Nikica Barić


The topic of Italian administration in the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH) is often avoided in modern Croatian historiography. The NDH was established after the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, and the ruling Ustaša movement was closely allied with both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy (1941–1945). From 1941 until 1943, part of the country was under Italian rule, while the other half was nominally independent, albeit under heavy German influence. During socialist Yugoslavia, the official historiography held that the Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić actually sold Dalmatia, the part of the NDH mostly associated with Italian fascist rule, to the Kingdom of Italy. This occurred specifically under the Treaty of Rome, signed on 18 May 1941, when large portions of the Croatian coast and hinterland were placed under Italian civil and military jurisdiction. This area came under Croatian authority only in September 1943, after the capitulation of the Kingdom of Italy. Like many other ‘simple’ truths in history, even this claim of ‘a sellout’ is not entirely true. In fact, there is little detailed information available to the Croatian public today about the Ustaša administration in the regions of Dalmatia, Istria, and Kvarner. Therefore, Croatian historian Nikica Barić’s book _Ustaše na Jadranu_ is extremely interesting and relevant for studying this aspect of the Second World War in Croatia. In over eight hundred pages, Barić provides details concerning Ustaše policies, the military, warfare, and everyday life in Istria, Rijeka, Dalmatia, and on the Kvarner islands, from the withdrawal of the Italian troops until the German and Croatian collaborationist (the Ustaše and Domobrani) defeat, ending with the communist Partisan victory in late 1944. His book is thus a clear breakaway from the Communist historiography and gives a new focus on Dalmatia in the Second World War. The topic is still important today, as different discourses occur in Dalmatia and elsewhere in Croatia about the nature and role of the NDH period. For some, it was clearly a fascist state, with racist tendencies and no positive role whatsoever; others, however, think it was merely the expression of the Croatian desire for their own independent country. Barić does not extensively engage with either side of this contemporary debate, but instead gives a deep analysis of the rather inefficient rule on the post-Italian littoral, blaming every side in the war for committing atrocities against civilian populations.

Barić provides a very interesting thesis about the ‘sale of Dalmatia.’ The Treaty of Rome should be considered in the historical context of the conditions prevailing in Europe at that time. Strong states such as Germany and Italy could unilaterally
annex areas within their visions of expansion. In the cases of German intrusions in the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia) and Austria, the stronger state forced the political and territorial outcomes for the weaker and smaller states. The same could be said for Italian pretensions for the eastern Adriatic coast. Barić believes that Italy would have occupied Dalmatia and held the territories given to Italy after the First World War even if the Treaty of Rome had not been signed. In fact, “the NDH leadership under Ante Pavelić, in an uneasy situation and confronted with Italian military power, succeeded in constraining Italian territorial requests and denied the Italian wish to be the dominant factor in NDH politics” (Barić, 2012: 42). Italian rule had to be tolerated, but when the Italians left the eastern Adriatic, Ustaše propaganda seized the opportunity to proclaim the rightful return of the coastal areas to the homeland. The thesis is problematic, as it gives a rather subjective tone to the discussion. The Ustaše had trained in Italian camps and Pavelić had enjoyed political asylum in Mussolini’s Italy in the 1930s, so the fascist irredentist ideas were certainly widely known. It is hard to imagine that Pavelić was engaged in a clever balancing act between Hitler and Mussolini at the time, especially since Hitler was more focused on Operation Barbarossa. Nevertheless, this part of the book is very provocative and the author should present his arguments in an article where he could explain the thesis in more details.

In order to facilitate a smooth transfer of power, a new Ministry for Liberated Areas was established, headed by Split lawyer Edo Bulat. The Ministry, however, could not exercise its authority over Sušak, Rijeka, and Istria, as these areas were integrated into the new German Adriatic Coast Operative Area (Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland). In this operative area even the new Italian Social Republic had its influence. After the war Bulat emigrated to Argentina together with his family, and Barić takes advantage of Bulat’s private archive to clarify many things about the NDH administration in Dalmatia.

Barić writes in detail about the introduction of civil administration in liberated areas, including the activities of the heads of civil administrations in Rijeka (Oskar Turina) and in Split (Bruno Nardelli). The author also describes the functioning of the Great Counties of the NDH (Velike župe): Bribir, Cetina, Sidraga and Ravni kotari, Dubrava, and Raša (the last one was in fact defunct). There were also two Domobrani (Homeguards) military headquarters in the regions of Lika and the Neretva Valley, and an Ustaša headquarters in the region of Velebit-Dinara, under the command of Vjekoslav Servatzy. Barić explains that these officials were ready to help the local population despite the fact that many people had been actively fighting the Italian occupiers as Partisans. He mentions many cases where the heads of the civil administration, Grand Counts, and military officials complained about the conduct of German forces. They were also very eager to help Dalmatian cities and villages to sustain the