12-2018

How Holocaust Memories Continue to Divide the Serbs and the Croats

Matthew James Hone
Stockton University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss5/2

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
HOW HOLOCAUST MEMORIES CONTINUE TO DIVIDE THE SERBS AND THE CROATS

By Matthew James Hone

Matthew J. Hone is an adjunct professor at Stockton University with a doctoral degree in Latin American Studies from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City, where he focused on the U.S. intervention in El Salvador and mass atrocities that occurred in Central America during the Cold War era. Conflict in the ex-Yugoslavia has been his academic, professional, and personal journey during the course of a master’s degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies from Stockton University, a master’s degree in International Peace and Conflict Studies from Arcadia University, an internship as a press officer at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and through the profound friendships that he continues to cherish, thanks to his firsthand experience analyzing and travelling throughout the Balkans.

Introduction

In Holocaust and genocide education, we frequently and rightly stress remembrance in order to honor the victims of the past as well as to safeguard our future from repeated transgressions. However, there are parts of the world where remembering or “misremembering” atrocities accentuates the fracturing of communities. In the Balkans, the festering wounds that have been inflicted throughout history never seem to truly heal, as the past, both real and fictionalized, drives contemporary and competing realities. This is noticeably evident with the modern-day rifts separating ethnic Croats and ethnic Serbs, which despite recent political inroads and relative stability, persist in being purveyors of mutual animosity.

Emanating from the twentieth century, the prevailing demarcation dividing Croats and Serbs is firmly rooted in the chaos of World War II Yugoslavia. Obviously, there were genuine
resentments prior to this civil strife in the newly formed Yugoslavian state and tensions simmered and occasionally proved volatile; however, the violence inflicted during the Second World War was unprecedented, even in a region that had experienced more than its share of duress. The peak of murderous brutality coincided with the creation of the NDH (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*) or the Independent State of Croatia and the genocide that shortly ensued. The establishment of an exclusively Catholic state fanatically embraced by the NDH further added to the moral perversion of Croatian autonomy in 1941.

Instead of reconciling the nefarious history, another war emerged approximately 50 years later, re-opening old wounds while simultaneously spawning additional grievances. The propaganda affiliated with the Serbian-Croatian struggle and the wars in Croatia and Bosnia in the early 1990s was reminiscent of what transpired decades prior. Memory and its manipulation have served as principal provocateurs of lingering animosity and ultimately, the discordant interpretations of the Holocaust in the former Yugoslavia have impeded constructive dialogue and prevents Serb-Croat relations from advancing, while the majority of Europe has at least attempted to redress the offenses of their past with varying effectiveness.

**Genocide**

Corresponding with the majority of Europe, the former Yugoslavia spiraled into chaos during the Second World War. Segments of this Balkan region were converted into Nazi satellites where genocide was perpetrated against ethnic Serbs, Jews and Roma. In other territories, order rapidly dissolved as civil war and ethnic cleansing were relentlessly perpetrated in order to terrorize the opposition. In the newly established Independent State of Croatia, the Ustaše, under the leadership of Ante Pavelić, were vying for an ethnically pure Catholic Croatian
state. “The Ustaše targeted their hatred at Jews, whom they believed to be biologically different (and intent on taking over the world), the Roma, whom they simply considered subhuman; and the Serbs, whom they considered culturally and even biologically inferior to Croats and alleged oppressors of the Croats, threatening their very survival.”¹ The antagonism towards the Serbs living in Croatian lands coincided with the establishment of the Yugoslavian state after World War I, as many ethnic Croats surmised that their identity had been compromised and they had merely exchanged the domination of Vienna under the Hapsburgs for Serb rule in Yugoslavia.

Between 1941 and 1945, the Ustaše perpetrated their campaign of atrocity with unrivaled savagery. “The arrests, deportations to concentration camps or exile, killings, arson, looting, and so on began almost immediately upon the arrival of Ustaše from abroad. They were quickly joined by local extremists.”² The agonizing memoir by Egon Berger, 44 Months in Jasenovac, which has now been officially added to the collection of the Yad Vashem Center and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, depicts in graphic detail the medieval practices inflicted on the thousands of Jews, Roma, and Serbs that were imprisoned in the Jasenovac concentration camp. “Guards used axes, mallets and sledgehammers on their victims. They sliced prisoners’ abdomens open and threw them, weighted down with stones, into the Sava. They used custom-designed knives they called Srbosjek, “Serb Cutter,” to dispatch victims, tossed prisoners into incinerators alive, and placed bets on who could invent the most creative means of slaughter.”³ According to Elizabeth White, a historian with the National Holocaust Museum, “The Ustashe regime which never established full control over Croatia, was

notoriously chaotic and violent, and bloody disarray ran rampant at Jasenovac." The ruthlessness perpetrated against Serbs in particular, persists in tainting interethnic and interreligious relations.

Ethnic Croats were not alone in perpetrating atrocity in World War II Yugoslavia; Serbian royalist supporters known as the četniks, under the leadership of Draža Mihailović, precipitated deplorable offenses against Croat and Muslim civilians. The Muslim inhabitants in Bosnia, just as they would in the early 1990s, bore the brunt of the carnage. The četniks were responsible for thousands of deaths and presumably the majority of Bosnian Muslims killed during the Second World War; however, the crimes of the četniks and the Ustaše were hardly comparable. According to the research of David Bruce MacDonald, “There were clear qualitative differences between Allied-backed Četnik monarchists with their small-scale massacres, and the Nazi backed Ustaša with their Croatian-run concentration camps.” Conforming to Nazi policy, the Croatian NDH implemented systematic genocide.

**Denial and Exaggeration: Serbia**

In the former Yugoslavia, the fabrication of numbers has regrettably evolved to be consequential in interpreting historic events, especially when victimization is concerned, and the Jasenovac death camp continues to serve as a flashpoint for fractured authenticity. “The Yugoslavian communist government would routinely broadcast the inflated number of 700,000; nationalist and NDH-friendly historians and politicians count the dead in the “few thousands.” More realistic estimates assess that between 80,000 and 100,000 Serbs, Jews, and Roma perished.

---

4 Pitts, “Family resurrects rare account of little known WWII Croatian concentration camp”
at the camp while scholarly analysis has alleged that approximately 400,000 Serbs succumbed to the Ustaše and its allies during the brief murderous existence of the NDH.

The political discourse of ethnic Serbs when referencing Jasenovac and other aspects of World War II generally aligns with the overestimations and inflated statistics of the ex-Yugoslavian state and this presumably contributed to atrocity during the Serbian interventions in Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s. While the politicians were consolidating power and territorial gain, the combatants on the ground were engaged in revenge killings. The Serbian population, manipulated by state propaganda, postulated that the Ustaše had returned and that mindset was bolstered by the nationalistic rants of Croatia’s first president, Franjo Tudjman, as well as by the poorly timed German recognition of Croatia as an independent nation, which echoed a more ominous era. The rhetoric broadcast from Serbian State television was so virulent that Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) issued this admission in 2011 more than a decade following the hostilities: "Apologies to the citizens of Serbia and those of neighbouring countries who were subject to insult, slander and what would now be termed as hate speech."\(^7\) According to author Marcus Tanner, “No one who ever sat through those 7.30pm vesti (news) programmes would forget the hate-filled propaganda that spilt out over the airwaves every night for up to an hour and a half. Nor could they forget the breathless, babbling tone of the presenters, the glee with which they referred to the "liquidation of enemy units"; nor could they forget the presenters' reliance on the limited lexicon of state Serbian nationalism, whose terms dictated that every Croat was an "Ustashe Fascist…."\(^8\)

---


Aided by relentless government propaganda while deeming the amplification of World War II figures to be accurate, ethnic Serbs were inclined to be fearful of Croatian intentions and this apprehension would occasionally prove genuine with the progression of the war as in the case of the ethnic cleansing of Krajina in 1995. Krajina was a historic Serb enclave located in Croatia proper and Operation Storm, which ensued towards the termination of hostilities, caused the displacement of approximately 200,000 ethnic Serbs, the greatest forced mass migration in Europe since the Second World War. Nonetheless, the blatant aggression of Serb loyalists supported by the Yugoslavian Army (JNA) commencing in 1991 was justified as self-defense rather than an invasion of the sovereign nation of Croatia. For the Serbs, since reconciliation was never remotely addressed under Tito’s decades-long regime and the resurrection of fascist symbolism accompanied Croatian independence, the return of the Ustaše was conceived as a feasible reality, a sentiment boosted by a jingoistic political campaign of extreme Serb nationalism.

Former Serbian presidents have issued apologies for the intervention in Croatia where approximately 10,000 Croats died in the early to mid-1990s. In 2010, Serbian President Boris Tadić visited the Ovčara memorial that commemorates the Croatian victims that were massacred when Vukovar was captured in 1991. The ramifications from this conciliatory step should not be de-valued as Tadić’s actions required significant political risk; however, the ex-president’s intentions have since been undermined by Serbian nationalistic maneuvers that threaten to dismantle the goodwill attained. The Serbian rehabilitation in 2015 of Dragoljub ‘Draža’ Mihailović, a royalist commander and perpetrator of atrocities during the Second World War, and recent comments by Serbian president Aleksander Vučić on the creation of a greater Serbia, threatens to invite enhanced rhetoric and a political backslide, where contentious issues like
Jasenovac threaten to manifest themselves more prominently under the nationalistic spotlight. Up to this point, contrary to his predecessor, the current Serbian president has refused to apologize for Serbian aggression amid the 1990s and during an early 2018 visit to Croatia he said, “Serbia has no territorial disputes with Croatia,” and he would not allow himself to be “humiliated by Croatian media.” Moreover, Vučić has gone as far to compare Croatian policies in the 1990s to that of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis by asserting, "Hitler wanted a world free of Jews and Croatia wanted a country free of Serbs.”

**Denial and Exaggeration: Croatia**

From an ethnic Croatian perspective, the minimizing or even downright denial of the Ustaše genocide has ushered in and justified extreme nationalistic and even fascist sentiment. Instead of identifying themselves as perpetrators, the Croatian national discourse has been swayed towards the presumption of victimhood. On one hand, although the Croats were one of the ethnic majorities in Yugoslavia and Tito himself was of Croatian descent, there prevailed an interpretation that national identity was being suppressed, ironically, an inclination shared by many Serbs as well. Nonetheless, following the brutality of the Second World War, even though massacres occurred that targeted groups deemed loyal to the Nazi regime as in what transpired at Bleiburg, Austria, ethnic Croats were not singled out despite recent extremist rhetoric contrary to the fact. In actuality, Tito systematically persecuted the ustaše leadership rather than engaging in

---

9 AP, “Serbian leader won’t apologize for wartime nationalism”, (Zagreb, February 13, 2018), [https://www.apnews.com/05308d720a4d46e7801ad4ced6e4ef8d Viewed on November 27, 2018.](https://www.apnews.com/05308d720a4d46e7801ad4ced6e4ef8d)

wholesale slaughter against those affiliated with the NDH and furthermore, a number of Croats loyally fought alongside him as fellow Partisans, a fact often lost in the polarized discourse.

Following the fall of communism in 1990, Croatian nationalists pushed to modify history and the newly independent Croatia led by Franjo Tudjman seized on this revision. Tudjman suggested “The remains of the Ustashe families buried at Bleiburg after being massacred by Tito’s partisans in revenge killings should be dug up and laid to rest at Jasenovac, the infamous concentration camp where the Ustashe murdered tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies.”

Authorities accentuated Bleiburg while erasing the crimes of Jasenovac from memory. Sven Miletić, a Zagreb-based journalist, stated during a commemoration earlier this year for those who perished at Bleiburg: “There are people who go there simply for emotional reasons, probably having had relatives killed there. But it was also meant to rehabilitate the [image of the] Ustasa regime.”

Even more perilous than exaggerating the past, Croatia’s modern far Right has sought to weaponize it. Historian Zlatko Hasanbegović, who has served in numerous posts within Croatian politics, represents the manifestation of extremist beliefs on the governmental level. “As a historian, his work focuses on downplaying the crimes of the Ustashe and cautiously rehabilitating its ideas.” Besides minimizing a media crackdown where independent journalists have been violently assaulted, Hasanbegović gave high praises for a television documentary produced by a political ally, Jakov Sedlar. Jasenovac: The Truth was basically a propaganda film that catered to Croatian denial. “The pro-Ustashe film claimed that between 20,000 to 40,000

---

victims perished in Jasenovac, instead of the 100,000 claimed by mainstream historians. This claim enables extremists like Hasanbegović and Sedlar to argue that Jasenovac was not a ‘death camp,’ but an ordinary concentration camp in which some prisoners died.”

Further clouding matters, in November 2016, a memorial plaque with an ustaša slogan was unveiled at Jasenovac by former paramilitaries in order to honor fellow fighters killed in the area at the start of Croatia’s 1990s war for independence.

The Serbs are not the only ethnic group that are being re-victimized by Croatian denial. The Croatian Jewish population, the majority of which were murdered in the NDH between 1941-1945, have recently boycotted commemorations in Croatia due to authorities failing to crack down on the revival of pro-Nazi ideology. Following the death of Franjo Tudjman in 1999, Croatia secured international goodwill by attempting to reconcile its past. In 2001, Croatian President Stjepan Mesić apologized for crimes committed against the Jews during the Holocaust when visiting Yad Vashem. Although Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković has vowed to move Croatia beyond its extremist past, doubts linger. “Under the previous center-right government, there was a growing climate of intolerance which included nostalgia for a pro-Nazi past and attacks on independent media and minorities, notably ethnic Serbs.”

The Croatian restoration of ustaše symbolism has transcended politics and has infiltrated popular culture. The recent advance to the World Cup final by the Croatian national soccer team was littered with ustaše callbacks. Marko Petrović, a popular Croatian singer who has been heavily associated with ustaše nostalgia, was riding along with the players on a victory parade and was invited to sing onstage in front of thousands by the team’s captain. “The triumphalism

---

14 Hockenos, “Croatia’s Far Right Weaponizes the Past”.
15 Note there was no specific mention of the Serbs or other groups.
uncovered something that existed before,” Žarko Puhovski, a professor at the University of Zagreb and a longtime political commentator, said. “The explosion of nationalism is not surprising for nations that achieve such symbolic sporting victories,” he said, “except that in Croatia it is manifested in a specifically radical right-wing manner.”

The Catholic Church and the NDH

One of the most reprehensible aspects of the crimes in the NDH was the participation of Catholic clergy. Where thousands of Catholic priests were murdered in places like Poland and other territories controlled by the Nazis and its allies, there were members of the Church in Croatia that actively collaborated with the Ustaše and even participated in the murder. A number of the camps were alleged to be administered by Croatian priests. “One of the most conspicuous of these priests, the Franciscan Miroslav Filipović, later nicknamed Majstorović (as in master killer), became for a period of time the commander of the Jasenovac camp.” There were religious leaders not involved directly with the slayings who enthusiastically performed mass conversions of Orthodox Serbs once the NDH was declared.

No one figure epitomizes the Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic divide more than Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac. Stepinac is emblematic of the Serb-Croat rupture and has become symbolic of the religious fanaticism of the NDH. “Archbishop Stepinac announced the founding of the state from the pulpit of the cathedral in Zagreb, became a member of the Council of State

---

and accepted the post of Supreme Apostolic Vicar to the troops.”19 For non-Croats of the ex-Yugoslavia, Stepinac is synonymous with fascism akin to NDH leader Ante Pavelić, who himself was a war criminal and sentenced to death in absentia. Nonetheless, despite his conviction to 16 years of hard labor under Tito’s Yugoslavia, little evidence supports Archbishop Stepinac as an open collaborator to the crimes of the NDH. “There are orders by Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac that Orthodox are to be permitted conversion, but only if the conversion is clearly voluntary or is done to save someone’s life.”20 These decrees hardly resemble the words of a blind zealot; however, at the same time, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that Stepinac sincerely undercut the machinations of the NDH despite his defenders.

Archbishop Stepinac was not the only high Catholic Church official functioning within the remnants of Yugoslavia. “Archbishop Misic of Mostar, Herzegovina, asked Stepinac to use his influence with authorities to prevent the massacres. And Bulajić wrote of a group of Slovenian Catholic priests who were “sent to the Jasenovac camp because they refused to serve a mass of thanksgiving to Ustasha leader Ante Pavelic... One of the imprisoned Slovenian priests, Anton Rantasa, managed to escape... On 10 November 1942, he informed [Stepinac and the papal legate Ramiro Marcone]... on the crimes of genocide being perpetrated at Jasenovac. He was told to keep silent.”21 Evidently, there were Catholic clergy that actively subverted the genocidal designs of the NDH and have historically emerged as more renowned stalwarts of Ustaše resistance than Cardinal Stepinac.

20 Mojzes, Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century, p. 64.
Following the Second World War, the Catholic Church in Croatia was in a precarious situation with the installation of a Communist government in Yugoslavia. Instead of reconciling their misdeeds, some members of the Church secretly aided the most notorious of the Ustaše in escape from justice. “After the war, many priests, rather than condemn the brutality of the fascist regime, went on to set up an underground network known as “the rat line” to smuggle former Ustashe leaders, including Mr. Pavelic, to countries like Argentina.”

A Church Still Divided

In 1998, Archbishop Stepinac was beatified by Pope John Paul II. Naturally, this decision was met with resistance from the communities victimized by the Ustaše. “There is no question he saved hundreds of Jews and others,” said Slavko Goldstein, leader of the Jews in Croatia, who has a number of about 2,000. He described the Cardinal's record as mixed. “He tried to correct some of the worst aspects, but he never condemned the regime as such,” Mr. Goldstein said.

Pope Francis has delayed the canonization of Stepinac and even took the brazen move by establishing a mixed Vatican-Serbian-Croatian commission. With this pause, Pope Francis has divided Vatican opinion while alienating many Croatian Catholics. “Former Croatian Ambassador to the Holy See Filip Vucak said that, during his farewell audience with the Pope in October 2015, he informed Pope Francis about reactions in Croatia regarding the delay in the canonization of Cardinal Stepinac, as well as about the possible exploitation of the Pope’s generosity regarding the establishment of the joint commission. He warned that such moves

---

could eventually lead to the worsening rather than improvement in relations between Catholics and Orthodox.”

The jury is still out on whether the decision by Pope Francis will negatively affect ecumenical relations between the Catholic and Orthodox churches; however, the Croatian Catholic community is likely to become more protective of Stepinac and its own history regarding the ustaše and this could exasperate divisions even further. Meanwhile, the delay in canonization has provided Serbian nationalists with the ammunition to continue to vehemently condemn Cardinal Stepinac as an accomplice to the NDH.

Perhaps more disturbing then the Stepinac controversy is the manner in which rank-and-file Croatian priests have tried to rehabilitate the ustaše. In 2008, when Dinko Sakić, the former commander of Jasenovac died, he was given full honors in a Nazi uniform with a Croatian Catholic priest overseeing the funeral. “God has forgiven Sakić all that was not in sync with God’s law, if he did anything like that,” said Lasić at the funeral of Sakić. Lasić said that he was proud to have seen Sakić dressed in the WWII Ustaša uniform while in Dubrava hospital where he died.”

Father Lasić had also held memorial masses in honor of former Ustaše leader, Ante Pavelić. Lasić has not been isolated in honoring Ustaše fascism: a decade prior, Father Luka Prcela was defending his own commemoration of Pavelić. “Ante Pavelić was a good Catholic,” said Father Luka Prcela, who has held a memorial Mass for the former dictator in Split for the last four years. "He went to mass daily in his own chapel. Many of the crimes alleged to have been committed by his Government never happened. These stories were lies spread by the communists. He fought for a free, Catholic Croatia. We have this state today because of him.”


\[26\] Hedges, “Fascists Reborn as Croatia’s Founding Fathers”, The New York Times
Although priests on the radical fringe, like Lasić and Prcela, do not represent the Croatian Catholic community as a whole, the fact that their extreme opinion has been represented with little internal condemnation leaves one to wonder whether radicalism has subordinated basic moral reason.

**Carving a New Future**

The Serbs and Croats have recently attempted to redress some of the troublesome issues that have plagued their relationship, but the conflicted past has proven elusive in their dialogue. "Unfortunately, the relations between Serbia and Croatia are burdened by the past. We did not speak today about this past. Unfortunately, that past is still preventing us from being able to describe the relations between our two countries as friendly," Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović said at a joint Serbian-Croatian press event. "But, it is our obligation, as presidents who are both directly elected by the will of our peoples, to meet and talk, try and find common ground, solve issues that are dividing us."27

The past they are referencing relates to the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the atrocities that ensued. However, it is the other past, one more distant but no less relevant that cuts deeper. Unless this is addressed, true reconciliation will prove elusive and the violations of an era long gone will bleed into the future once again.

---

Bibliography


AP, “Serbian leader won’t apologize for wartime nationalism”, (Zagreb, February 13, 2018), https://www.apnews.com/05308d720a4d46e7801ad4cdd6e4ef8d


Hockenos, Paul, “Croatia’s Far Right Weaponizes the Past”, Foreign Policy, (May 6, 2016), https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/06/croatias-far-right-weaponizes-the-past-ustase-hasanbegovic/


