

From Annihilation of the Elites to Total Annihilation: Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–1942

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Abstract

The Independent State of Croatia (isc) was created as a result of the aggression of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy against the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It occupied the central part of Yugoslavia, an area that far exceeded ethnic Croatian territories. Although formally it was in the sphere of influence of Fascist Italy, the isc was much closer to the national-socialist Third Reich in terms of its organization and foreign policy position.

The isc's internal organization was an expression of acceptance of the Nazi ideological-political principle of "blood and soil", by which an area could be Germanized (in the case of the isc – Croatianized), but not the people who lived there. This led to the destruction of nationally, racially and religiously undesirable population groups – primarily the Serbs, who accounted for nearly a third of the population of the country, as well as Jews and, for the most part, the Roma. The first to be attacked were the most prominent Serbs, the bearers of national and political identity, and often the wealthiest citizens. Priests, monks and indeed the entire organization of the Serbian Orthodox Church also came under concerted attack.

The establishment of the Independent State of Croatia (ISC) was made possible after Nazi Germany and its allies launched their ultimately successful invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941. Victory opened the way for putting in place the Croatian ultranationalist political program which had been taking shape since the second half of the nineteenth century. It soon became obvious that the ideological profile and political practice of the newly-created Ustasha Croatian state was much closer to the German Nazi model than to that of Italian Fascism.

The newly-established ISC encompassed not only Croatia, but also areas which were neither ethnically nor historically Croatian (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Srem). This was made obvious by its own population census: according to data gathered by the German Foreign Ministry and valid as on 1 May 1941, Croats made up slightly more than one half (52.46%), while Serbs accounted for nearly one-third (1,925,000 or 30.6%) of the country's population of 6,290,300. Muslims were officially subsumed under Croats, while Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Jews and Slovenes constituted larger minorities.¹

Alojzije Stepinac, the Archbishop of Zagreb and Metropolitan Bishop of Croatia, who had been a supporter of the Croat "revolutionary movement" since 1936 (Ekmečić, 2007, pp. 415, 420, 423 and 431), extolled the new Croatian state as a divine creation. The Archbishop saw its inception as "God's hand at work", as he put it in his circular letter of 28 April 1941, inviting the clergy of the Diocese of Zagreb to set to "the blessed work of preserving and improving the ISC" (Novak, 2011, pp. 720–721).² This fitted in well with the Vatican's plans for expanding its jurisdiction over the "schismatics", i.e. Orthodox Christian Serbs, a goal which was supposed to be served by the creation of a large Croatian Catholic state (Falconi, 1965; Manhattan, 1988, pp. 89–104). The annihilation of the Orthodox Serb population within the boundaries of that state, the obliteration of their identity and of all traces of their existence, was supported by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and clergy. And whatever measure of disagreement there was between the Ustasha authorities and Archbishop Stepinac and a few other prelates – admittedly, such controversy did occasionally come to the fore – followed from divergent opinions on the methods of achieving this shared goal, not on the goal itself (Alexander, 1987, pp. 71–72; Steinberg, 1994, p. 183).

¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, Pol. IV 2,555 g, 21 Mai 1941.

² *Katolički list* No. 17, Zagreb, 1941, 197–198; V. Novak, *Magnum crimen. Half a Century of Clericalism in Croatia. Dedicated to Unknown Victims of Clericalism*, Vol. II, Zagreb 1948, rpt. Jagodina 2011, pp. 720–721. The Archbishop's circular letter was broadcast over the radio for a number of days in a row, either in its entirety or in excerpts, thus ensuring its message a much wider outreach than the printed version alone could have had.

As long as it was not a threat to German interests, the Serbian policy of the Croatian state enjoyed Hitler's undivided support (Hillgruber, 1967, p. 577).³ The Italians had no doubts whatsoever that orders for the destruction of Serbs were coming from the government itself (Radogno, 2006, pp. 186–187). As early as 11 June 1941, the Italian 2nd Army reported that Catholic priests and monks had been leading murderous raids on Orthodox Serbs and acting as promoters of Ustasha propaganda, expressing the conviction that the Catholic faith could not flourish and develop in strength unless all Serbs were destroyed (Radogno, 2006, pp. 186–187).

The premises of the ideology of the prewar Ustasha terrorist organization, notably its anti-Serbian and anti-Jewish component, were promptly incorporated into policies created by the newly-established power structure. These policies were pursued throughout the existence of the Croatian state in the Nazi "New Order". State repression was dressed up in a pseudo-legal form, which opened the door to conducting a policy based on the concept of a homogeneous state of Croats (both Roman Catholic and Muslim). This was to be created through the destruction of Serbs, Jews and, somewhat later, the Roma, as well as of politically undesirable citizens – at first Yugoslav nationalists, and then also Communists (Jelić-Butić, 1978, pp. 158–184; Krizman, 1983, pp. 117–137; Koljanin, 1996, p. 30).

Immediately following the declaration on the establishment of the ISC on 10 April 1941, the public discourse became saturated with ultranationalist and racist rhetoric, which was targeted against two main groups: Serbs and Jews, though principally against the Serbs (Krizman, 1983, p. 119; Yeomans, 2013). Even though there were clear differences in the enforcement and final outcome of the policy of annihilating the "undesirables" (Serbs on the one hand, and Jews and Roma on the other), the key fact is that there was a publicly proclaimed state policy aimed at their destruction, and that it was pursued using all available means, obviously depending on circumstances and resources. This is the reason why the Croatian policy towards these three groups had all the hallmarks of genocide throughout the existence of the ISC.⁴

The plan for the extermination of Serbs brought the Ustasha state face to face with the fact that this national group made up about one-third of the population. Thus, its implementation required the full mobilization of existing state institutions and resources. In addition, new political bodies were created for this specific purpose. The policy of annihilation was

3 Minutes from the discussion between Ante Pavelić, the leader of the Croats, and Hitler, 6 June 1941.

4 In the opinion of Tomislav Dulić, the extermination of Jews and Roma in the ISC was a genocide because a "substantial part of the population" was destroyed, while the case of Serbs can be designated as an "attempted genocide" or ethnocide (Dulić, 2005, p. 365). On the other hand, Alexander Korb expresses the view that the crimes against Serbs were not a genocide and that there is no evidence for a planned annihilation (Korb, 2013, p. 259 and pp. 268–269).

carried out both by the Ustasha movement – its organs (central and local) and its military and police forces – and by administrative bodies, from the government and ministries down to the lower levels of public administration in the counties and districts. The regular Croatian Army (*domobranstvo*, Home Guard) and gendarmerie (*oružništvo*) were also assigned a specific role in its implementation.⁵ This is in no way contradicted by the fact that Croatian Army officers sometimes voiced their disapproval of the methods used against the Serbs, or by the occasional cases of Ustashes being disarmed by Croatian Army units.⁶ The systematic and mass killing of Serbs was committed primarily by Ustasha military detachments (*Ustaška vojnica*) and, acting together with them or independently, armed civilians (the “wild Ustashes” or Ustasha militia) led by local Ustasha officials.⁷

Even though the methods, dynamic and means employed in the process varied, its ultimate goal was the physical annihilation of the Serb population and all traces of its group identity, notably its religious – Orthodox Christian – dimension. A series of laws banned all Serbian national symbols and institutions; their adoption was quickly followed by the seizure of Serbian public and private property and by increasingly frequent murders (Jelić-Butić, 1978, pp. 158–175). Initially, the policy was implemented in the cities and ethnically compact Serbian areas located along the former Austrian Military Frontier (Lika, Kordun, Banija, West Slavonia and Srem), and thereafter in Bosanska Krajina, Herzegovina and Eastern Bosnia, i.e. the areas bordering on Serbia and Montenegro. The Serb social elite was the first to be subjected to physical destruction. The Serbian Orthodox Church was outlawed, its priests and monks tortured, murdered or exiled, churches and monasteries systematically ravaged, and their properties looted or destroyed. In addition to the clergy, teachers too were seen as bearers of Serbian national identity, and were therefore exposed to equally ruthless repression. According to official Croatian records for the second half of July 1941, “there still are 2,204 male and female teachers of the Greek-Eastern faith, and the Ministry of Education suggests that they be transferred to concentration camps” (Vukčević, 1993, pp. 392–393).

The program of destruction of Serbs had a foreign policy dimension to it. Namely, it fitted into the Nazi German plan for an “ethnic reorganization” of Europe, the long-term aim of which was the national homogenization

5 More recent Croatian historiography on the Ustasha military organisation completely ignores this role of the movement’s military wing; cf. e.g. Obhodjaš 2013. Works on the regular Croatian Army (*domobranstvo*) are almost equally silent on its role in the destruction of Serbs, cf. Barić, 2003, p. 84 and pp. 455–459.

6 Headquarters of the Croat Legions to the Commander of the Croatian Army, Main Headquarters, Bosanski Novi, 5 Aug. 1941, (Vukčević, 1993, pp. 454–456). See also: Barić, 2003, pp. 455–459; Šinko & Bošnjak, 1987, pp. 150–151.

7 Contemporary Croatian historiography tends to ascribe the crimes against Serbs to the “wild Ustasha”, cf. Barić, 2003, pp. 455–459.

of the Third Reich and the Germanisation of the annexed lands of occupied states. And it was fully in keeping with that plan that Slovenes from the German-occupied part of Slovenia were expelled to the ISC and the German-occupied part of Serbia. A conference of German and Croatian representatives held in Zagreb on 4 June 1941 decided on the resettlement (expulsion) to the German-occupied part of Serbia of an appropriate number of Serbs from the ISC in addition to the Slovenes (Milošević, 1981, pp. 31–34; Ferenc, 1979, pp. 199–211).

The Croatian anti-Serbian discourse was essentially contradictory. It denied the existence of the Serbian people as such on the one hand,⁸ while calling for, and working on, their elimination on the other. The “theoretical” basis for the dehumanization of Serbs was founded on the allegedly insurmountable civilizational differences existing between the Croats, an eminently “Western” people, and the Serbs, viewed as the embodiment of an inferior and odious “Byzantium”. Overt or oblique, such a discourse had become commonplace in Croatian public life already in the interwar period (Koljanin, 2008, p. 299), as had the thesis that the Croat people were being exploited and oppressed, with their physical survival imperilled by “greater-Serbian” Yugoslavia and the Serbs as a nation.

In essence, the discourse on the necessity of defending the very existence of the Croat people that became prevalent immediately upon the establishment of the ISC came down to the following: the Croat people had been released from the unnatural and deadly political framework into which they were forced in 1918, thus returning to their natural, civilizational, ideological and racial (Germanic) context as epitomized by Nazi Germany.⁹ Unlike the ISC, the other Slavic nations that had been given a place in the Nazi “New Order” (Bulgaria and Slovakia) neither denied their Slavic origins nor sought to relate themselves to a Germanic ancestry. Continuing the 19th-century legacy of Ante Starčević, the originator of exclusive Croat nationalism, the ISCs widened its distance from the Serbs in racial terms as well.

Both the anti-Serbian and anti-Jewish elements drew on the theory that the Croat people were threatened by the Serbs and Jews who had been working together against the former’s vital interests. Thus, the Croats were compelled to secure their future by radically removing these threats from

8 This part of Croatia’s official policy was presented by Pavelić to Hitler during their first meeting on 6 June 1941; cf. Hillgruber, 1967, p. 577; Krizman, 1983, pp. 48–49.

9 As reported by Edmund Veessenmayer, a member of the German diplomatic staff in Zagreb, to Foreign Minister Ribbentrop on the occasion of his meeting with the designated head of the ISC, Ante Pavelić, in Karlovac on 14 April 1941. Pavelić declared that he was going to prove that the “Croats are not of Slavic but of Germanic ancestry. And, finally, he offered assurances that Hitler would not be disappointed in him” (quoted after Milošević, 1991, p. 47). At his meeting with Hitler on 21 July 1941, Slavko Kvaternik, the Commander-in-Chief of the Croatian Army, also insisted on the non-Slavic origins of the Croats, cf. Hillgruber, 1967, Vol. II, p. 612.

their body politic. The above notwithstanding, the Serbs continued to hold the place of honor on the list of enemies of the Croat people. Arrests and murders of Serbs were politically indiscriminate, and had started even before the mass detentions of Communists that ensued after 22 June 1941. The beginning of the “crusade” against the Soviet Union marked the onset of the large-scale internment and killing of Jews, who were identified with Bolshevism, one of the two archenemies of humankind (the other was plutocracy, i.e. liberal capitalism).

The attack launched by Nazi Germany, its allies and satellites on the Soviet Union gave another strong boost to the ISC’s repressive policies towards the Serbs as well as the Jews. The anti-Bolshevik/anti-Communist strategy introduced at the time would become an essential part of the anti-Serbian and anti-Jewish policies, too. The ideological label “Communist” was attached not only to the Communist opponents of the Croatian state, but also to the Serbs and Jews, irrespective of whether they actually were Communists or Communist sympathizers. Therefore, from 22 June 1941 the policy of destruction of Serbs and Jews was pursued as an element of the struggle against Communism, in which the Croat people fought both at home and – together with the other peoples of the “New Europe” – in the East.¹⁰

The invasion of the Soviet Union led the Croatian leadership to mobilize all resources to ensure the success of the principles of the “New Order”. Croats were called upon to join the struggle of the great German nation in defense of Europe against “Jewish-Bolshevik savagery”, the greatest enemy of humankind and the Croats as a nation. On 2 July 1941, the Croat leader, Pavelić, issued a proclamation calling upon his countrymen to take part in the battle against Bolshevism, adding that they had one other – equally important – reason for joining the crusade: namely, “the Moscow power-holders” had made an alliance with the “Belgrade power-holders” so as “to prevent”, at the last moment, “our national liberation and save the prison of the Croat people, the former Yugoslavia” (Pavelić, 1941, p. 51).

Until the end of the summer of 1941, the destruction of the Serbian population took the form of forced resettlement to the German-occupied part of Serbia, and thus so-called resettlement camps for Serbs operated for a few months in Sisak (Caprag), Slavonska Požega and Bjelovar. These camps were not intended expressly for extermination, but acts of torture were carried out there on a massive scale, and many Serbs were killed either during transportation or while incarcerated (Bijelić, 2008). The “resettlement-to-Serbia” formula was useful in the process of physical elimination because it served as a pretext for concentrating Serbs in one place for subsequent execution.

¹⁰ Minutes of the conversation between Hitler and Marshal Slavko Kvaternik, held at the Führer’s Headquarters on 21 July 1941, in: Hillgruber, 1967, Vol. II, pp. 575–580.

The forced conversion of the Orthodox Serb population to Roman Catholicism was undeniably the main method of obliterating their national identity and bringing about Croatization, and it was there that the symbiotic relationship between the Ustasha state and the Roman Catholic Church found its full expression. The Church's main motivation for supporting the ISC lay in the fact that the new state was wholeheartedly involved in wiping out the Orthodox ecclesiastical organization, and was very much committed to converting the Serbs to Roman Catholicism even at the cost of their large-scale physical annihilation. Members of the Catholic clergy and religious orders performed the conversion rite with the assistance of Croatian military or police forces, under the grisly shadow of massacres and an aggressive anti-Serbian and anti-Orthodox propaganda campaign.

It was not by chance that the "Law on Conversion Between Faiths" was enacted as early as 3 May 1941.¹¹ But no opportunity for conversion was to be given to members of the Serbian social elite. In its circular letter of 30 July 1941, the Ministry of the Interior ordered that certificates of conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism not be issued to members of the intelligentsia, save by exception (Vukčević, 1993, pp. 412–413); and the order for their transfer to the camp at Gospić followed shortly after. This went well with the policy of the Roman Catholic Church not to permit conversion to those who would do it out of "self-interest", an allusion to Serbs of good financial and intellectual standing (Dulić, 2005, p. 94).

Nor was "voluntary" conversion to Roman Catholicism in itself a guarantee of survival; sooner or later, many a "convert" ended up murdered (Kolanović, 2003, p. 54). The main criterion for applying repression was affiliation, whether current or former, to Orthodox Christianity. In July 1941, the Ustasha Police Directorate ordered the counties to compile, this within fifteen days, a register not only of all local Serbs, but also of all those who had ever been Orthodox.¹² In this way the religious-racial criterion was introduced into the annihilation process, for one's Serbian descent was equated with one's membership of the Orthodox Church regardless of any subsequent change of religion. The same criterion was applied to the Jews; namely, conversion was not enough to save them from annihilation.

The outbreak of a Serbian uprising in Herzegovina in early June 1941, and with full force in Lika and Bosanska Krajina in late July 1941, was a development which increasingly influenced Croatian policy. Once Serbian ethnic areas were liberated by the insurgents, the majority of whom were Communists or had Communist sympathies, the process of annihilation was increasingly carried out under the umbrella of military actions against

11 *Zbornik zakona i naredaba Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, Zagreb 1941, p. 56; *Narodne novine* No. 19, 5 May 1941; "Uputa prilikom prelaza s jedne vjere na drugu", in: *Zbornik zakona*, 122; *Narodne novine* No. 37, 27 May 1941.

12 Vojni arhiv, Beograd [Military Archives; hereafter: VA], Fonds NDH, b. 179, no. 13/2-1.

insurgents. At first, these campaigns were executed by Croatian forces acting alone, however as time progressed the involvement of German and Italian military forces grew (Schmider, 2002, pp. 89–98).

The first camps were set up in the ISC within a few days of its inception. The Ustasha authorities created an entire system of camps centered around Gospić. Apart from the facilities at Gospić proper, this camp included a network of provisional centers and execution sites, the most infamous being the environs of the village of Jadovno on Mt Velebit, and Slana and Metajna on the Adriatic island of Pag.

Since the only purpose of internment in Gospić was physical destruction, it must be classified as an extermination camp (*Vernichtungslager*) (*Extermination camps*, 1990, p. 461). Gospić (and by extension the Lika region) was chosen for several reasons. First of all, the location had a great symbolic significance for Croat extreme nationalism and for the Ustasha organization itself. Namely, the Ustashes already had a fairly strong foothold in Lika, which combined with agrarian overpopulation, poverty, religious fanaticism and a militarist tradition ensured the fast mobilization of local residents. Furthermore, the planned destruction of Serbs would be much easier on the karst terrain of Mt Velebit – dotted with sinkholes, it was an ideal location for conducting large-scale, systematic executions. Further back along the road leading to Gospić were the camps of Koprivnica (located at the abandoned “Danica” factory) and Zagreb (“Zagrebački zbor”, situated on the premises of a fairground). Political opponents were usually held in prisons (Kerestinec and Lepoglava) (Peršen, 1990, pp. 40–75). There were also smaller camps and temporary detention facilities (in Petrinja, Jablanica, Trebinje, Mostar, Sarajevo and Kruščica), where mass killings took place occasionally.¹³ As regards the “final solution to the Jewish question” in the ISC, it should be noted that the process of annihilation was carried out in the camps almost without exception. In the ISC, the Holocaust started off at Gospić, was subsequently moved – in the main – to Jasenovac, and found completion in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz in August 1942 and May 1943 (Sundhaussen, 1991, pp. 321–326).

Large-scale arrests of Serbs and Jews were stepped up in the second half of June 1941, which coincided with the beginning of the war in the East and the propaganda campaign against Bolsheviks and their domestic following. By July 1941, the system of camps centered around Gospić was fully operational and integrated into the destruction process. On 8 July 1941, the Police Directorate instructed all of its subordinate departments that whenever required by interests of public security, all “Greek-Easterners” (i.e. Serbs) and Jews were to be sent to the Gospić police department, i.e.

¹³ Report of Major Nikola Mikec to State Directorate for Reconstruction, Zagreb, 7 Aug. 1941, in: Vukčević, ed., *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, pp. 473–475.

to the camp administered by that department, and no longer to the “Danica” facility in Koprivnica. This instruction also applied to those who had converted to Roman Catholicism after 10 April 1941.¹⁴ The process of annihilation thus gathered momentum, and from then on Serbs and Jews were sent directly to Gospić.

The attitude of the Ustasha authorities towards the Communists would depend on their nationality. That this was so may be inferred from the Ustasha police instruction of 23 July 1941 not to send Catholics and Muslims to Gospić,¹⁵ which implies that to be sent to Gospić meant a death sentence. Croat and Muslim Communists were exempted, at least temporarily, even though some groups of arrested Communists were still sent to Gospić (Peršen, 1990, p. 53). New instructions were soon issued on the sending of Serbs – both intellectually prominent members of society and those suspected (even if not proven guilty) of siding with the Communists – to the camp. The same applied to Jews. Croats and Muslims harboring Communist sympathies were still required to be arrested, but they were to be detained at the location of arrest, while Serbs and Jews were to be sent to Gospić forthwith.¹⁶

In the early period of its functioning, the majority of the camp’s Serb internees were male, ranging in age from adolescents to the elderly. In terms of status, they were in the main members of the social elite. Most of the interned Jews were youths, i.e. the community’s vital core. Later, from July to August 1941, Serbian women and children were also interned at Gospić; by and large, this did not hold true for Jews. According to research performed by Djuro Zatezalo, of the total number of 42,246 persons deported to the camp, as many as 40,123 (94.97%) were murdered, of whom 38,010 (94.73%) were Serbs, 1,988 (4.95%) Jews and 155 (0.28%) of other ethnic nationalities. Exactly 10,502 victims have been identified – 9,663 (92%) were Serbs of both sexes, including 1,014 children up to the age of fifteen, while among the 762 (7.25%) identified Jewish victims there were 15 children. It is indicative that there were no children in the other groups of identified victims (77 or 0.74%) (Zatezalo, 2007, p. 373). The most numerous of the latter were Croats (55 or 0.52%), who were persecuted for their political sympathies, however this did not entail the internment of their family members. Unlike them, Serbs and Jews were subjected to total destruction as collectives, which explains the presence of women and children in those two groups of prisoners.

The list of identified victims (Zatezalo, 2007, pp. 422–732)¹⁷ allows us to draw some conclusions as regards the dynamic of the process of destruction

14 VA, Fonds NDH, b. 180, no. 10-1.

15 VA, Fonds NDH, b. 189, no. 31/7-1, Circular Letter of the Ustasha Police Directorate, Zagreb, 23 July 1941; Vukčević, 1993, p. 366.

16 VA, Fonds NDH, b. 169, no. 8/2, Circular Letter of the Directorate for Public Order and Security, Zagreb, 23 July 1941.

17 The author provides the names of the 10,502 victims, along with their ages, occupations, places of residence, the locations and dates of their violent deaths.

in specific geographical areas of the Ustasha state. The largest number of victims came from the region of Lika, and indeed from that part of it which was in relative proximity to the camp itself. Of the total of 10,502 victims, 4,335 (41.28%) were from Lika, mainly from the Gospić/Perušić district, but also from the districts of Korenica, Ogulin and Otočac. The number of victims from the Donji Lapac district, where Serbs accounted for the vast majority of the population, was conspicuously small. In the course of July 1941, Ustasha and Croatian Army units joined by armed Croat and Muslim peasants engaged in the systematic destruction of the Serbian population of this district in order to break up the continuous ethnic area that it formed with neighboring Bosanska Krajina. From 1 July to 10 August 1941 some 3,500 persons, mostly women, children and the elderly, were killed in this and adjacent districts with great cruelty. To give but one example: in early August 1941, 560 Serbs from Smiljan – the native village of the world famous inventor Nikola Tesla – were slaughtered. Understandably, this brutal policy engendered a reaction, and on 27 July 1941 a mass uprising broke out in the area of Donji Lapac and Bosanska Krajina, spreading rapidly to neighboring Serb-inhabited areas (Vezmar, 2005, pp. 152–182).

It is obvious that outside the towns and cities the process of annihilation implemented in the ISC targeted ethnically compact Serbian rural areas. Among the camps created for the specific purpose of facilitating the mass destruction of ethnic, religious, national and racial groups under the Nazi “New Order”, Gospić was by far the most important. The commencement of the “crusade” against the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 marked the beginning of the mass and systematic killing of Jews on occupied territories (Evans, 2008, pp. 217–259), ushering in the last and most gruesome phase of the Holocaust: extermination. It was unleashed in all of its horror towards the end of 1941 and in the beginning of 1942, and thus at more or less the time when the Germans were still constructing their system of death camps in occupied Poland (Friedländer, 2008, pp. 294–560). Indeed, the ISC’s “infrastructure of death”, centered first on Gospić, and from August 1941 on Jasenovac, was actually ready and operational before the Nazis had established their own. By the time the Germans were prepared for mass murder, the Holocaust in the ISC had been for the most part completed, with the Ustasha state making full use of the means and resources at its disposal.

As the Serbian uprising developed in intensity, on 15 August 1941 the Italian High Command began the reoccupation of a large part of the ISC (“Zone II”), which happened to include the site of Gospić concentration camp (Nenezić, 1999, pp. 98–101; Burgwyn, 2005, pp. 72–75). As a result, the Ustasha authorities were compelled to dissolve the facility, as well as the camps situated on the island of Pag, and transfer their prisoners to a makeshift camp at Jastrebarsko (19 August 1941). On 2 September, Jewish and Serbian women and children were transferred from Jastrebarsko to the camp in Kruščica near Travnik, and thence to the camp of Loborgrad in Hrvatsko Zagorje (Löwenthal, 1957, p. 15). Jewish and Serb male internees

were taken from Jastrebarsko to Jasenovac railway station, from where they were transported to a newly-opened camp near the village of Krapje. This was the first in the Jasenovac system of camps, and was designated “Camp I” (Mataušić, 2003, p. 30). At the same time or shortly later another camp – “Camp II” – was set up in the vicinity of the village of Bročice.

The camps in Krapje and Bročice soon began to receive new groups of arrestees from various regions of the country. Apart from Jews and Serbs, these included Croat Communists and other anti-Fascists (Jakovljević, 1999). In October 1941, the number of prisoners rose to between 4,000 and 5,000. Living and working conditions were horrendous. For example, prisoners building a levee along the River Strug were given only the most primitive work tools; many perished directly on the construction site, while others died from exhaustion or of the diseases which soon began to spread. The situation was aggravated by heavy rain and the fact that the locations of these two camps were regularly threatened by floods (*Zločini u logoru*, 1946, pp. 4, 40–41).

Work on setting up a new camp in the eastern part of predominantly Serbian Jasenovac began on 20 October 1941. The facility made use of buildings located on the seized estate of the Serbian Bačić family, which included a large brickyard, a sawmill, flour mill, and a chain factory. The transfer of prisoners from Krapje and Bročice to Jasenovac was preceded by a large-scale killing. As a result, the number of prisoners transferred by 20 November did not exceed 1,500. The estimated death tolls for these two camps range from 8,000 to 12,000 people (Miletić, 1986, Vol. I, p. 20; Vol. II, pp. 898–900).

The camp at Jasenovac was itself known as “Camp III” (*Ciglana*, the “Brickyard”) or “Concentration Camp III”. It was to become the largest such facility in the Ustasha camp system, playing a key role in the implementation of the ISC’s repressive policies. The camp was a hybrid of sorts in that it served two main objectives: the physical destruction of undesirable population groups and the economically beneficial utilization of slave labor; in practice, the former was achieved through the latter. In this respect Jasenovac was no different from the large German concentration camps, notably Auschwitz, which had the same purpose. Thus, since its primary function was physical annihilation, it may be classified as a concentration and/or extermination camp (Friedländer, 2008, pp. 337 and 495).¹⁸

During the setting up of “Camp III” at Jasenovac, the question of internment received a quasi-legal regulation:¹⁹ the *Decree on the Forced Confinement of Undesirable and Dangerous Persons in Concentration and Labor Camps*

18 Richard J. Evans classifies the Ustasha camps as concentration camps, however noting that their role was not to confine opponents of the regime but to destroy ethnic and religious minorities (Evans, 2008, p. 159). Whatever the case may be, the camp at Jasenovac cannot be classified as a “death and labor camp”, as has been proposed by Nataša Mataušić (Mataušić, 2003).

19 *Zbornik zakona*, 1941, pp. 868–869; *Narodne novine* No. 188, 25 Nov. 1941.

of 25 November 1941 specified in detail which persons were to be sent to the camps and for how long, which authority was responsible for establishing camps and deciding on internment therein, and who was responsible for the internal organization of individual camps. With the enactment of the law on internment, the treatment of undesirable groups – from their arrest to execution in camps – became fully regulated. The whole procedure was administered by two Ustasha executive bodies whose chief, Eugen Kvaternik, was answerable directly to the Head of State, Ante Pavelić. The conclusion appears inescapable that the policy of destruction of the Serbs, Jews and Roma was shaped in the highest echelons of the Croatian Fascist state and pursued under their direct control. Further, all the mechanisms – institutional, legal and otherwise – necessary for carrying out the policy were set in place in the course of 1941, with a central role being assigned to the extermination camps: first at Gospić, and later, from the autumn of 1941 and spring of 1942 until the end of the War and the collapse of the Ustasha state, at Jasenovac.

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