

The Genocide against the Jews in the Independent State of Croatia

In the genocide perpetrated against the Jews in the Independent State of Croatia from 1941 to 1945, between 75% and 80% of the Jews on the territory of the present-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were killed. In other words, only one Jew in five lived to see the year 1945.

There was nothing in previous Croatian history to indicate that such a crime might be committed: it is true that there were anti-Semitic pamphlets and incidents, and even political parties with anti-Semitic tendencies in their ideologies and programmes, in Croatia in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, but anti-Semitism had never reached extreme forms – pogroms and murders – seen, for example, in Poland and Russia.

The Ustasha movement was essentially anti-Serbian, and since its founding in 1931/3 it spread hatred mainly against the Serbs. As the ties between the Ustasha and the German Nazis grew stronger, and Ustasha ideology grew closer to that of the German Nazis, they adopted racist anti-Jewish theories. In the late thirties, anti-Semitic outburst in the right-wing Croatian press grew more and more frequent, and most of their authors later joined the Ustasha movement. The growing strength of German Nazism certainly contributed to the creation of an anti-Semitic atmosphere, especially during the first stage of World War II, when the Germans were successful. The Yugoslav royal government succumbed to the pressure; two laws passed in 1940 abolished the equality of Jews and, as regards their legal status, set it back a century. These laws required that the number of Jews enrolled in secondary schools and universities should correspond to the percentage of Jews in the total population, and wholesale in food-stuffs was practically forbidden to all enterprises owned or co-owned by Jews. Following the example of the Nazis, from whom they frequently received instructions, the Ustasha added to their plans for killing Serbs even more severe measures against the Jews. All this was planned in advance and resembled the German plans in that it involved three stages: excommunication, concentration, extermination.

Only a few days after his arrival in Zagreb, on 22 April, the newly appointed Minister of the Interior, Andrija Artuković, stated for *Die Deutsche Zeitung in Kroatien* that the government of the Independent State of Croatia “would soon solve the Jewish question in the same way in which the German government had solve it”, stressing that “the most stringent measures would be taken to see that racial laws were strictly enforced in the near future”. In early May, Ante Pavelić gave the same statement for the same paper: “The Jewish question will be radically solved according to our racial and economic positions.” In the meantime, on 30 April, the *Official Gazette* published the “Legal Provision on the Protection of the Aryan Blood and Honour of the Croatian People”, which banned marriages between Jews or other persons of “non Aryan” origin and persons of “Aryan” origin. Jews could not get around this provision the way Serbs could, by converting to the Catholic faith, because the status of the Jews was clearly defined by the provision on racial affiliation. All Jews over 6 years of age had to wear a yellow sign in public, and their movements were restricted.

In June, the “Racial Political Committee” was established within the Ministry of the Interior with the major aim of establishing racial affiliation, especially in “dubious cases”. At the same time, under the “Legal Provision on the Protection of the National and Aryan Culture of the Croatian People”, Jews were banned from “participating in the work, organizations and institutions of the social, youth, sports and cultural life of the Croatian people in general, and especially in literature, journalism, the arts and music, town planning, the theatre and film”.

Almost from the beginning of the Ustasha state, the authorities cast an eye on Jewish (and Serbian) property. Thus special “legal provisions” were enacted according to which Jewish movables and real estate were qualified as “state-owned”. In other words, looting was possible in the name of the state. However, in practice, there was even more open robbery carried out by officials of the regime. Although, from time to time, views were expressed that such acts

were "illegal", the regime obviously did nothing to prevent them, but, on the contrary, encouraged them. A drastic example was the extortion of 1004 kg of gold which the Zagreb Jews had to collect in May 1941 to save their lives. This helped only a few people, and something similar happened in Osijek.

Arrests of Jews began during the first days of Ustasha rule. At first they took away individuals, prominent and influential members of the Jewish community. In May, arrests were organized on a larger scale, and in June there were still more. On 21 June, for example, all the members of the Zagreb "Makabi" were arrested. The campaign was then intensified and channelled toward the "final solution". It was conducted under the slogan "In the ISC (Independent State of Croatia) there is no room for Jews." In late June, Pavelić stated, in the "Emergency Legal Provision and Order" that "the Jews are spreading false information... and hindering the distribution of supplies to the population" and that they were therefore "collectively considered responsible and therefore measures will be taken against them and they will be put away, because of their criminal responsibility, into prison camps under the open sky". Throughout the ISC, this was the signal for large-scale arrests and deportations to camps. Women and children were included. Thus the great majority of the Jews in places such as Koprivnica, Karlovac, and Varaždin were arrested by the end of July. Varaždin was declared to be the first town "cleansed" of Jews. Only those who hid or escaped avoided arrest. That is why Pavelić, quite rightly, declared in late August: "...as regards the Jews, I can tell you they will be finally liquidated shortly. The Jewish question was of a very serious nature. In Zagreb alone there were 18,000 of them, but now there are barely 4,000 and these, too, will be sent to forced labour or to concentration camps." (Whether deliberately or not, Pavelić made a mistake, the number of Jews in Zagreb in 1940 was 11,000): The Ustasha regime made careful plans for this, the last stage of "solving the Jewish question". It established almost thirty "assembly camps" or "transit camps" in which Jews who had been arrested were put temporarily, soon to be deported to the death camps or concentration camps that were established at the same time. The first of these – Daniča near Koprivnica – was opened in April. By the summer, camps had also been organized in Gospić and in Jadovno on Velebit, and the camps of Metajna and Slano were opened on the island of Pag.

In the last two camps, mass murders were perpetrated as early as in July, but they soon stopped because their location was unfavourable: communications were threatened by the development of the uprising in Lika, and the closeness of Croatian territory under Italian occupation brought into question the secrecy of the operation. That is why in the autumn of 1941 a new complex of death camps was set up in the Jasenovac-Stara Gradiška area. This continued to function almost until the end of the war. Most of the Jews from northern Croatia and Bosnia were killed there, about 18,000 of them. The surviving internees from the transit camps of Kruščica near Travnik, Tenja near Osijek, Vukovar, Đakovo, Lobar-grad and others also arrived in Jasenovac. People died in these camps, too, mainly from starvation.

Taking and shooting hostages was another way of killing Jews. When opponents of the regime carried out a diversion or assassinated an official, the "Jews" who had already been arrested, as well as "Communists", were, as a rule, shot as the "intellectual originators" of such actions. In Zagreb alone, several hundred Jews lost their lives in this way by September 1941.

The actions of the Ustasha were often more cruel and barbaric than those of the Germans (sadistic torture, massacres in which cold steel was used and throwing into pits).

Thus the Jews of Croatia and Bosnia shared the terrible fate of the Jews in other Yugoslav territories – they were the first victims of the "final solution". Until 1941, in the countries under Nazi control, Jews were persecuted and taken away to concentration camps while smaller groups were killed. Mass killings acquired their final, organized form in early 1942.

In early 1943, German officers from the headquarters of the SS (Eichmann's department IV/2) submitted a report saying that the Ustasha authorities, in spite of their cruelty, had not car-

ried out the “final solution” sufficiently thoroughly on the territory of the ISC. According to this report, there were about 5000 Jews still alive and free on the territory under the control of the Ustasha authorities, owing to personal and family connections, corruption, and the intercession of the Catholic Church in Zagreb for people in mixed marriages and their children and for some individuals. In the spring of 1943, for the first time on the territory of the ISC, the Germans took a direct and active part in capturing large numbers of Jews on the basis of this report. Most of the Jews were transported to Auschwitz.

Only a few Jewish inmates of Jasenovac survived, and only rare individuals returned from Auschwitz. Only a small number of Jews survived on the territory directly ruled by the Ustasha, and this happened only by chance or due to the exceptional agility of the survivors or the people in their immediate environment. There were 150-200 survivors in Zagreb, mostly from mixed marriages, and about the same number of survivors in other parts of the ISC. The Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, managed to save 55 inmates of the Jewish Old People's Home who lived in Zagreb or its vicinity throughout the war.

However, in mid-1943 Danijel Crljen claimed that “the Jewish question has been solved with a thoroughness and persistence that should give food for thought to anyone who crosses the path of the Ustasha social revolution”.

An anonymous photographer recorded the various stages of the demolition of the Synagogue at 7 Praška Street, Zagreb, from his flat, across the street. The demolition began in October 1941 at the order of Ivan Werner, the Ustasha mayor of Zagreb.



Over the past fifty years, researchers have established the basic facts regarding the genocide against the Jews on the territory of the ISC and, within that area, the territory of present-day Croatia. There are lists of individual members of Jewish communities: before that war, about 38-39,000 Jews lived on the territory of the ISC, and only about 9,000 lived to see the end of the war. The figures according to region are basically the same: out of 14,000 Jews in Bosnia-Herzegovina, only 4,000 i.e., nearly 30% survived, and out of 25,000 Jews in northern Croatia, Slavonia and Sirmium, only about 5,000 or about 20% were saved. The situation was a little better in Dalmatia, but there were only about 400 Jews living there before the war, out of whom about 250 survived the war.

A certain number of Jews saved their lives by fleeing to the Italian zone within the ISC, to the parts of Croatia occupied by Italia in 1941, and finally by fleeing to the Italian, western coast of the Adriatic. Quite a large number arrived from Serbia into purely Croatian milieus (for example, the island of Korčula), where they lived until the end of the war or joined the Partisans.

The stock phrase that any peace "heals the wounds of war" does not apply to the Jewish communities of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. These wounds, which are a consequence of the loss of four-fifths of the members of the community, cannot ever get better. The Croatian Jewish community could not be renewed: most of the pre-war Jewish communities were unable to go on with their work after 1945, most of the synagogues are no longer used as such, cultural life is much poorer, sports activities are almost non-existent. Some activities have been preserved, but badly impaired and impoverished. Those who planned the genocide against the Jews have achieved their goals to a great extent, and this is why new generations of Croatian Jews find it hard to shake off the distressing burden of remembrance of the times of the Ustasha reign of terror.

