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Croatia and Yugoslavia in the Cleft between Totalitarianisms

After 1990, a fervent discussion about the character of the Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945) and of the Yugoslav communist regime (1945-1991) took place in Croatia and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The symbols of these regimes and the crimes committed in their names are the Ustasha camp at Jasenovac and the mass execution of Croatian Ustasha, German (SS and Wehrmacht), Slovenian (Slovensko domobranstvo) and Serbian (Chetniks and other collaborators) soldiers in May 1945 after they surrendered at Bleiburg and elsewhere in the country. Within revisionist circles there is a strong tendency to apply equidistance to these events by concluding that both regimes were totalitarian and that all totalitarianisms are the same. In the same way, when revisionists analyse those crimes, they will state that a crime is a crime, regardless of the ideology that inspired it and the flag under which it was committed. The author concludes that Jasenovac was a crime of genocide but that Bleiburg was a war crime and a crime against humanity. Therefore two crimes are not and cannot be the same and, consequently, the two totalitarian regimes were not and cannot be the same.

In April 1941, the “Third Reich”, Fascist Italy and their allies (Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) attacked Yugoslavia. Afterwards, the country was divided into nine distinct jurisdictions, five of which became a part of neighboring countries. In the other four, governments were created that ostensibly arose from the will of the local political elite, and even the popular will, but in which the influence of the occupying powers was decisive.

On all of these new territories administrative units were organized that operated on Nazi or Fascist principles and, accordingly, the Nazification project was realized to its ultimate extreme – mass persecutions, deportations, and the killing of those who were ethnically and religiously objectionable or were political undesirables.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia in April 1941, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was the only political force with organized networks throughout the country. In the summer of 1941, it launched an anti-fascist uprising. The Partisan movement succeeded in winning over all of the nationalities of Yugoslavia and promised, in a way that was specific to each of them, the removal of the prewar inequalities that were colored by class exploitation and Greater Serbian hegemony. Support for the Partisan struggle was strongest in Croatia because it offered a state that would be stripped of foreign conquerors, the Ustasha terror, and Greater Serbian hegemony. In the areas that the Partisans liberated they quickly organized an embryonic civil authority, which gradually expanded its structure and made it possible, even during the war, to take power in the entire country.
From the fall of 1944 until the end of the war, and even after it, the new government settled accounts with its political enemies – from Macedonia and Kosovo in the southeast to Slovenia in the northwest. Their actions were a combination of justifiable wrath because of the crimes that had been committed, a victor’s giddiness, a spontaneous and politically inspired vengeance, and a calculated “confrontation with the national enemy,” which sprang from Stalinist ideology and its principles on “sharpening the class struggle” after the victory of the revolution. Jasenovac camp survivor Adolf Friedrich has spoken about this vengeful wrath that built up toward the end and just after the war. In 1943, while on a work detail outside of the camp, he had seen the body of a young girl whom he had known before the war. Her throat had been cut. “It made me sick to my stomach. I was in bed for three days. She was a wonderful, young, dark-haired girl, and now her body cried out for revenge against the beasts who had butchered many thousands of innocent women and children in the same way. Anyone who sees something like this with his own eyes can never forget it,” Friedrich testified in 1972.¹

The result was the implementation of the tradition of Vae victis (woe to the vanquished), additionally strengthened by the harsh tribal mentality of some South Slav regions, and a fetishism of a “principled” revolution.

In Croatia and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina the symbols of the totalitarian character of these two regimes became the Ustasha camp in Jasenovac and Bleiburg and the “Way of the Cross.”

Jasenovac is a village on the left bank of the Sava River about 110 kilometers southeast of Zagreb. From August 1941 until the end of April 1945 it was the headquarters of the largest concentration camp system in the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH).²

The history of Jasenovac starts long before the establishment of the camp. The Ustasha were a Croatian pro-Nazi and pro-Fascist movement founded in 1932 by poglavnik (leader) Ante Pavelić. It was incited to action by the political repression of and the massive persecutions by the Belgrade government (which proclaimed a royal dictatorship in 1929) and economic depression.³ Backed by Mussolini’s Italy, Pavelić and his collaborators advocated from the beginning the most radical methods in the struggle for an independent Croatia, including terrorism. They called for national exclusiveness (not recognizing other peoples except Croats in Croatia, and limiting decision-making about state and national affairs to those who were “members of the Croatian people by descent and blood”), state-right historicism (based on Croatia’s historical right to statehood and its right to all territories that belonged to it during its history or were inhabited by Croats), and the uncon-