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NAZI "DIVIDE ET IMPERA": COMPARING SOVIET AND YUGOSLAVIAN CASES IN 1941*

ABSTRACT: *The article scrutinizes Nazi Germany's occupation policy in Yugoslavia and in the Soviet Union in 1941. Particular attention is given to the German application of "divide et impera" principle on the territories of formerly multinational states, whose ethnic groups fought to win occupier's favours with varying success, meeting at the same time Germany's demands, chiefly wide participation in destruction of the Jews as a condition to partake in Nazi geopolitical rearrangement of Europe.*

KEYWORDS: World War II, Holocaust, Yugoslavia, Balkans, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union (USSR), Ukraine, Independent State of Croatia (ISC), Serbia

Introduction

The article seeks to elucidate similarities and differences between Nazi Germany's population policies in Yugoslavia and Soviet Union after these territories fell under German rule in 1941. Nazi policies reflected, to some extent, a classical colonial approach of "divide et impera" and involved different treatment of various national groups comprising these multinational states. However, the Germans considerably radicalized these policies with regard to non-Jewish population of Yugoslavia and the USSR, which came largely as a result of the lifting of restrains on Nazi treatment of civilians and partisans. In both countries, German authorities suppressed the biggest nations (Serbs and Russians). At the same time, they

* Some ideas expressed in this article were first expressed in my presentation at "The First International Conference on Jadovno 1941" held in Banja Luka in 2011.

gave favorable treatment to numerically weaker groups (Croats, Bosnians, Ukrainians, Baltic nations, etc.), their privileges being extended from autonomy to independence. All the nations had to pay the price for the entrance to the German-dominated "new Europe": absolute adherence to Nazi policy of physical destruction of Jews.

Discontent before the German invasion

In many countries conquered by Nazi Germany the occupier encountered deep-rooted discontent and divisions and were readily exploiting them to maintain their stewardship. The Nazis preferred to play a national card stressing differences between ethnic groups (rather than class divisions exploited by the Soviets), but were also not averse to exploiting religious tensions. Consequently, multi-ethnic societies like pre-war Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union provided the Germans with a natural resource to capitalize on.

Pre-war Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were made up largely of ethnically related Slav groups and dominated by the numerically biggest nations (Serbs and Russians) although for a variety of reasons, this domination was not absolute. Nevertheless, important elements in the midst of the second biggest groups (Croats and Ukrainians, respectively) and other ethnicities did not accept this status quo and demanded full-fledged independence for their nations "cleansed" of other elements. In the course of the 1930s, extreme circles in the Croat and Ukrainian national movements formed their paramilitary movements (Ustaša and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists or OUN). They were outlawed in their countries because they adhered to terrorist tactics in order to achieve their goals. In the course of the 1930s, these movements drew attention of Italy and Nazi Germany, eager to undermine Yugoslavia and the USSR and to find allies in a future war.

Until the late 1930s, the Ustaša were not overtly anti-Semitic, and Italy, their main patron did not demand it. But by the beginning of the WW2 the Ustaša sought to get German sponsorship, and then Jews were added to their list of Croatia's enemies[1] where Serbs already figured prominently. In this respect, we should bear in mind the 3-stage Ustaša plan to "solve the Serbian problem": to kill one third, to deport one third, convert one third to Catholicism. In contrast, the OUN was a strongly anti-Jewish organization since its inception but after the alliance with the Nazis it

[1] Milan Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji: 1918–1941*, (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2008), 292–302.

adopted a decidedly Nazi-style stance on the Jewish question.[2] The OUN base of force was in Western Ukraine, heavily populated by Poles and Jews but not by Russians who lived largely in Central and especially in Eastern Ukraine. It is probably for this reason or out of desire not to alienate the Ukrainian population thoroughly intermingled with the Russians in Central and Eastern Ukraine that the OUN did not target the Russians while directing their main thrust against Jews and Poles.[3]

In addition to a heavy reliance on national movements representing the second largest groups, the Germans endeavoured to rally support of other ethnic or religious forces in both countries dissatisfied with their position. In Yugoslavia, this was largely the case of Bosnian Muslims who contemplated more autonomy to the point of actual independence in German-dominated Europe.

In addition, there was a significant German minority in Yugoslavia numbering some 500,000 people, which served as probably the most reliable pro-German force in the country.[4] In the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany found supporters among the native inhabitants of Baltic countries, which lost their independence in 1940, and became subjected to a brutal Sovietisation, which, among other things, involved deportations of thousands of Baltic nationals to the Soviet hinterland. Soviet Germans, another potentially pro-German force in the country, were largely neutralized by the developments in 1940–41[5] but those among them who found themselves under German rule were efficiently transformed by Nazi Germany into an extremely pro-Nazi group.[6]

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[2] Aharon Weiss, "The Attitude of the Ukrainian Nationalist Groups towards Jews during the Second World War," David Bankier and Yisrael Gutman (eds.), *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution,* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2003), 265–275.

[3] For a good grasp of complex relations in Galicia between Ukrainian nationalists, Jews, and Nazi Germany, see Frank Golczewski, "Shades of Grey: Reflections on Jewish-Ukrainian and German-Ukrainian Relations in Galicia,", Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (eds.), *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 114–155.

[4] Milan Ristović, *Nemački 'novi poredak' i jugoistočna Evropa 1940/41–1944/45: Planovi o budućnosti i praksa,* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1991), 97.

[5] Repatriation of *Volksdeutsche* from the territories, which were recently annexed by the USSR, to the Reich in 1940 on the one hand, and Soviet deportations of ethnic Germans after the beginning of hostilities in June 1941.

[6] See Eric C. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*õ (New York: Cambridge University association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, 2015), 207–230.

After the invasion: Ideology and strategy

In 1941, Nazi Germany came to control, directly or indirectly, vast European territories and faced a question how to best control them. The German approach took note of several levels that involved ideology, military necessities, strategic considerations, and economical pragmatism. All this was analyzed with an eye to how Germany may best exploit pre-war ethnic tensions. In each country Nazi population policy reflected a unique combination of these factors.

In 1941 the Germans did not conduct an ideological war in Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, according to Nazi racial categorization, almost all nations comprising Yugoslavia belonged to "inferior Slav peoples" unworthy of self-rule, let alone independence, in the German-dominated world. Yet, the German attack on Yugoslavia in 1941 was a military operation,[7] devoid of ideological imperatives. Consequently, economic and military factors seemed to be the most important German motives in ruling Yugoslavian peoples in 1941. Therefore, the Germans felt free to grant full-fledged, albeit nominal independence to its most important native ally, Croatia. Yet, there were also limits to German "generosity", and the fact that they continuously discouraged Bosnian Muslims from establishing their own state, underscores the point.[8] In addition, since the area was not considered ideologically important, the Germans were ready to rather generously grant parts of the "Yugoslavia pie" to its allies (Hungary, Bulgaria, and Italy), although their military contribution in the campaign against Yugoslavia was negligible. In 1941, only Italy, the most important German ally, was eager and able to conduct a policy independent of the Germans.[9] All other German partners (Bulgaria, Croatia, and Hungary), readily embraced Nazi harsh approaches in the population policies, including the "Final solution" of the Jewish question.

In contrast, the Nazis regarded the war against the Soviet Union as an ideological crusade.[10] True, even in such a region were the Germans ready to give slices of the "Soviet pie" to those among its allies whose military

[7] See Martin van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940–1941: The Balkan Clue,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[8] On this subject, see Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, "Bosnia-Herzegovina at War: Relations between Moslems and Non-Moslems," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5, 3 (1990), 275–292.

[9] See, Dusko Keckemet, "Transit camps for Jews in areas under Italian occupation," Ivo Goldstein, Narcisa Lengel Krizman (eds.), *Anti-Semitism, Holocaust, Anti-Fascism*, (Zagreb: Zagreb Jewish Community, 1997), 117–128.

[10] Jürgen Förster, "The Relation between Operation Barbarossa as an Ideological War of Extermination and the Final Solution", David Cesarani (ed.), *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85–102.

contribution to the Eastern campaign was deemed vital (Finland and Romania). In 1941, only Finland, acting in its own occupation zone, was able to carry out relatively independent and somewhat restrained population policies, including those in the Jewish question.[11] All other German allies, whether those permanently in charge of the portions of the Soviet territories (Romania) or temporarily in charge of some Soviet areas (Hungary, Italy, Slovakia) adhered to the German harsh approach in the population policies, including *Judenpolitik*.[12] But beyond this, the Germans did not consider granting even nominal independence to their most enthusiastic supporters among local peoples (Ukrainians[13] and Baltic nations[14]), even though this could give them sizable political dividends. This example demonstrates to what extent the ideological approach dominated Nazi population policies in the USSR, especially when the tidings of the war were clearly in their favour in 1941.

The relative weight of strategic consideration could be felt in 1941 with regards to the Germans' benevolent treatment of Bosnian Muslims, who were regarded as an important asset with an eye to seemingly imminent forthcoming Nazi drive to Muslim Orient. Combination of Nazi ideology and strategic considerations dictated in 1941 that national aspirations of the biggest nations comprising pre-war Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, Serbs and Russians, would be severely curtailed. Serbs somewhat benefited from Nazi basic ideological disinterest in its Yugoslavia but their self-rule in the occupied Serbia was most limited and Serbia's borders were severely diminished.[15] Russians in the occupied Soviet territories were not awarded even that as their territory, significantly reduced according to Nazi plans, was designated to be managed as a German colony.

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[11] Olli Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany and Russia*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 90–108.

[12] George Eisen and Tamás Stark, "The 1941 Galician Deportation and the Kamenets-Podolsk Massacre: A Prologue to the Hungarian Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, 2 (Fall 2013), 207–241; Dennis Deletant, "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the "Jewish Problem," *The Shoah in Ukraine…*, 156–189.

[13] E. g., Alan Rich David, "Armed Ukrainians in L'viv: Ukrainian Militia, Ukrainian Police, 1941 to 1942," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 48, 3 (2014), 271–287; Markus Eikel and Valentina Sivaieva, "City Mayors, Raion Chiefs and Village Elders in Ukraine, 1941–4: How Local Administrators Co-operated with the German Occupation Authorities," *Contemporary European History* 23, 3 (August 2014), 405–428.

[14] On the collaboration in Baltic countries see e. g., Gerhard Bassler, "The Collaborationist Agenda in Latvia, 1941–1943," *The Baltic Countries under Occupation: Soviet and Nazi Rule, 1939–1991,* Anu Mai Kòll (eds.), Stockholm: Acta Univsersitatis Stockhomienis, 2003, 85–95; Ruth Bettina Birn, "Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police," *Contemporary European History* 10, 2 (2001), 181–198.

[15] Milan Ristović, "Rural 'Anti-Utopia' in the Ideology of Serbian Collaborationists in the Second World War," *European Review of History* 15, 2 (2008), 179–181.

Military needs and economic considerations

In the German eyes, military considerations dictated that vast territories that the Germans came to control in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union would be "pacified", to borrow German terminology. Yet, it turned out that the Germans did not have sufficient manpower to cope with a large-scale uprising launched by the Serbs in summer 1941.[16] In the USSR, the situation was slightly different. In the occupied Soviet territories the partisan movement was still nascent in 1941. The Germans had more rear formations there but overall, their number was likewise inadequate for such a vast territory. But in 1941 German leadership, whether civilian or military, did not deem partisan war in Yugoslavia and USSR as a problem threatening German rule but rather regarded it as an opportunity to intimidate local population to such extent that it would be never eager to revolt against German rule.

This is underscored by Hitler's own words on the conditions in the occupied Soviet territories. In July 1941, "partisan war behind the front offered the possibility of "exterminating all that stands against us". To pacify such a vast area, "anyone who even looks at us askance" was to be shot".[17] German military command used a partisan threat to sanction large-scale executions of civilians (Jews and Serbs in Yugoslavia; Jews and mainly Russians and Belorussians in the USSR).[18] To the German scarce manpower in the rear and police formations assigned to "pacify" the occupied Yugoslavian (mainly Serbian) and Soviet territories, one should add other factors, which determined their population policies. The needs of the German war machine and the economy dictated that Serbia (rich with raw materials), Ukraine (rich with food stock), and probably Estonia (also rich with war material), should necessarily remain under direct German rule.

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[16] On the uprising and other aspects of the partisan war in Yugoslavia, see e. g., Antoine Sidoti, *Partisans et Tchetniks en Yougoslavie durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale: Ideologie et Mythogenese*, (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2004); Klaus Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien 1941–1944,* (Hamburg: Mittler und Sohn, 2002).

[17] Ben Shepherd, "With the Devil in Titoland: A Wehrmacht Anti-Partisan Division in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1943," *War in History* 16, 77 (2009), 79.

[18] Michael Berkowitz, "The Nazi equation of Jewish partisans with 'bandits' and its consequences," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 13, 2 (2006), 311–333; Walter Manoscheck, "Coming along to Shoot Some Jews?" The Destruction of the Jews in Serbia," Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *War of extermination: the German military in World War II, 1941–1944,* (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 39–54; T. O. Anderson, "Incident at Baranivka: German Reprisals and the Soviet Partisan Movement in Ukraine, October–December 1941,"*Journal of Modern History* 51 (1999), 585–623.

"Final solution" of the Jewish question

Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were the first countries in the Nazi-dominated Europe where the Germans embarked on a policy of physical destruction of the Jews. This similarity is noticeable despite dissimilarities between actual conditions in German-dominated Yugoslavia and the occupied Soviet territories in 1941. The beginning of the "Final solution" policy in the Soviet Union is usually ascribed to loosely formulated "Commissar Order", a series of other orders and directives by the German political leadership and military command, explicitly or implicitly identifying Soviet Jews with the Reich's mortal enemies,[19] as well as to the logic of the war of extermination waged by Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union.[20] In Yugoslavia the extermination of the Jews took on a shape of a military operation conducted by German military for tactical reasons, arguably, without receiving a prior "licence to kill all Jews" from Berlin.[21] Apart from these considerations, one should also look into the role of local factors in Yugoslavia and the occupied Soviet territories concerning the persecution and murder of Jews, such as the behaviour of German allies and collaborators in affecting the course of the Holocaust in these areas. Administrations set up directly or indirectly by Nazi Germany in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union felt obliged to the Germans and went to length to prove them their value and indispensability as junior partners in adhering to a grand German policy, of which "The Final Solution" of Jewish Question was a most essential component.[22] It appears that in 1941 the more German allies received from Nazi Germany, the more enthusiastically they adhered to the policy of murder of the Jews.

With some reservations, it seems that in both countries in 1941 intensive partisan activities against the Wehrmacht led the Germans to

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[19] Felix Römer, "Im alten Deutschland wäre solcher Befehl nicht möglich gewesen". Rezeption, Adaption und Umsetzung des Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlasses im Ostheer 1941/42," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 56 (2008), 53–99.

[20] Jürgen Matthäus, "Controlled Escalation: Himmler's Men in the Summer of 1941 and the Holocaust in the Occupied Soviet Territories," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, 2 (2007), 218–242; Jürgen Förster, "The Relation between Operation Barbarossa as an Ideological War of Extermination and the Final Solution," David Cesarani (ed.), *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 85–102.

[21] E. g., Menachem Shelach, "The murder of Jews in Serbia and the Serbian uprising in July 1941", Asher Cohen, Yehoyakim Cochavi, and Yoav Gelber (eds.), *The Shoah and the War* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 161–175.

[22] E. g., Alexander Korb, "The Drina Border, Nationalizing Civil War, and the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–43", paper, (Institute for Global Studies, University of Minnesota, 2007); Walter Manoschek, "*Serbien ist judenfrei": Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien*, (München: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 1993).

precipitate the murder of the Jews. As Wehrmacht allocated considerable manpower to solve strictly military tasks of "pacifying the area", it became also more actively involved in killing Jews. It is difficult to outline alternative historical ('what if') scenarios, but it cannot be ruled out that had it not been for high-profile partisan activities in 1941 in occupied Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union the Germans would have arranged for a smooth "Final solution" only at a later stage of the war.

Conclusion

In order to efficiently control the dominated Yugoslav and Soviet territories, populated by ethnically heterogeneous peoples, Nazi Germany played one nation against another. Entities with whom the Germans placed their sympathies, were given some measure of independence and occasionally allowed to pursue their own population policies to the point of ethnic cleansing, as long as those did not contradict Germans' own designs. Furthermore, in 1941 Nazi Germany did not sense that there was any contradiction at all in this respect and eagerly embraced the policy of brutally oppressing local populations in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union under the disguise of conducting anti-partisan warfare. The Germans tried to channel the outrage of all Yugoslav and Soviet nations on the Jews.[23] In 1941 local Germans' supporters actively partook in the German anti-Semitic onslaught. However, in a longer run, after the elimination of the Jews was completed, this policy alone could in no way satisfy local peoples, especially those belonging to the largest ethnic groups in Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, which experienced an unprecedented German brutality towards them.[24] Overall, seeds of German imperial overstretching in ruling the populations of occupied Yugoslavia and Soviet Union were sown as early as in 1941 with short-term tactical victories achieved but the imminent result was ultimate strategic disaster.

[23] On the relationship between the German population policies and the "Final Solution" see: Susanne Heim and Aly Götz, "The Holocaust and Population Policy: Remarks on the Decision on the "Final Solution," *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 (1994), 45–70. On the Nazi population policies in the Slav areas see, for example: Karel Berkoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine Under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[24] Charles D. Melson, "German Counterinsurgency in the Balkans: The Prinz Eugen Division Example, 1942–1944," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, 4 (2007), 730.

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Kiril Feferman

„ZAVADI PA VLADAJ": POREĐENJE NACISTIČKOG PRISTUPA SOVJETSKOM I JUGOSLOVENSKOM PROSTORU 1941.

Rezime

Članak se bavi sličnostima i razlikama između nacističke politike prema stanovništvu okupiranih zona Jugoslavije i SSSR-a 1941. Ta politika je odražavala klasičan kolonijalni „zavadi pa vladaj" odnos, karakterisan različitim tretiranjem raznih nacionalnih grupa koje su sačinjavale ove multinacionalne države. U obe oblasti, cena koju su partneri Nemačke morali da plate da bi se uključili u novonastali sistem bilo je učešće u eliminaciji Jevreja. U posebnim slučajevima, Nemci su tolerisali nezavisne politike svojih saveznika, ako je taj savez bio od strateškog značaja, bilo da se radilo o radikalnijoj politici nego što su Nemci predviđali (poput Nezavisne Države Hrvatske prema Srbima) ili manje radikalnoj (Italija u Jugoslaviji, Finska u SSSR-u).

KLJUČNE REČI: Drugi svetski rat, Holokaust, Jugoslavija, Balkan, nacistička Nemačka, Sovjetski Savez (SSSR), Ukrajina, Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (NDH), Srbija

«РАЗДЕЛЯЙ И ВЛАСТВУЙ»: СРАВНЕНИЕ НАЦИСТСКОГО ПОДХОДА К СОВЕТСКОЙ И ЮГОСЛАВСКОЙ ТЕРРИТОРИЯМ В 1941 ГОДУ

Резюме

В статье рассматриваются соответствия и отличия в политике, проводившейся нацистской Германией по отношению к населению оккупированных территорий Югославии и Советского Союза в 1941 г. В политике Германии отражались классическая колониальная концепция «разделяй и властвуй», подразумевавшая дифференцированные подходы по отношению к разным национальным группам, населявшим эти многонациональные страны. В обеих странах участие в уничтожении евреев было той ценой, которую иностранным и местным союзникам Германии требовалось заплатить для того, чтобы получить свою долю в оккупированных районах. В исключительных случаях, в связи с особой важностью союзников, Германия готова была закрыть глаза на более независимую политику, проводившуюся ее союзниками. Это могла быть и более радикальная политика, чем та, которая предусматривалась немцами (НГХ по отношению к сербам) или менее радикальный подход (Италия в Югославии, Финляндия в СССР).

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: Вторая мировая война, холокост, Югославия, Балкан, нацистская Германия, Советский Союз (СССР), Украина, Независимое Государство Хорватия (НГХ), Сербия