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USTAŠA CRIMES, SERBIAN VICTIMS, NUMBERS AND POLITICS: TOWARD A RATIONAL DEBATE

ABSTRACT: The number of Serbs who were murdered by the Croatian Ustaša regime is still contentious, even though there is broad agreement on the figures among expert historians. The issue is blurred by authors who ignore the canon of scientific discovery. Ustaša terror was awful enough, the author argues. Distorted numbers trivialize debate and degrade the victims.

KEYWORDS: Ustaša, Ideology, Victims, Genocide, Jasenovac, Croatia, Serbs, Jews, Nazism

Genocide and its Manipulators

Making an estimate of the number of victims of many twentieth century episodes which may be included in the category of *genocide* and/or *democide* presents a major challenge for the researcher.¹ The primary challenge is not in the quest for reliable sources and the application of correct methodology, daunting as they are. The challenge is chiefly in the sphere of politics. All over the world, any attempt to establish, as precisely as possible, the number of victims of any given “genocidal” event equals a morning walk in a tightly-packed minefield. From China to Ukraine, from the “Western Balkans” to Armenia, there has been a tendency to instrumentalize and weaponize past megadeaths – often of inflated magnitude – in the service of some current political agenda.

The word “genocide” was first coined by Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin in 1944 in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. Consisting of the Greek prefix *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin suffix *cide* (killing), it was codified as an

¹ A recent example is provided by a study of the number of victims at the Jasenovac death camp which was presented at the National Library in Belgrade on October 21, 2019 (Душан Николијевић, *Јасеновац између броја и жртве*, Београд: Музеј жртва геноцида, 2019). It was fiercely condemned by a segment of the Serbian lay public, and even by some historians, well before it was published. Attacks on a *book unread* were reminiscent of the ritual denunciations of Milovan Djilas’s *New Class* stage-managed by Tito’s regime six decades earlier.

independent crime by the 1948 UN *Genocide Convention*: “Acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such”.²

Attempts to manipulate this term became apparent already in the early stages of the Cold War, however, on both sides of the “Iron Curtain”. On the Soviet side, to quote a notable example, Aron Traynin – a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences – claimed that the United States was guilty of “genocide” of the African-American population through the policy of racial segregation. Traynin also asserted that the South African policy of apartheid was a form of “creeping genocide” directed against the native African population.³

In the West the tendency to misuse *genocide* for political purposes had deeper roots and eventually far greater effect. Lemkin himself, not long after the end of the war, advocated the application of the term he had invented to accuse the USSR of conducting “genocide” against various ethnic groups within its boundaries. This notion was eagerly embraced by an array of émigré groups from the Soviet-dominated central-eastern Europe, often composed of the former members of various pro-Nazi collaborationist groups. Seasoned veterans of SS units and death camp auxiliaries from the Baltic provinces and western Ukraine were in the forefront of such efforts, followed by the Crimean Tatar, Circassian (*Cherkez*) and Chechen exiles, in the attempt to frame their particular group’s alleged suffering at the hands of the Soviet authorities within the emerging *genocide* paradigm. A prominent U.S. Senator, Herbert H. Lehman (D-NY), made a major step toward the political instrumentalization of genocide in 1955, when he argued that genocide had been developed into a science in Nazi Germany, but that “Soviet Russia” was an even more accomplished practitioner of the crime.⁴

Over the ensuing half-century, the importance of acquiring the genocide-victim status has grown exponentially. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has further muddied the waters by establishing an unconventional definition of genocide. It made that term applicable to a segment of the male population at the level of municipalities and townships.⁵ The ICTY has also tried to impose the precise number of supposed victims –

² *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1948.* United Nations – Treaty Series, No. 1021, 1951.

³ Thomas De Waal, *Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 138. Original source: Арон Наумович Трайнин, *Защита мира и борьба с преступлениями против человечества.* Москва: Изд-во Академии наук СССР, 1956. Since Traynin’s study was published, black Africans’ share of South Africa’s population went up from 68% to 82%.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 139. Like some other Russophobic cold warriors, Lehman consistently used the term “Soviet Russia”, rather than the Soviet Union.

⁵ Even if Srebrenica had happened exactly as claimed by the ICTY, it would have accounted for some 8 percent of the total number of victims of the war, and one-fifth of the Muslim civilian victims. Comp: Mirsad Tokača, *Bosanska knjiga mrtvih: ljudski gubici u Bosni i Hercegovini 1991-1995 – The Bosnian book of the dead: human losses in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1991-1995.* (Sarajevo: Istraživačko-dokumentacioni centar, 2012).

without empirical basis – as conclusive.⁶ This indicates the kind of challenge facing a researcher. If such games are possible in the case of a single episode which supposedly happened in the full light of international scrutiny – not far from the heart of Europe, only a quarter-century ago – it is even more difficult to establish the number of victims of various earlier episodes of mass murder.⁷

Various estimates of deaths resulting from the Red Terror in Russia (from December 1917 until the end of 1922) are widely contested. At the lower end, authoritative sources cite a hundred thousand executed “enemies of the people”.⁸ At the higher end some authors claim as many as 1,300,000 victims.⁹ The famine caused by Bolshevik requisitions in the Volga valley in 1921-1922 took at least two million lives, which in itself ranks as a major crime against humanity.¹⁰ Some researchers have contended, however, that the death count was as high as five million.¹¹ The great famine in the most fertile parts of southwestern USSR in 1932-1933, which included Ukraine but was not confined to it, was caused by land collectivization. This man-made disaster claimed at least 5.5 million lives.¹² Some authors’ estimates are as high as eight million victims, however.¹³ A similar disparity of estimates applies to the number of victims of Stalin’s Great Terror (*Большой террор*) in 1936-1938.¹⁴

The number of civilian victims of the Japanese occupation of China (1937-1945) is even more widely disputed, from the low of 300,000 to as many as 15 million. Particularly contentious is the massacre carried out by the Japanese after they conquered Nanking in December 1937. It claimed between 50,000 and 300,000 lives, with 70-80 thousand victims the most likely figure.¹⁵ Neverthe-

⁶ See eg: Стефан Каргановић, *Доказивање Сребренице пред Хашким трибуналом* (Београд-Хар: Историјски пројекат Сребреница, 2016).

⁷ Even by the ICTY criterion, in the former Yugoslavia there are more drastic and better documented instances of the extermination of entire communities during the Second World War, e.g. the slaughter of over 2.300 Serbs in the villages of Drakulić, Šargovac and Motike near Banja Luka in February 1942. On July 30 and August 2, 1941, in the western Bosnian town of Livno and its environs 1.587 Serbs were murdered, including over 700 children. See: Будо Симоновић, *Огњена Марија Ливањска*, 5. издање (Цетиње: Светигора, 2015).

⁸ W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 384: “The best estimates set the probable number of executions at about a hundred thousand”.

⁹ Stefan Rinke and Michael Wildt, *Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions: 1917 and Its Aftermath from a Global Perspective* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2017), 57–58.

¹⁰ Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand. The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 197.

¹¹ Norman Lowe, *Mastering Twentieth-Century Russian History* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 155.

¹² R.W. Davies and S.G. Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–33* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 401.

¹³ Michael Ellman, “The Role of Leadership Perceptions and of Intent in the Soviet Famine of 1931 – 1934”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no. 6 (September 2005), 823 – 841.

¹⁴ S. Rosefelde, “Documented Homicides and Excess Deaths: New Insights into the Scale of Killing in the USSR during the 1930s”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1997), 321–333.

¹⁵ For the promotion of inflated number of alleged victims unsupported by evidence, see e.g. Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

less, to this day in China it is not advisable to challenge the official figure of three hundred thousand victims, which is almost certainly highly inflated.

We still do not know even the approximate number of people killed during the chaotic partition of India in 1947-1948: estimates vary from one to two million. The famine caused by Mao's Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) claimed at least 15 million – the current official figure – and possibly as many as 30 million lives. Either way, the Great Chinese Famine was the largest in human history. The Khmer Rouge reign of terror in Cambodia 1975-1979 took between 1.7 and 2.5 million lives. In Rwanda the Hutu-led government killed between 500,000 and over a million Tutsis in 1994. In East Timor up to one-third of all residents were killed following the Indonesian occupation, but the numbers are hotly disputed.

A paradigmatic example of the political charge of the word *genocide* is found in the mass murder of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1918. Over a century has passed but the controversy is not abating, and the number of victims – up to 1.5 million – is as hotly disputed as ever. The controversy resurfaced in December 2019, when the U.S. Senate unanimously passed a resolution recognizing the mass killing of Armenians as genocide.¹⁶

The Ustaša Phenomenon

The twentieth century had witnessed a departure in the conduct of many European states away from the concept of natural morality that provided a salutary restraint on their behavior before 1914. Before the Bolshevik terror, it was not mere expediency which had prevented states from resorting to mass extermination as a means to an end. The limitations on the behavior of states derived from an underlying consensus that *raison d'état* entailed continued membership of the community of civilized nations.

The final break came following Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, and the ensuing decision to embark on the Final Solution.¹⁷ Until June 1941 Germany arguably was waging a traditional European war (*ein europäischer Normalkrieg*) which turned exterminationist with the *Barbarossa*. Until June 1941 the principles of warfare and the treatment of the vanquished did not appear to be fundamentally different from previous attempts at Continental hegemony by Napoleon or the *Kaiserreich*. Against the Soviets – treated as both ideological and racial enemies – no laws applied, however: the war aimed at destroying not simply the Soviet government and its ability to resist, but the people as such and the rule of law as such.

¹⁶ The vote was hailed by Armenia's prime minister a "victory of justice and truth". Turkey responded very differently: "History will note these resolutions as irresponsible and irrational actions by some members of the US Congress against Turkey... They will go down in history as the responsible party for causing a long-lasting damage between two nations". The House of Representatives had passed a similar resolution six weeks earlier.

¹⁷ The intent was contained in Hitler's well-known speech of January 30, 1939. For the conflicting views on the exact timing of the decision to kill Europe's Jews, see Michael R. Marrus. *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987).

There was a corner of Europe, however, where the war had stopped being “normal” well before the struggle in the East reached its existential climax. Ante Pavelić’s Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH) was the first member of the New European Order to abandon all remnants of traditional restraints. As early as 17 April 1941, a week after the Croat state was proclaimed upon the entry of German troops into Zagreb, Pavelić enacted a fiat, the *Law on the Protection of the People and the State*. It made it “legal” to kill anyone the regime wanted killed. Capital punishment was made mandatory for all those who “offended the honor and vital interests of the Croat people” and who “in whatever way” threatened the state.

A day later Pavelić signed the first racial law, on “the Aryanization of Jewish property”. It is noteworthy that ordinary Croat citizens enthusiastically took part in this campaign wherever they could: “indeed, the share of ‘private’ elements in the plunder was enormous – at least half of the property of which the Jews were robbed apparently never reached the state treasury but remained in the hands of individual Croats”.¹⁸ The NDH thus accomplished in just two weeks what it had taken the Nazi regime seven years to achieve in Germany. The ensuing decrees, *On Racial Affiliation* and *On the Protection of the Aryan Blood and Honor of the Croatian Nation* ordered all Serbs to wear blue sleeve bands with the letter *P* (*Pravoslavni*, Orthodox), and Jews the Star of David and the letter *Ž* or the word *Židov*, Jew. Some 40,000 Jews were made visible in the Ustaša Croatia months before they were made to wear the yellow star in Germany.¹⁹

The NDH was less confident of itself on the key issue of identity and rootedness than other German allies. The Ustaša insistence on the “holy Croatian name which cannot be replaced by any other” (as stated in Pavelić’s 1932 *Ustaša Principles*) was indicative of a hidden neurosis, no less than the claim that the Croats were one of the oldest nations in Europe, supposedly fully developed in the early medieval times. The endeavor to make the Croatian language as different from Serbian as possible reflected the same fixation. The Ustaša version of Croatian ethnogenesis developed into a heroic saga of state-building Aryan warriors defending the West against barbarity from the East. Pavelić’s Croatia was imagined as a *Volksgemeinschaft* both civilized and nobly barbarian; young and vigorous, yet old and wise.

The Ustaša movement had its roots in the political tradition based on “Croatia’s state rights” (*pravaštvo*). It included the key claim that all inhabitants of Croatia belonged to the Croat political nation and that none were exempt from the jurisdiction of its political and legal institutions.²⁰ For its upholders, the Serb

¹⁸ “Croatia”, by Menachem Shelah. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990), 323–324.

¹⁹ For the Jewish community in the NDH see Slavko Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber i Židovska općina Zagreb, 2001).

²⁰ For a comprehensive study of the States Rights ideology and movement, see: Mirjana Gross, *Izvorno pravaštvo – ideologija, agitacija, pokret* (Zagreb: Golden marketing, 2000).

citizen-soldiers of the Military Border were unwelcome aliens for as long as they insisted on retaining their distinct name, their autonomous legal status vis-à-vis Civil Croatia, and their Orthodox faith.²¹ An obsessive aristocratic resentment at the *Grenzer* privileges, harking back to the 17th century, was passed on from one generation to another, and became democratized after the collapse of feudalism in 1848.²²

At the historical root of the Ustaša bloodbath, let us emphasize, lay a centuries-old striving of the Croatian feudal and ecclesiastical elite to impose legal and religious homogeneity and to impose political obedience. A culturally homogeneous nation-state could not be created without ethnic cleansing, however. The notion of a racially distinct national community with an exclusive claim to its land was thus also developed. Eventually it became the necessary ingredient to make the Ustaša project possible, emotionally attractive and culturally viable to the potential followers.

The old distaste for *the Vlachs* of the Croatian feudal estates was re-defined in the mid-19th century by the “father of the nation”, Ante Starčević. He proclaimed that in Croatia there was only one “state-bearing”, constitutive nation: the Croatian nation. His Party of Rights demanded sovereign statehood and territorial expansion to the Drina River. Starčević saw the Serbs as the main obstacle to the fulfilment of his vision, and tried to resolve it by asserting that the Serbs did not exist: they were “a geographic term”, not a people.²³ By their very nature and even by name (*Serb-Servus-Slavus*, “Slavo-Serbs”), he wrote, they were a “breed” of slaves, a mongrel melange of Vlach and Roma blood predestined for criminality or slavery, unworthy of human designation and fit for slaughter. He articulated *eliminationist anti-Serbism* and thus gave rise to the political culture which ultimately led to the Ustaša project of *exterminationist Serbophobia*. Starčević provided Croatian nationalism with a crude, simple ethno-historical narrative which matured after his death. He gave a radical answer to the unsettled question of Croatian identity, which postulated the demonized Serb as its defining ingredient.²⁴

Unlike Fascism and Nazism, which were inherently dynamic movements, Pavelić aimed for a *stable* situation: his project entailed the creation of a nationally homogeneous, Serb-free, Croat state based on the *Führerprinzip*. His movement’s ideology was meant to serve that project. What also set the Ustašas

²¹ The overseer of the Zagreb diocesan landholdings, Ambroz Kuzmić, in a report of November 13, 1700, suggested that the “Vlachs” should be “slaughtered, rather than allowed to settle down... neither the Emperor’s radiance nor the noble state will ever be at peace with them”.. Quoted in Vojin S. Dabić, *Banska Krajina, 1688–1751* (Belgrade-Zagreb, 1984), 27.

²² On the origins and evolution of the Ustaša ideology, see: Srdja Trifkovic, *Ustaša: Croatian Fascism and European Politics, 1929–1945* (Chicago: The Lord Byron Foundation for Balkan Studies, 2011), 65–77.

²³ On Starčević’s Serbophobia see: Ferdo Šišić, “O stogodišnjici Ilirskog pokreta”, *Ljetopis Jugoslavenske akademije*, Zagreb, vol. 49, (1936).

²⁴ On Starčević’s legacy, see: Srdja Trifkovic, “The First Yugoslavia and the Origins of Croatian Separatism”, *East European Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1992), 362–363. Also, M. Gross (2000).

apart from both Nazis and Fascists was the degree to which their anti-Serb animus defined their emotional as well as cultural self-perception, their very *Croatness*. They postulated a demonic concept of *the Serb* which made any compromise impossible. Even limited sovereignty and amputation of territory was preferable to it.

Genocide Interrupted

The NDH was an Axis creation, but it nevertheless possessed all key attributes of *de facto* statehood, and in terms of policy-making it was an actor in its own right. Although the scope and quality of Croatia's statehood kept diminishing as the war progressed, it was always more than a mere extension of the policy dictated in Berlin or Rome. The existence of rivalries and divergent interests between the Axis powers enhanced the scope for autonomous action. Pavelić needed that scope to pursue his project of imposing homogeneity by genocidal means, if possible unhindered by German or Italian meddling.

In the Ustaša discourse, the assumption of power on April 10, 1941, was mystified as the beginning of an all-encompassing national revolution. That date supposedly marked not only the end of the greater-Serbian oppression, but also the beginning of a new era in which the Croat nation would build a nation-state cleansed of the malevolent aliens, Serbs and Jews, and liberated from the moral, linguistic, and biological contamination they had inflicted. This utopian vision included genocide as its integral part: to the Ustaša, mass murder made perfect sense. The glorification of the racially pure Croat peasant, his social-Darwinian "natural justice" his only guidance, produced a cult of unbridled bloodlust and pure hatred. It soon turned Croatia into a pandemonium of anarchy and genocide.

The intention to exterminate all Serbs in the imagined future Croatian state was the foundation of the Ustaša project. Its ideological underpinnings harked back to the early modern times. They were articulated by Starčević and his successors. The intent to dehumanize the Serbs, and the sustained effort to treat them accordingly, had been immanent to the Croatian political tradition. Its realization started in the village of Gudovac near Bjelovar, north of Zagreb, less than three weeks after the NDH was proclaimed: 190 local Serbs were murdered by the local Ustašas on 28 April 1941. Within weeks, far more bloody outrages were performed – simultaneously and with identical sadistic methods – in most areas of the Ustaša state.

After the first wave of slaughters, however, which lasted between May and September 1941, the Ustaša killing machine was no longer able to continue the full-scale application of Pavelić's genocidal project. Four key factors prevented the regime from completing its stated task of making Croatia totally Serb-free.

First, starting in eastern Herzegovina in early June 1941, the initially stunned and disoriented Serb population rose to arms. The uprising had no ideological basis, contrary to the communists' subsequent claims; it was a desperate

response to an existential threat.²⁵ That much was clearly understood by the German plenipotentiary general in Zagreb, Edmund Glaise von Horstenau – who felt frustrated as early as July 1941 by his inability to stop the bloodbath – and by the Italian high command. General Furio Monticelli, who commanded the Sassari Division, described the Serb uprising as a perfectly “natural reaction to the Ustaša persecution and violence”.²⁶ After the initial shock, wherever topography allowed it, the Serbs resisted *en masse* and proved unwilling to subject themselves to the openly murderous Ustaša regime.

Second, the Italian forces – primarily the Second Army headquartered at Sušak – soon displayed an ability to act autonomously on the ground, regardless of the political instructions from Rome. Italian soldiers often intervened to protect Serb civilians. As General Mario Roatta remembered, “Italian troops could not remain indifferent to such horrors. They intervened wherever they could, thus saving lives of a major segment of the Serb-Orthodox population and earning gratitude of the major part of the Serb Orthodox people in Croatia”.²⁷ By September 1941 this attitude of the Italian army resulted in the expulsion of all Ustaša units from the western half of the NDH, from Jastrebarsko in the northwest to Rudo in the southeast.²⁸

Third, after 18-month long intra-German debates and disputes about the causes, course and consequences of Ustaša misdeeds, by the end of 1942 the Wehrmacht pragmatists finally prevailed over the fanatically pro-Ustaša Minister in Zagreb, Siegfried Kasche.²⁹ A strict German mechanism of direct control was imposed on all Ustaša units. It weakened only in the second half of 1944, as a result of overall weakening of German positions in the final stage of the war, which Pavelić and his inner core of *Ras* cutthroats exploited to reintroduce the unrestrained course of bloody violence, albeit with far fewer potential victims on hand.

Fourth, Ustaša methods of murder were primitively personal, some light years away from the industrial killing methods perfected in Poland. The cutthroats of Jasenovac consisted of two to three thousand seasoned mass murderers belonging to the *Ustaška obrana* (“Ustaša Defense”) unit of Vjekoslav “Maks” Luburić for the most part of the camp’s existence. They were capable of killing hundreds of people in a single day using one-on-one tools, knives and clubs, or even thousands in a week – notably during the liquidation of the two early camps

²⁵ For the problem of the Serb *existential dialectics*, see: Веселин Ђуретић, *Савезници и југословенска ратна драма: Између националних и идеолошких изазова*, I, II (Београд: САНУ, 1985).

²⁶ Nicolas Gladstone Virtue, “Occupation Duty in The Dysfunctional Coalition: The Italian Second Army and Its Allies in The Balkans, 1941–43”, *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 14-1, (2011), 10.

²⁷ Марио Роата, *Битка на Балкану*, quoted by: Лазо М. Костић, *Хрватска зверства у Другом светском рату: према изјавама њихових савезника* (Чикаго: Српска народна одбрана, 1974), 226.

²⁸ See: Burgwyn, H. James, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini’s Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941–1943* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005). See also: Srdja Trifkovic, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia, 1942–1943”, *The Historical Journal*, 36, 4, (1993), 879–904.

²⁹ See: Edmund Glez fon Horstenau, *Između Hitlera i Pavelića* (Београд: Nolit, 2013).

in the fall of 1941, and after the arrival of the Kozara deportees in the spring of 1942, or the Roma a few months later. That feat could not be replicated on the regular daily basis.

Numbers of Ustaša Victims

The overall figures are no longer disputable among professional historians. The recent estimate by Nikodijević (2019) that no fewer than a hundred thousand and no more than 208,000 people were murdered in Jasenovac is methodologically different from the more precise estimates of 122,000-130,000 victims, but it does not greatly diverge from them.³⁰ Either way, Jasenovac was the fourth largest death camp in Europe by the number of people killed. This was no mean feat by any means, bearing in mind the primitive methods of murder and corpse removal. The Serbs accounted for roughly two-thirds of that number. Jasenovac was the point of execution for almost one-quarter of all Serb civilians murdered in the Ustaša state, ca. 80,000 men and women of the 300,000 total.

Methodologically unimpeachable figures on the number of victims of Jasenovac quoted herein are in close accordance with more general estimates of the actual and demographic losses of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia between April 1941 and May 1945. The pioneering work of Bogoljub Kočović remains, almost half a century after publication, a true beacon of conceptual clarity and methodological impartiality.³¹ Subsequent demographic research, and the analysis of the long-concealed 1964 state census, do not change the final result.³² In the whole of the Yugoslav state, as it existed on 6 April 1941, at least 1,070,000 persons were killed until May 1945, and no more than 1,120,000 people.³³ This is a far more precise range of likely figures than that concerning the Pontic holocaust, or the Armenian genocide, etc. It rests on incontrovertible evidence immune to any form of politically motivated manipulation.

Of approximately 1.1 million Yugoslav citizens who perished during the war, the Ustaša murdered some 300,000 Serb civilians.³⁴ Most of them were

³⁰ Dragan Cvetković, „Geostatistička analiza ljudskih gubitaka u koncentracionom logoru Jasenovac“, *Istorija 20. veka*, vol. 37, 1, (2019), 100.

³¹ Bogoljub Kočović, *Žrtve Drugog svetskog rata u Jugoslaviji* (Harrow: Naše delo, 1985). Compare: Vladimir Žerjavić, *Gubici stanovništva Jugoslavije u Drugom svjetskom ratu* (Zagreb: Jugoslavensko viktimološko društvo, 1989). Nenad Lajbenšperger, „Presenting and Establishing the Number of Yugoslav Casualties of World War II from Liberation until 1951“, *Токони учтопује*, бр. 3, (2017), 143–164.

³² *Žrtve rata 1941–1945. Rezultati popisa* (Beograd: Savezni zavod za statistiku 1966, repr. 1992).

³³ D. Cvetković, *op. cit.*, 94f. As the author points out, “Since the census of victims was primarily meant to be used to obtain war reparations from Germany, and since the number had fallen far short of the expected and until that time validated number of 1,706,000 it was decided to ban its usage and the entire material was entrusted to the Archive of Yugoslavia for safekeeping. The ban lasted almost 30 years, until 1992”.

³⁴ Dragan Cvetković, „Holokaust u NDH – numeričko određenje“, *Istorija 20. veka*, vol. 29, 1, (2011), 163–182.

slaughtered at home, in the place of residence.³⁵ Roughly one-third were murdered in camps, initially in the pits of Jadovno and the island of Pag, subsequently in the Jasenovac camp system which included Stara Gradiška. One-sixth of Serbs residing in the territory of the NDH at the time of its proclamation were murdered by the regime for the sole reason of who they were. Their acts, their attitudes, and their beliefs were wholly immaterial to the killers.

The curve of the Serb-killing operations by the Ustaša death squads in the field, and the magnitude of the parallel work done by the resident camp executioners, reflected the shifting political landscape. One noteworthy fact is that the slaughters continued even when it became obvious that they were detrimental to the consolidation of the state, following the Serb uprisings and Italian reoccupation of Zones II and III in the summer of 1941.

Genocide as a Metaphysical Objective

In the Ustaša state the project of physical destruction of the Serbs did not need to “mature”. It was integral to the Croatian political tradition and the cornerstone of the Ustaša utopian vision, the precondition for the construction of a racially homogeneous and culturally fully integrated Croatian national community.

The intent had long predated the return of Pavelić and his 220 followers from Italy. In May 1941, less than a month after the NDH was proclaimed, one of the leading former emigres, Vlado Singer – a Jewish convert to Roman Catholicism and a fervent Ustaša – met by accident at the Zrinjevac Square in Zagreb his old acquaintance, Šime Balen, a well-known communist who was a high-ranking official in Tito’s regime later on. Singer had no hesitation in telling Balen the exact score on the Ustaša plan for resolving the Serb question. The world was at war, he said, and will remain preoccupied by it for some time to come:

All sorts of things can happen under such circumstances... which would not be possible in peacetime. We have to use the opportunity. The Serbs have been for the past three hundred years our worst burden. With them, so multiplied and the way they are, there will never be any good luck to our Croat state. Now is the opportunity! We have to kill a third of them, a third will run away, and a third will embrace Catholicism and become Croats.³⁶

This was a clear program and all key actors acted accordingly. In a speech in the town of Gospić, Mile Budak, Pavelić’s minister of education, announced: “We have three million bullets for Serbs, Jews and Gypsies. We shall kill one third of all Serbs. We shall deport another third, and the rest of them will be forced to become Catholic”. The *so-called Serbs*, Budak added, are not any *Serbs* at all, but people brought by the Turks “as the plunderers and refuse of the Balkans... They should know, and heed, our motto: *either submit, or get out!*”

³⁵ For various estimates of the number of victims by contemporary Axis sources, see: C. Трифковић, *Усташе: Балканско срце таме*, 216–218, 221–223.

³⁶ S. Goldstein, *op. cit.*, (2001), 113.

Such an act of submission was not an option for most of the victims, however. The program heralded by Singer, Budak and others meant that – as Ernst Nolte has put it – “Croatia became during the war a giant slaughterhouse”.

The commitment to genocide as a good-in-itself distinguishes Hitler’s and Pavelić’s bloodbaths from other despotic regimes in history. In late 1941, Eugen-Dido Kvaternik told his old classmate Branko Pešelj that he allowed for the possibility that Germany could lose the war and conceded the danger that in that case the Croatian state would cease to exist. However, he added, “regardless of the outcome of the war there will be no more Serbs in Croatia”. This “reality of any post-war situation”, Kvaternik said, would be a *fait accompli* for whoever turned out to be the victor.³⁷ He and others regarded exterminationist Serbophobia as “the quintessence of the Ustaša doctrine, its *raison d’être*”.³⁸ The Jewish Question in Germany – however debated and defined before 1941 – was a lesser concern for a German Nazi than the ‘Serbian Question’ for the Croat Ustaša. By making their terror public in wide areas, especially in the Dinaric regions of the Krajina and Bosnia-Herzegovina, they sought to make the inter-communal breach irreversible.

“There were no innocents” at Jasenovac, its commander, Vjekoslav “Max” Luburić, declared two decades after the war.³⁹ They were guilty by virtue of who they were. Such mindset is aptly illustrated by Vladko Maček’s personal encounter with a genuine mass murderer. The HSS leader, interned at the Jasenovac camp headquarters building in 1941-42, recalled hearing from the other side of the barbed wire “the screams and wails of despair and extreme suffering, the tortured outcries of the victims, broken by intermittent shooting”. They “accompanied all my waking hours and followed me into sleep at night”. He noticed that one of the officers assigned to watch him, Ljubo Miloš, crossed himself each night before going to sleep. Maček was puzzled by the gap between his apparent piety and the monstrosity of his actions, and asked the man whether he was not afraid of the punishment of God. “Don’t talk to me about that”, the guard replied, “for I am perfectly aware what is in store for me. For my past, present and future deeds I shall burn in hell, but at least I shall burn for Croatia”.⁴⁰

The Apocalyptic Finale

By the end of 1942 the frequency and magnitude of Ustaša murderous sorties started declining even in the German zone. This was due to the success of the Wehrmacht – and General Glaise in particular – to rein in the Ustašas and impose German military control over their activities. At the same time, Pavelić

³⁷ Branko Pešelj to the author, Washington D. C., May 12, 1988.

³⁸ Michele Frucht Levy, “The Last Bullet for the Last Serb: The Ustaša Genocide against Serbs, 1941–1945”, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 37, no. 6, (November 2009), 811.

³⁹ Ivan Mužić (ed.), *Maček u Luburićevu zatočeništvu* (Split: Laus, 1999), 71–72.

⁴⁰ Vlatko Maček, *In the Struggle for Freedom* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1957), 234.

was forced to remove some of the most notorious Ustaša mass murderers, such as Vjekoslav Luburić, Erich Lisak, Vjekoslav Servatzy and Eugen Kvaternik, from the upper echelon of the state (but in the end only Kvaternik was gone permanently). A more prominent role was played – for the ensuing year and a half – by the more pragmatic *home Ustaša* “civilians”, notably Mladen Lorković.⁴¹

Pavelić stage-managed the downfall of Lorković as an alleged conspirator in August 1944, which was immediately followed by the final departure of his old enemy, General Glaise, from Zagreb. The scene was set for the final, nightmarish phase of the Ustaša state. The old guard of mass murderers was brought back to top positions. The war in its final eight months became explicitly anti-Serb: to wit, members of the Serbian Volunteer Corps travelling with German papers and escort were summarily executed at the Zagreb railway station in December 1944. The public discourse was refocused on the cult of bloody revenge against the enemies of Croatia for all past sufferings of the Croat nation and those which were yet to come.⁴² The words of Vlado Singer, Eugen Kvaternik, Ljubo Miloš and others indicate the extent to which the Ustaša leaders and direct executioners regarded genocide as their primary task, a sanctified objective which took priority even over the victory in war or the salvation of one’s immortal soul.

The Ustaša genocide different in some respects from the Nazi effort, but both varieties are comparable in five important respects:

1. Genocide was implicit in the ideological assumptions of both movements.
2. In both cases, the regime devoted significant resources to carrying out mass murder in pursuit of the vision of a homogenous national community, regardless of whether genocide threatened military-strategic or security interests of the state.
3. In both cases the majority of “ordinary citizens” were not immediately engaged in the project, but they accepted passively the normalization of a deeply abnormal situation.
4. In both cases the number of direct executioners was relatively small, but they believed, not without reasons, that the majority of their fellow citizens tacitly accepted the necessity of work which only a sturdy elite had the strength and nerves to see through.
5. In both cases, both the order-givers and field murderers “knew” why their work had to be done: mass murder was goal-oriented, *genocide made sense* for both.

In the final stage of the war the Ustaša state lacked the means to use the last bullet for the last Serb. It made a wholehearted attempt to exterminate them, however. The extent of its success, expressed through the number of victims, needs to be further researched.

⁴¹ *Pragmatism* in the Ustaša context had its limits. Lorković exalted the fact that Ustašas had burnt all bridges behind them. He saw this as an advantage: “they have only the road forward left to them, in blood and with lead!” Mladen Lorković, “Muške vrline – temelj Ustaškog pokreta”, *Ustaški godišnjak 1*, (1942), 90.

⁴² Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism 1941-1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 284.

The Ustaša Croatia and the New Europe

The NDH was in some respects an atypical Quisling creation. In four important respects it differed from all other allies of the Reich:

1. Croatia was the only satellite state which carried out “the final solution of the Jewish question” itself, of its own volition and on the spot.
2. Due to the parallel mass murder of Serbs, the NDH was the only country in Nazi-controlled Europe in which the number of non-Jewish civilians who were murdered exceeded the number of Jewish victims.⁴³
3. The NDH was the first state in Hitler’s “New Europe” to start applying an openly genocidal project, weeks before the onset of the Barbarossa and eight months before the Nazi decision to proceed with the extermination of European Jewry was made at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942.⁴⁴
4. The Ustaša cult of violence and raw hatred, and the resulting crimes, far exceeded anything seen or done in other states which sided with Hitler, specifically Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia.

Of no lesser importance, in practical terms, was the fact that the Ustaša regime – alone among the satellites – did not have to suffer the presence of an even more zealously pro-Nazi force waiting in the wings to replace Pavelić if he proved insufficiently enthusiastic or reliable. All other German allies in central and southeastern Europe were headed by individuals and regimes less than totally committed, by mid-1944, to the increasingly uncertain Nazi project.

There exists another intriguing difference. The Nazis subjected ordinary Germans to relentless anti-Semitic indoctrination for almost a decade prior to the final, exterminationist phase of 1942-45. The anti-Serb propaganda campaign conducted by the Ustaša regime preceded the beginning of its own exterminationist campaign by weeks rather than months. In both cases modern racial myths were blended with a mix of pre-existing myths, stereotypes and prejudices, thus preparing ordinary people to internalize the dehumanization and subsequent liquidation of the victims. In Croatia, however, the collective indoctrination preceding the mass murder could be so much shorter because the soil was more receptive to the seed. One fanatic with two hundred henchmen would not have imposed their will on the rest of the society had there existed a collective will to reject his methods, not to act as his accessories, and had there not existed a tradition of animosity and intolerance upon which he was able to build.

The result was far greater participation of ordinary citizens in the crimes of the regime in Croatia than in Germany. The Holocaust was taking place in the East, far from the eyes of most Germans. The Ustaša terror was

⁴³ Jonathan Steinberg, “Types of Genocide? Croats, Serbs and Jews, 1941-45”, David Cesarani (ed.), *Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* (London: Routledge, 1996), 176.

⁴⁴ See: Srdja Trifkovic, “Balkan Bloodbath Before Wannsee: Croatia 1941 Revisited”, in: *Israeli-Serbian Academic Exchange in Holocaust Research – Collection of Papers from the Conference in Jerusalem-Yad Vashem, 15-20 June 2006* (Београд: Музеј жртва геноцида, 2008), 47–64.

open and it aimed from the outset to turn many Croats and Muslims into accomplices – mostly through the distribution of looted property.⁴⁵ The Germans cremated the victims, while the Ustaša often left them deliberately visible on the crime scene.⁴⁶

Trivializing Crimes by Magnified Numbers

The Ustaša crimes present a burdensome legacy for a nation which seems determined, for the most part, to minimize or deny the magnitude of horrors committed in its name. As Thomas Fleming has warned, the Croatian nation will not fully mature until it has reckoned with its past; but he also warns that one set of propaganda lies cannot be opposed by the anti-propaganda from the Serb side: In fact, all propaganda – no matter how superficially attractive – is ultimately lethal to those who believe in it; they are lies covered up in a little truth, like time-bombs wrapped in Christmas paper. Nations are nourished on truth, not lies, and the peoples of the Balkans (and those who would presume to tell them how to live) have an urgent need of the truth that only historical scholarship can provide.⁴⁷

Between the end of the war in 1945 and the time of Yugoslavia's disintegration 45 years later, no serious historical scholarship was possible. Once his power was secure and absolute, Josip Broz Tito tried to force all "Yugoslavs" to invest their memories of the war into the common bank of the *National Liberation Struggle* (NOB) and *Fascist Terror* as equal shareholders. Tito's edifice thus came to be built on three fictions: the myth of the constituent nations' equal contribution to the Partisan victory in the 'National Liberation Struggle', the myth of all ethnic groups' equal suffering under the 'occupiers and their domestic servants', and the equating of the Četniks with Ustašas as politically and morally equivalent.

Specifically, the Serbs were not allowed to be personalized as victims and the Ustašas were seldom named as perpetrators. Countless markers and monuments in Lika, Kordun, Banija, or Bosnia and Herzegovina memorialized the "victims of the terror by occupiers and their domestic servants", followed by long columns of Serbian names. Of course, the state narrative could not prevent or outweigh the impact of personal and family ones, however, which for the Serbs became part of an underground national narrative.

While politically expedient for the Communist dictator, Tito's policy assured that there would be no atonement and no scholarly discourse on the Ustaša legacy. This facilitated a massive official coverup of Ustaša crimes in the

⁴⁵ According to Gen. Glaise's diary, "the precondition for a Croat to join the Ustaša service was to kill at least one Serb, to rape a Serb woman, and to rob some Serb property. My response was that every other Ustaša should be put against the wall and shot" (G. fon Horstenau, *op. cit.* 161).

⁴⁶ Alexander Korb, "The disposal of corpses in an ethnicized civil war: Croatia, 1941–45", in: Elisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus (ed.), *Human remains and mass violence: Methodological approaches* (Manchester University Press, 2014), 108–109.

⁴⁷ Thomas Fleming, "Foreword", in: S. Trifković, *Ustaša* (2011), 7–8. In Serbian translation: Томас Флеминг, "Предговор", у: Срђа Трифковић, *Усташе: Балканско срце таме* (2016), 7.

name of ideological *Gleichschaltung*. The pernicious legacy of the Titoist period is reflected in the fact that Serbian historians have not produced, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, a comprehensive, multidisciplinary study on the Ustaša phenomenon and Serb suffering. There is, instead, a hyperproduction of quasiscience which seeks to dominate the public sphere.

The misuse of the term *genocide* for political purposes in recent decades has created an opportunity for the successor nation-states of both the USSR and Yugoslavia to use it in order to solidify their newly-constructed identity and historical narratives. Many have embarked on the *recherche des genocides perdus* in order to round off a mythical-formative tale.

The Serbs do not need such manipulative exercises. The correction of the number of Serbian civilians shot by the Germans at Šumarice (Kragujevac) in October 1941 was quite significant: from the figure of seven thousand, repeated *ad nauseam* for decades, to the correct number of 2,800 victims.⁴⁸ This has not impacted in any way the horrendous nature of the crime, its perception as such, or the responsibility of the perpetrators.

The same principles should apply to the endeavor to establish, as precisely as possible, the number of Serb and other victims of the Ustaša regime in Croatia. This task does not in any way condone the ongoing attempt by some polemicists to “relativize” that regime’s crimes, to de-Serbianize the victims, and to de-Croatize the perpetrators, in the old Titoist fashion. They go so far as to claim that, in Jasenovac, unnamed “people” were killed by unnamed “fascists”.⁴⁹ Such attempts at absolving Croatia from the Ustaša legacy, and robbing the Serb victims of their identity, are below contempt. They are the exact equivalent of denying the Jewish identity of the victims of the Holocaust. They reflect a perverted moral compass of the authors.

On the other hand, a methodologically sound quest for the verifiable number of Ustaša victims looks like sacrilege to some Serbs, regardless of rational arguments. To the upholders of numerological grandomania, the provable magnitude of Ustaša crimes – horrendous as they are both in their intent and execution – is considered insufficiently high. This unsurprisingly leads to a legion of quasi-historians and dilettantes dabbling with a deadly serious subject in order to provide the “evidence” on cue. Unscientific claims leading to the absurd inflation of figures is the result of their endeavor. Particularly reprehensive is their disregard for the way their writings erode the credibility of empirically based narratives on the Ustaša phenomenon and consequences.

A paradigmatic example is provided by the pseudoscientific compilation of poorly edited material by a self-styled “Auschwitz expert” (as we are eccen-

⁴⁸ In his book *Име и број* (“Name and Number”, 2007) the curator of the *October 21 Memorial Museum* in Kragujevac Staniša Brkić published the names and personal data for 2,796 civilians shot by Germans.

⁴⁹ See: Слободан Антонић: Ко је направио Јасеновац – фашисти или Хрвати? *Све о Српској* <http://sveosrpskoj.com/komentari/antonik-ko-je-napravio-jasenovac-fasisti-ili-hrvati/> (Posted December 24, 2019; retrieved December 28, 2019).

trically told from the cover of his book), Gideon Greif.⁵⁰ In a massive assemblage of secondary-source snippets that represents his *magnum opus* on the subject, the Israeli author asserts astronomic figures for the Serb victims of Jasenovac (700,000 or even more, as stated by Greif in different media appearances), and for the Independent State of Croatia as a whole (1.4 million). He offers no evidence to support such claims, which are utterly devoid of rational grounding. He even claims support for his assertions from an unnamed “international group of experts”, of unknown origin or composition. Not a single new document, not a single original idea, is contained in Greif’s work. Predictably, not a single refereed journal has reviewed his work, and rightly so. It is “fake history” *par excellence*. It provides the best favor any pro-Ustaša apologist, or neo-Ustaša revisionist, can hope for.⁵¹

L'affaire Greif would not have been possible, however, had the professional Serb historians done their duty. Their failure to do so, three decades after the last Titoist restraints were removed, is nothing short of a scandal. Many are willing to point out, privately, that Greif is a charlatan who speaks none of the ex-Yugoslav languages, that he is an opportunist whose professional rating – in his native country or internationally – is negligible, that he is greedy for the lavish Serbian state subsidies, etc; but they are loath to say so in public. That is also a scandal.

Conclusion

The key feature of the Ustaša movement, the Croatian state it created and the regime it established, was the premeditated genocidal terror against the Serbs. It was seen as an ontological duty which transcended all other priorities, a necessity not subjected to any cost-and-benefit analysis. This was considered axiomatic among the Ustaša political leadership and among the throat-slitting rank-and-file alike. It was seen as the existential prerequisite of the Ustaša state, its consolidation and its survival. Mass murder was treated as a sanctified endeavor, even at the risk of a lost war or at the cost of personal eternal damnation.

The number of Serb victims is horrendous: some 300,000 overall (out of ca. 1.9 million Serbs residing in the Independent State of Croatia at the moment of its proclamation), sadistically murdered one-on-one, with up to a third of them killed in Jasenovac alone. There would have been many more victims, but as we have pointed out several important limiting factors were at play which prevented the completion of the genocidal project.

The Ustaša legacy is today’s *serbenfreie* Republic of Croatia. That legacy is kept alive not only at Ustaša-slaughter-celebrating concerts and soccer matches, but also by the political, academic, ecclesiastical, cultural, artistic, en-

⁵⁰ Gideon Greif, *Jasenovac – Aušvic Balkana; Jasenovac – Auschwitz of the Balkans* (Beograd: Knjiga komerc, 2018).

⁵¹ Greif’s writings are on par with a popular sub-genre of quasihistory in Serbia, which asserts and elaborates the claim that the Serbs are the oldest nation in the world (*Srbi narod najstariji*).

tainment and media establishments. They have fully internalized the assumptions and preferences harking back to Starčević and Pavelić, but for the most part they no longer require the explicit symbolism and terminology of 1941 to promote their peculiar world outlook. In the Balkans the old heart of darkness keeps beating, encouraged by the benevolent tolerance of the “international community”. Its leading lights advise the Serbs *to look forward*, which entails the dictum to forget, minimize, or even deny, the fruits of the Croatian Holocaust of 1941-45, and its revived legacy of 1991-1995.⁵²

The endeavor is flawed. Old sins unatoned for, and dead sinners unrepentant, will continue coming back to haunt the living. To paraphrase a warning about another ghost from Europe’s not too distant past, *we are not yet finished with Pavelić*.⁵³

The truth exists, only lies need to be invented. The Serbs have no reason to fear it. Solid work by seasoned professionals is urgently needed.

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⁵² The U.S. Department of State human rights report on Croatia (March 11, 2010) states matter-of-factly that Jasenovac was “the site of the largest concentration camp in Croatia during World War II, where *thousands* of Serbs, Jews, and Roma were killed” [emphasis added]. This claim is the exact moral and factual equivalent of asserting that “tens of thousands” of Jews and others were killed in Auschwitz or Treblinka.

⁵³ *Wir sind mit Hitler noch lange nicht fertig*. John Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 1.

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USTAŠA CRIMES, SERBIAN VICTIMS, NUMBERS AND POLITICS: TOWARD A RATIONAL DEBATE

Summary

There is no more thankless task for a historian than to try to determine the number of victims of any single episode of mass murder in which the 20th century was abundant. All over the world we encounter the sanctification of numbers unsupported by scientific evidence and the misuse of the term “genocide” for political purposes.

The issue of the number of Serbs who were murdered by the Ustaša regime in the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH) under the 1941–45 Axis occupation is also still contentious, even though there is broad agreement on the figures among expert historians of the period.

Ever since the Ustaša movement was founded in the 1930's, anti-Serb genocidal intent had been immanent to its ideology. After the fall of Yugoslavia in April 1941, the Ustaša regime applied its exterminationist agenda with murderous gusto. After the first wave of genocidal terror, however, it was not able to complete its design against the Serbs – Ustašas' primary foes – for four key reasons. *First*, after the initial shock in July 1941, the Serbs rose to arms all over the NDH; *Secondly*, the Italian Army tried to restrain Ustaša killers in its zone of occupation, and failing that extended it to the western half of the NDH in September 1941, expelling all Ustaša death squads; *Thirdly*, in late 1942 the Wehrmacht imposed strict controls over the Ustaša militia down to the company level, thus restraining their murderous sorties until the second half of 1944; and *Fourthly*, the methods used by Ustaša killers were savage: one-on-one sadistic murders, using mostly clubs and knives; but they were unable to produce the number of victims needed for the task.

Methodologically unimpeachable research indicates that the number of Yugoslav citizens killed in 1941–45 was around 1.1 million, out of 17 million.

The Ustaša regime murdered some 300,000 Serb civilians. The Jasenovac camp system accounted for around 130,000 victims, two-thirds of them Serbs. The Ustaša wanted to do better, but they were restrained by the four limiting factors listed above.

Some Serb laymen find these figures too low. This creates an opportunity for quasihistorians unburdened by the canon of scientific discovery. Their compilations claim, with no proof, that 700-800,000 were murdered in Jasenovac alone, and over a million in the NDH. Such falsehoods need to be discredited. The truth about the Ustaša terror is awful enough. Inflated numbers should not morph into myths which, in the final instance, always hurt the most those who invent them.

KEYWORDS: Ustaša, Ideology, Victims, Genocide, Jasenovac, Croatia, Serbs, Jews, Nazism