

# From the History of WWII: A Genocide in Nazi Croatia

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## Preface

*Due to the current conflict in (East) Ukraine (historically known as Russia Minor), the world is more and more becoming informed about the genocide of the Poles, Jews, and Russians on the territory of West Ukraine during WWII committed by Ukrainian Nazi-nationalists (the Banderists). However, at the same time, in the Balkans, in parallel with the Ukrainian case, the organized genocide of the Jews, Roma, and above all the ethnic Serbs were on agenda but the world audience is still not properly informed about the case - the case occurred in the Nazi-shaped Independent State of Croatia.*

*At the very start, it must be mentioned that Nazi Croatia during WWII (1941–1945) concerning its inner policy (of genocide) was independent of its mentors Germany and Italy. Moreover, both Rome and Berlin in several cases tried to convince a Nazi government in Zagreb to stop with the policy of genocide but in vain.*

## The division of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

After the April War of 6–18<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the Germans, Italians, Bulgarians, and Hungarians occupied and divided the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia into several parts. The Germans annexed North Slovenia and put under their direct occupation the Yugoslav part of Banat and Central Serbia with Kosovska Mitrovica.

The Italians occupied South Slovenia, established their marionette regime in Montenegro, and annexed the Gulf of Boka Kotorska, parts of Konavli, and Dalmatia. The Hungarians annexed Prekomurje, Baranja and Bachka. The Bulgarians occupied the East and Central Vardar Macedonia and South-East Serbia. The Italians established their marionette state of Greater Albania with East Montenegro, Kosovo (without its northern part that was occupied by the Germans for economic reasons), and West Vardar Macedonia.[i]

However, the most important post-April War creation on the territory of the ex-Kingdom of

Yugoslavia was an Independent State of Croatia that was officially proclaimed on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941. It was composed of Croatia, Slavonia, parts of Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and East Srem (today in Serbia). The official name of the state was *Neovisnadržava Hrvatska* (the NDH) with a capital in Zagreb. It had 6.663.157 inhabitants according to the last pre-war census and covered a territory of 102.725 sq. km.[ii] According to the Rome Treaties from May 1941, the NDH gave to its patron Italy Kastav and Sushak with its hinterland, the islands of Krk and Rab, the North Dalmatian, and parts of the Central Dalmatian littoral, the biggest part of the Adriatic islands and a part of Konavle. Therefore, Italy realized all paragraphs of the secret London Treaty signed between Italy and the Entente in April 1915. Nevertheless, after the capitulation of Italy on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1943 the NDH tried to incorporate parts of Dalmatia but did not succeed to establish a real state-administrative sovereignty over these territories due to German obstruction.

The collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941 was very rapid for at least three reasons:

1. The country was not prepared for the war at all.
2. The aggressors were much stronger from all points of view.
3. The Croat treachery during the April War.

Because of the military defeat, some 375.000 officers and soldiers of the Yugoslav army, but only of Serb origin, fell into the Axis hands and became prisoners of war in Germany. Nevertheless, on the territory of the NDH fanatical Serb-hating Croat Nazi-Ustashi were on the loose, perpetrating appalling massacres which very soon led to the Serb uprising and the loss of *de facto* control over the large areas.[iii] Destruction of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, her occupation followed by the creation of a Greater NDH, and massacres of its Orthodox and Jewish population were the historical triumph of the Vatican and Roman Catholic separatism.[iv]

## The creation of Nazi Croatia

After the April War in 1941 and the occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as a leading pre-war Croat politician Vladimir Vladko Machek refused the Italian and German offer to become a head of the new quisling state of the NDH, the Croat Nazi-Ustashi leader, Ante Pavelic was brought back from Italy to lead this Independent State of Croatia. V. Machek himself noted that the declaration of the NDH on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941 was greeted with “a wave of enthusiasm” in Zagreb “not unlike that which had swept through the town in 1918 when the ties with Hungary were severed”. [v] The territory of NDH, like the rest of the ex-Kingdom of Yugoslavia, was divided between the German and Italian zones of influence and administration. When the Nazi-Ustashi Poglavnik (Führer) Ante Pavelic was returned from Italy to be appointed by the Italians as the leader of the NDH he came with some 300 supporters, but it turned out soon that he got silent massive support from the ethnic Croats in the country. The Ustashi movement, established in 1929, found its ideological roots in the mid-19 century chauvinistic Roman-Catholic and Serbophobic ideologist Ante Starcevic – a founder of the nationalistic Croat Party of Rights. A. Starcevic was exactly the person who formulated the ideological framework of a Greater Croatia and the Nazi-Ustashi-committed brutal and sadistic genocide against the Serbs during WWII on the territory of the NDH.[vi]

The Italian installation of the Ustashi regime in the NDH meant nothing else than the Serbophobic Roman Catholic fanatics were now in power in a state where the law and order were framed on the pattern of Nazi Germany’s anti-Jewish law and order – in a state whose

population was barely 50 percent Croat followed by 12 percent Muslims (today Bosniaks) and at least one-third the Serbs whose destiny was to disappear by these or other means.

The Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims officially declared by the Ustashi regime as the “flower of the Croat nation”, i.e., as the ethnic Croats of the Islamic faith, and as such the Bosniaks took full participation in the Croat-run four years genocide against the Orthodox Serbs. During the war, the most infamous Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslim military unit was the SS Hanjar Division which was inspected by H. Himler himself. However, differently to the Muslim case in the NDH, the implacable extreme Serbophobic regime in Zagreb sought to exterminate all Serbs on the territory of the NDH according to the self-proclaimed principle by the NDH Minister of Education,

Mile Budak on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941: one third to kill, one third to expel and one third to convert to the Roman Catholicism (to Croatize).[vii] The first laws in the NDH were to ban the Cyrillic script and to outlaw the Serbs who had to wear a special sign on their clothes that they are the Orthodox.[viii]The Serb Orthodox churches and schools were first closed and later destroyed. The Ustashi organized bloody massacres of the Serbs even inside the churches (in Glina in August 1941) or the schools (in Prebilovci in August 1941). Deportations of the Serbs to Serbia were part of the Ustashi-designed “Final Solution” of the Serb Question in the NDH – in 1945 there were around 400.000 Serb refugees in Serbia from the NDH.

## The role of the Vatican

We do not have the right to forget that the essence of the NDH was that this state was the first Vatican-sponsored state in the Balkans. The Roman Catholic Church in the NDH put itself to the full exposal to the new Nazi Roman Catholic Ustashi authorities and even participated directly in the massacres of the Orthodox Serbs.[ix] For the Roman Catholic clergy in the NDH, one of the most controversial demands of the Ustashi authorities was the conversion of the Serbs to Roman Catholicism.

In principle, the clergy was uncomfortable with this policy of direct conversion, without the converts first accepting the Union act (recognizing the Pope as a head of the church but keeping Slavonic liturgy). Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church in the NDH accepted a forced conversion of the Serbs under the formal pretext of saving their lives. It is estimated that the total number of converted Orthodox Serbs in the NDH was around 300.000, but it is recorded also that many of the already converted Serbs became anyway murdered by the Ustashi detachments. In the spring of 1943, the Ustashi government created a Croatian Orthodox Church that was headed by Bishop Hermogen – the Russian Orthodox priest who escaped from the USSR.



## The 9<sup>th</sup> Circle of Dante's Hell

The first organized massive massacre of the Serbs in the NDH was committed on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1941 when 187 Serbs from the village of Gudovac and its surroundings were massacred. Among the most brutal and sadistic massacres at the beginning of the NDH was in Glina on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1941 when some 1.200 Orthodox Serbs dressed in their Sunday best were called to the local Orthodox church from surrounding villages to be converted to Roman Catholicism.

However, instead of conversion they were locked inside the church and slaughtered by knives. In August 1941 occurred and the Prebilovci massacre of the local Serbs in East Herzegovina including the children in the village school. A report on this event by the local Italian commander to Mussolini is very sensitive and anti-Catholic as the commander noticed that after the Prebilovci massacre is shameful to be a Roman Catholic. The organized Ustashi genocide against the Serbs very soon became rapid and efficient according to the U.S. official reports up to August 1942 there were some 600.000 killed people in the NDH, the overwhelming majority of them the Serbs.[x] The massacres of Croat-Muslim Ustashi forces were to such an extent that even Adolf Hitler was forced to personally intervene in this case in order to restrain the Ustashi barbarism. It is also recorded that the German troops were in some cases in Bosnia-Herzegovina opening fire on the Ustashi soldiers to save the lives of the Serbs. That was a fact that the Serbs and the Jews were fleeing from the Germans to the Italian occupation zone of Yugoslavia for the very reason as the Italians protected them from the Ustashi knives.[xi]

In the attempt to finally solve the Serb Question westward of the Drina River, the Ustashi government established a network of death camps among all Jasenovac (a Yugoslav Auschwitz) nearby the Sava River on the very border with Bosnia-Herzegovina became the most infamous as in it perished around 700.000 people among them 500.000 the Serbs (official Croat propaganda ). The extermination techniques included a slaughtering of the prisoners with a special type of knife known as the *Srbosjek* (a Slaughterer of the Serbs) made in the Solingen factory in Germany under the Ustashi design or making the hand-washing soaps of alive boiled human bodies sold in the shops in Zagreb. The pieces of evidence of the extermination of the Serbs were sent by the local executors to Zagreb and from Zagreb to the Vatican. The most enduring of this genocide is for sure the scene described by the Italian journalist and writer Curzio Malaparte in his book *Kaputt*. This book is an account of his wartime experiences as a war correspondent. Therefore, several months after the NDH became proclaimed Malaparte went to make an interview with Ante Pavelic - a head of the state and a leader of the Ustashi movement. On this occasion, he was joined by the Italian minister in Zagreb, Raffaele Casertino. What he wrote as a witness is:

While he spoke, I gazed at a wicker basket on the Poglavnik's desk. The lid was raised and the basket seemed to be filled with mussels or shelled oysters - as they are occasionally displayed in the windows of Fortnum and Mason in Piccadilly in London. Casertano looked at me and winked, "Would you like a nice oyster stew?" "Are they Dalmatian oysters?" I asked Poglavnik. Ante Pavelic removed the lid from the basket and revealed the mussels, that slimy and jelly-like mass, and he said smiling, with that tired good-natured smile of his, "It is a present from my loyal Ustashis. Forty pounds of human eyes."[xii]



The NDH was internationally recognized by Germany, Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Japan, Spain, National China, Finland, Denmark, and Manchuria [declared an Independent State by Japan].

It existed from April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941 to May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945.

In the other words, the NDH existed for a whole week after the German capitulation as the last Nazi state in Europe. After the war, a new communist authority in Yugoslavia, led by Josip Broz Tito of Croat and Slovenian origin, did everything to eliminate the pieces of evidence of the Croat-Muslim *Magnum Crimen* against the Serbs during the war.

A most notorious case happened with the death camp of Jasenovac which was demolished. Very soon after the war simply nothing was left as evidence of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circle of Dante's Hell followed by the destruction of the written and other documents. After 1990 a new

nationalistic government of Franjo Tudjman in Zagreb did everything to disgracefully whitewash a history of the NDH directly supported by the official scientific institutions in Croatia. In this context, one of the most shameful “scientific” publications was published in several languages by the Croatian Institute of History in 1997.[xiii]

## The sources of genocide

Today, it is much more reliable to consult German and Italian sources on the NDH than the archival material from the Yugoslav archives. Therefore, the most useful reports to Berlin and Rome are by the German and Italian embassies in Zagreb, German General Artur von Flebs, German dr. Josef Fessl, German Wilhelm Hetl, German Lothar Rendulitz, German Herman Neubacher, German dr. Josef Matl, Italian General Pitzio Biroli, Italian General Mario Roata, Italian Colonel Guisepe Angelini, Italian Enzo Cataldi or Italian historian Salvatore Loi who published an extremely valuable anthology of the Italian documents and reports on the Italian military operations in Yugoslavia in 1978. S. Loi’s account on the NDH is probably one of the most relevant and realistic. According to him, the NDH became transformed into the lake of Serb blood until mid-August 1941. The Croat-Muslim genocide against the Serbs was, according to the same author, the most barbaric part of WWII, even more, barbaric than the holocaust against the Jews.[xiv]

Subsequently, it is not of any surprise that U.S. President Th. F. D. Roosevelt told in 1944 that after the war the Croats as a nation has no right to their national state as they showed to be animals during the war. For such a nation as the Croats were, Roosevelt anticipated international monitoring but not any kind of Croatia. However, after the war, a Croat-led the Communist Party of Yugoslavia created an even bigger Croatia within Yugoslavia than it was before the war reducing Serbia to the borders before the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913.

## Epilogue

Finally, the Croats backed by Vatican and Germany continued a policy of the NDH in 1991 and, in essence, succeeded as today in Croatia there are only up to 4 percent of the Serbs in comparison to 25 percent in 1940 or 12 percent in 1990.

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## Notes

[i] B. Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918–1945. Druga knjiga: Narodnooslobodilački rat i revolucija 1941–1945*, Beograd: NOLIT, 1988, 25–51.

[ii] S. Srkulj, J. Lučić, *Hrvatska povijest u dvadeset pet karata. Prošireno i dopunjeno izdanje*, Zagreb: Hrvatski informativni centar, 1996, 105.

[iii] T. Judah, *The Serbs. History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, New Haven–London, 1997, 117.

[iv] M. Екмечић, *Дуго кретање између клања и орања. Историја Срба у Новом веку (1492–1992). Треће, допуњено издање*, Београд: Евро-Ђунти, 2010, 438.

[v] V. Maček, *In the Struggle for Freedom*, London, 1957, 230.

[vi] On this issue, see more in [В. Ћ. Крестић, *Геноцидом до велике Хрватске. Друго допуњено издање*, Јагодина: Гамбит, 2002].

[vii] According to *Hrvatski narod* – official NDH newspaper, dated on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1941.

[viii] *ХД Хрватска држава геноцида*, Двери српске. Часопис за националну културу и друштвена питања, Год. XIII, број 47–50, Београд, 2011, 24–31.

[ix] V. Novak, *Magnum Crimen. Pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb, 1948–Beograd 1986; V. Dedijer, *Vatikan i Jasenovac*, Beograd: Rad, 1987; М. А. Ривели, *Надбискуп геноцида. Монсињор Степинац, Ватикан и усташка диктатура у Хрватској, 1941–1945*, Никшић: Јасен, 1999; Л. Лукајић, *Фратри и усташе кољу. Злочинци и сведоци. Покољ Срба у селима код Бања Луке Дракулићу, Шарговцу и Мотикама 7 фебруара и Пискавици и Ивањској 5 и 12 фебруара 1942. године*, Београд: Фонд за истраживање геноцида, 2005.

[x] Р. Л. Кнежевић, Ж. Л. Кнежевић, *Слобода или смрт*, Сијетл, 1981, 44.

[xi] O. Talpo, *Dalmazia: Una cronaca per la storia (1941)*, Roma, 1985. This book is of the crucial importance for the reconstruction of the Croat-Muslim massacres of the Serbs as it contains the large number of the Italian military and other documents from the Italian archives. See more on this issue in [S. Avramov, *Genocid in Jugoslavija*, Beograd, 1995].

[xii] C. Malaparte, *Kaputt*, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997, 266; B. J. Fišer (priredio), *Balkanski diktatori. Diktatori i autoritarni vladari jugoistočne Evrope*, Beograd: IPS–IP Prosveta, 2009, 229.

[xiii] V. Žerjavić, *Population Losses in Yugoslavia 1941–1945*, Zagreb: Dom i Svijet–Hrvatski institut za povijest, 1997.

[xiv] М. Екмечић, *Дуго кретање између клања и орања. Историја Срба у Новом веку (1492–1992). Треће, допуњено издање*, Београд: Евро-Ђунти, 2010, 445.

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