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Nationalism and National Policy in Independent State of Croatia (1941–1945)

by Irina Ognyanova

The history of the Independent State of Croatia (ISC) has been systematically misrepresented by Serbian and some Croatian scholars (mainly Marxist), propaganda, and mass media for decades. This is one of the main reasons that historians nowadays deal with this topic and try to reveal the truth about the Second World War on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The fact that the Ustasha government tried to banish the Serbs from ISC, terrorizing and killing them, has been used by the Serbian anti-Croat propaganda since the war as a proof of the Croatian genocidal nature and of its pro-fascist orientation. This was an extremely sensitive topic, which explains why it had been avoided by Croatian historians for decades.

Currently the events of the Second World War are being recalled and are more politically manipulated than ever. The themes of Ustashes, Chetniks, terror, slaughters, and concentration camps are treated more by politicians than historians. Their unscientific and prejudiced historical interpretation in the last fifty years only served to advance the purposes of political propaganda and demagoguery. Recently, Croatian propaganda has described all Serbian nationalists as “Chetniks” and has tried to present the leader of the Chetniks in the Second World War, Draza Mihailovic, as a “genocidal monster.” Serb propaganda has described all Croatian na-

tionalists as “Ustashas” and “Nazis.” It systematically inflated the number of victims in the Ustasha concentration camps, trying to create the impression that Croats have a genocidal nature and that today they “threaten” the Serbian minority in Croatia. It is not possible for a historian to pick his way between these competing mythologies without causing some ideological offense to both of them.

The recent events in the territory of the former Yugoslavia make the theme of the Independent State of Croatia, established on 10 April 1941 more actual than ever. Bosnia and Herzegovina, which were recently a battle-field territorially were a part of this country. The interwar period in Croatian history and the period of the Second World War are closely connected to the present day events. We have a similar situation—disintegration of a multi-ethnic state, such as Yugoslavia, and consequences of this process—currently and during the course of the World War II. Since the situation fifty years ago was quite similar to the recent one, it is very important to understand the deep roots of the conflict between Serbs, Croats, and Moslems. Therefore, the historical picture of the Second World War just can help us in that direction.

The wartime situation in Croatia (1941–1945) afforded room for the explosion of national and religious tensions and animosities that had existed for centuries, which escalated in all their wartime brutality. What followed after 1941 can only be described as a nationalistic war. To understand it we need to go back to the history of Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s, and especially the issue of Croatian extreme nationalism.

The history of interwar Yugoslavia, with all its national and political crises and instability proved the absolute impossibility of the peaceful coexistence of different national groups in a common state in which the Serbian domination was imposed over all of them. Conflicting nationalisms among the peoples of Yugoslavia were a harsh reality. If for the Serbs, every other nationalism was suspected of separatism, for the Croats and Slovenes, Serbian nationalism was identical with hegemonism. In different parts of the country emerged anti-state national movements, such as that of the Ustashas in Croatia. They were a manifestation of the local patriotism and nationalism and called for the destruction of the existing state complex.

Separatism in interwar Yugoslavia was strongest among the Croats who first realized that the new Kingdom created by the Great Powers in 1918 was nothing else but Greater Serbia which they have never accepted as their state. All central power in the country was in Serbian hands, and Croats were excluded from it. Indeed, mass Croatian national consciousness appeared only after the establishment of Yugoslavia and against the new Kingdom, or more precisely against Serbian predominance within it. The outburst of Croatian nationalism after 1918 was one of

the chief menaces for Yugoslavia's stability.¹ Ustasha's nationalism was one of its main streams in the interwar period—that is why its treatment in historiography is a very important question. It was the core of the Ustasha ideology, which was established and developed by Ante Pavelic and his adherents in exile (mainly in Italy and Hungary) as a response to the establishment of King Alexander's dictatorship in Yugoslavia in January 1929.

The Ustasha-Croatian Revolutionary Organization² was formed abroad by Croatian separatists who were determined to bring about by violence (terrorism, insurrection, and armed struggle) what the Croats had failed to achieve by constitutional methods, namely, the independence of Croatia. In the 1930s and 1940s, they paid much more attention to action and practical work than to ideology, which is typical of all terrorist organizations. Even in theory they defended the notion of the necessity of the usage of violence, justifying it by calling on high national interests.³

Mistreated Croatian nationalists at home and persecuted refugees abroad considered the country as being actually at war with their Serbian oppressors. Together with the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, the Ustasha movement was one of the strongest national movements against Serbian dictatorship in Yugoslavia in the 1930s. It was a radical, nationalistic, oppositional, and revolutionary movement. When Croatian separatists took over in the new Independent State of Croatia during World War II (1941–1945), they had the real opportunity to put their ideology into practice. At this moment Ustasha's nationalism reached its highest and most extreme form.⁴

¹ Peter Sugar, *Native Fascism in the Successor States: 1918–1945* (Santa Barbara, 1971), 155–156; Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and Politics of Nationalism* (London, 1977), 140; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), 135–138, 164.

² The word “ustasha” originally meant a participant in an uprising, an insurgent. In the uprisings against the Turks in the nineteenth century, for example, the word was used by both Croats and Serbs. Only in the 1930s and especially during the Second World War did it primarily designate a member of Pavelic's organization.

³ Galeazzo Ciano, *Ciano's Hidden Diary: 1939–1943* (New York, 1952), 168; Joseph Rothchild, *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars*, 7th ed., A History of East Central Europe, vol. 9 (City: 1992), 245.

⁴ Mijo Bzik, *Ustaška borba: Od prvih dana ustaškoga rada do Poglavnokova odlaska u emigracije. Poeci i bit Ustaškoga pokreta* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1942), 26–45; Mijo Bzik, *Ustaški pogledi 1928–1944* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1944), 16–38; Ante Pavelic, *Die Kroatische Frage* (in German) (Berlin, 1941), 34–40.

Another reason to pay special attention to the problem of Ustasha nationalism is the fact that it is one of the most contested, disputable ones in the historiography dealing with Croatian history. This issue is frequently elaborated in the historical literature but it is often treated with nationalistic bias, and there are many contradictory opinions and assessments. Ustasha rule is quite an interesting topic for investigation, because it concerns the problem of the differences between fascism/nazism and extreme nationalism in the Balkans during World War II. It is connected, in general, with the issue of Balkan nationalism which had been one of the primary and dominant ideologies in this region from the nineteenth century until the present time.

Until recently, in the historical literature the opinion prevailed that the Ustashes were fascists and that their ideology was a Balkan version of fascism.⁵ This idea was so widespread because of the unscientific treatment of the problem of fascism. In the old literature, terms as “clero-fascism,” “monarcho-fascism,” and simply “fascism” were very frequently used, and these labels were assigned to all anti-democratic and autocratic movements and regimes in Europe of the interwar period and the Second World War. The authors of this literature thus simplified the political situation in the Europe during the interwar period. They spoke of the great crisis in the democratic political system after the First World War and of the only two alternative and rival anti-democratic and totalitarian systems in Europe—right

⁵ Edmond Paris, *Genocide in Satellite Croatia, 1941–1945. A Record of Racial and Religious Persecutions and Massacres* (Chicago, 1961), 3; Hugh Seton-Watson, *The East European Revolution*, 2d ed. (New York, 1961), 78; *Istorija Jugoslaviji* (A History of Yugoslavia), vol. 2 (Moscow, 1963), 130; Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Francaise, Italian Fascism, National Socialism* (New York, 1966), 13; Hugh Seton-Watson, “Fascism, Right and Left,” in W. Laqueur and G. Mosse, *International Fascism 1920–1945* (New York, 1966), 192; Frank Littlefield, *Yugoslav Relations with Germany and Italy and the Nationality Problem, 1933–1941* (New York, 1972), 10, 19; Branko Petranovic and Momcilo Zecevic, *Jugoslovenski federalizam: Ideje i stvarnost. Tematska zbirka dokumenata* (in Serbian), vol. 1 (Belgrade, 1986), 334; James Sadkovich, *Italian Support for Croatian Separatism, 1927–1937* (New York, 1987), 152–153; Stevan Pavlowitch, *The Improbable Survivor: Yugoslavia and Its Problem, 1918–1988* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 6, 100; Srdjan Trifkovic, “The Ustasa Movement and European Politics, 1929–1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southampton, 1990), 26, 404; Idem, “The First Yugoslavia and Origins of Croatian Separatism,” *East European Quarterly* 26(3): 362 (1992); Jelavich, Barbara, *History of the Balkans*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), 202; Dimitrije Djordjevic, “The Yugoslav Phenomenon,” in *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joseph Held (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 324; Dennison Rusinow, “The Yugoslav Peoples,” in *East European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Sugar, (1995), 377; Miron Rezun, *Europe and War in the Balkans: Toward a New Yugoslav Identity* (Westport, 1995), 61.

(fascist) and left (Bolshevik). Of course, these writers put the Ustasha regime of 1941–1945 in the sphere of the fascist political system. There was no doubt for them that the Croatian Ustasha organization, Romanian Iron Guard, Hungarian Arrow Cross, and Slovakian Hlinka Guards were fascist by their nature. Marxist authors freely used “fascist” as a smear-word, designed not so much to identify anything specifically fascist as to discredit person, group, or whole movement that had an anti-Communist ideology.⁶

It is very important for historians to define the term “fascism” and to distinguish movements that were fascist, pro-fascist, and those that were merely authoritarian in the traditional sense of the term. Only recently have the majority of historians abandoned the simple scheme democracy/totalitarianism (fascism and bolshevism), founding out that one group of European states as Balkan, the most Central European and Iberian (Spain and Portugal) states did not inserted in it. Before these countries easily were associated with a non-democracy, in particular with the right-wing variety of totalitarianism (fascism). Today most historians agree that the regimes in these states were using some of the means and methods of fascism, but were not fascist by nature. They were authoritarian regimes, quite similar to totalitarian ones in conception, but different in realization. Only in recent years have Croatian and foreign authors succeeded in shaking off ideological dogmas and begun extensive scientific research of the Ustasha movement. As a result, some of them have made a complete reassessment of the Ustasha ideology and rejected the thesis about its fascist character.⁷

⁶ Seton-Watson, “Fascism, Right and Left,” 83; Sugar, *Native Fascism*, 148.

⁷ Vladko Macek, *In the Struggle for Freedom* (New York, 1957), 116; Stjepan Hefer, *Croatian Struggle for Freedom and Statehood* (Buenos Aires, 1959), 103–105; Ivan Meštrović, *Uspomene na političke ljude i događaje* (in Croatian) (Buenos Aires, 1961), 285; Ladislaus Hory and Martin Broszat, *Der kroatische Ustascha Staat, 1941–1945* (in German) (Stuttgart, 1964), 177; Fikreta Jelic-Butić, “Ustaski pokret i hrvatsko nacionalno pitanje” (in Croatian), *Jugoslavenski istorijski casopis* 4 (1969): 185, 189; Ivo Rojnica, *Susreti i doživljaji 1938–1945* (in Croatian), vol. 1 (Munich, 1969), 219; Stephen Gazi, *A History of Croatia* (New York, 1973), 313; Ivo Korsky, *Hrvatski nacionalizam: Clanci i eseji* (in Croatian) (Buenos Aires, 1983), 5; Lenard Cohen and Paul Warwick, *Political Cohesion in a Fragile Mosaic: The Yugoslav Experience* (Boulder, 1983), 58; Bogdan Krizman, *NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1986), 129; Kazimir Katalinić, “The Declaration of Croatian Independence in the Light of International Documents,” *Journal of Croatian Studies* 28–29 (1987–1988): 141; Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919–1953* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 114; Kazimir Katalinić, *Radanje države: NDH, Tito, “hrvatsko proljeće” i 1991* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1994), 8–9, 54; Rothchild, *East Central Europe*, 245; Kazimir Katalinić, *Argumenti: NDH, BiH, Bleiburg i genocid*

In fact, the roots of the Ustasha ideology can be found in the Croatian nationalism of the nineteenth century. The Ustasha ideological system was just a replica of the traditional pure Croatian nationalism of Ante Starcevic. His ideology contained all important elements of those of the extreme Croatian nationalism in the twentieth century. Starcevic's writings reveal an attitude similar to that of the contemporary Croatian nationalists: Frankovci at the beginning of the twentieth century and Ustashes in the 1930s. Mainly this is the idea that all political, social, and economic problems were subordinate to the national one and would be easily solved once national emancipation and statehood had been achieved.⁸

Ustasha's ideological system contained some new elements that distinguished it from its predecessors and made it eclectic. At the same time, the Ustashes borrowed from traditional Croatian nationalism, the National-Socialism of Hitler, the fascism of Mussolini, and even from the program of the Croatian Peasant Party.⁹ Some of their ideas were really fascist and national-socialistic. Such ideas included national megalomania and chauvinism, racism, xenophobic hatred of the "foreign elements" in the state, anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, glorification of the powers of violence and blood, contempt for "Jewish" liberal democracy (anti-democracy), social utopia, use of terror for encounter with all "enemies of the state," establishment of concentration camps, and so on, but that was because the fascism was a popular, modern ideology in the 1930s in Europe. Fascist and National Socialist ideology with their radical revisionism with regard to borders proved attractive to many dissatisfied nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia. The center of activity for Croatian nationalists in the 1930s was in Italy. Therefore, it is not difficult to find some influences of fascism on Ustasha ideology.¹⁰ The Ustasha movement became increasingly dependent on the states, that advocated the revision of the Versailles treaty and thus also the entire state structure of Yugoslavia: Italy, Germany, Hungary, and Austria. They largely supported the Croatian separatists,

(in Croatian) (Buenos Aires, 1993), 127; Stephen Fischer-Galati, *Eastern Europe and the Cold War: Perceptions and Perspectives* (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 1994), 76–77.

⁸ Duško Kalebić, "Pravaštvo i Ustaštvo" (in Croatian), *Hrvatska smotra* 7–8 (1942): 390–393; Seton-Watson, "Fascism, Right and Left," 191, 193; Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: A Reader's Guide. Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography* (California, 1976), 13; Djilas, *Contested Country*, 207.

⁹ Ivo Bogdan, *Dr Ante Pavelić riješio je hrvatsko pitanje* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1942), 27; Ante Pavelić, *Putem hrvatskog državnog prava* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1977), 9–12.

¹⁰ Bulgarian State Historical Archive, fund 176, inventory 8, file-number 864, 56; Sugar, *Native Fascism*, 126.

turning them into means of pressure on the Yugoslav government and into a weapon to destroy Yugoslavia when the time would come to change the *status quo* in South-Eastern Europe. These countries gave financial help, provided military training on their territory, and supplied Ustashas with weapons and explosives for their terrorist activities.¹¹

But at the same time Ustasha ideology had a specific character which made it unique: anti-Yugoslavism, anti-Serbism, religious intolerance, Catholicism, conservative traditionalism, historical mythologization, etc. Despite its later advancement toward Nazism (in the Independent State of Croatia), the Ustasha movement never became truly nazist and remained a nationalistic movement the main goal of which was to solve the Croatian national question—to destroy Yugoslavia with foreign help, to liberate Croatian lands from Serbian dictatorship, and to unify them into the framework of one national state. Its ideology was a national-liberation and revolutionary ideology. The Ustasha organization was a Croatian nationalistic revolutionary organization.¹² The main point in the Ustasha's oath: "I swear to fight in the Ustasha army for a free Independent Croatian State" reveals its real aim precisely. In South-Eastern Europe it was perhaps most similar to Corneliu Codreanu's Legion of the Archangel Michael in Romania.¹³

Fascism and Nazism were mainly a reaction to conflicts within nationally homogeneous societies, a form of solving class conflicts and the crises of political institutions through violence and dictatorship. The Ustashas, however, had no developed program for internal affairs and only a rudimentary concept of what Croatian society should be like. They had a national, but not a social program. That was one of the Ustashas biggest mistakes. Their movement did not have mass character, and not more than ten percent of the population supported it. The Ustasha movement was not a middle-class one (like the fascists') but a movement of the lower social strata of Croatian society (mainly peasantry).¹⁴ The Ustashas shared the cult of the

¹¹ Ciano, *Hidden Diary*, 204–205.

¹² Some contemporary authors, Djilas for example, use the term "extreme-nationalistic." Others, such as Leonard Cohen and Paul Warwick prefer the term "ultra-nationalistic." A third group, the majority of historians, simply call the Ustasha organization "nationalistic."

¹³ Zagreb State Archive, fund 249 (Ustasha. Croatian liberation movement), box 9, 21; *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), 12 March 1941; Ivan Peric, *Suvremeni hrvatski nacionalizam* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1976), 120–122; Djilas, *Contested Country*, 114.

¹⁴ Most of the Ustashas were recruited from the ethnically mixed regions of Lika and Hercegovina, where the population experienced the constant attacks of the Serbian nationalists. See Sugar, *Native Fascism*, 140.

state with the fascist ideology, but for them the nation and the national state were the supreme goals, while for the fascists they were instruments for power.

The main idea in Ustasha ideology was the idea of the Independent State of Croatia, which was born in the mid-nineteenth century. Its founder was the Party of Croatian Rights whose leader, Ante Starcevic, was called the “father” of pure Croatian nationalism. Ante Starcevic was the initiator of the idea of Croatian independence and the right of the Croatian nation to have its own independent state.¹⁵ The Ustashas inherited these ideas. They believed that the Croatian state had always been a legal entity, even when its incorporation in another state deprived it of international recognition (from the twelfth century on). For them, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was illegal, because it had never been accepted by the majority of the Croatian people through democratic processes—neither elections, nor referenda. They claimed that the Croatian state had always existed and that they had only liberated it in April 1941 by defeating the foreigners (Serbs) who had occupied it since the end of the First World War.¹⁶

The Ustashas believed that they were fighting against a foreign enemy (Serbs) in the name of the liberation and unification of the Croatian lands. They insisted on their specifically Croatian identity in reaction to the existence of a largely formed Serbian national consciousness elsewhere where Serbs lived in their territories. Ustashas firmly opposed Yugoslav national ideology, because they saw the strong orientation of the Serbian national interests to Belgrade. Separate Croatian and Serbian traditions and ideas of statehood were too strong for the Ustashas to ever accept the notion of a South Slav union. The Ustashas were the only fighters for the complete national independence of Croatia, the biggest enemies of an united Yugoslavia and of the Serbian people. Their ideology was an ideology of extreme Croatian nationalism during the interwar period and the Second World War.

For the Ustashas the purification of the nation and the creation of a homogeneous national state were the supreme goals. They had a peculiar understanding of sovereignty, as meaning primarily ethnic homogeneity. This idea appeared in Ustasha's ideology because of the multi-national and multi-religious character of the

¹⁵ Ante Starcevic, *Misli i pogledi* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1941), 34–42; Idem, *Izbrani spisi* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1943), 87–90, 102–104; Mirjana Gross, *Povijest pravaške ideologije* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1973), 74–108.

¹⁶ *Hrvatska straša* (Zagreb), 18 February 1941; Ante Oršanic, *Duh starcevicanstva u svjetlu europskog nacionalizma* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1942), 47–48; Idem, *Uloga drzave u zivotu naroda* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1943), 28–33.

Croat historical territories. Even the core of them—Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia were marked by the presence of ethnic Serbs who were Orthodox by their religion. The issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina was much more difficult, because here the Croats were living together not only with another Christians but with Moslems too. In the Independent State of Croatia, the pro-Axis regime adopted a strategy of ultra-nationalistic purification toward non-Croats. This policy involved the deportation or liquidation of those Serbs who would not renounce their Orthodox faith, Jews, and Gypsies.¹⁷

The Bosnian issue was the most intense emotional focus of Ustasha national ideology. Determining who held sovereignty over this region, inhabited by Croats, Serbs and Moslems was the most intricate, emotionally explosive and disputable problem. Both Croats and Serbs have claim to Bosnia and Herzegovina on ethno-linguistic and historical grounds, and under the ISC the inevitable conflict turned into ruthless inter-communal butchery. The Ustashes never doubted that their nation alone had legitimate rights to these territories and considered the Bosnian Moslems to be Croatian “blood brothers” and “Croats of the Moslem faith.”¹⁸

In the Ustashes’ view, almost all people living between the German-speaking population in the North (Austria) and the Greeks in the South were Croatian in origin, and therefore were to be included in the future independent Croatian state. Like the father of the Greater Croatian idea, Ante Starcevic, Ustashes insisted that the Croatian nation should include those who, in the course of the time, had become Orthodox or Moslems. The other names used by people living in this region were regional descriptions, not national names. It was possible to speak of those who lived in the region known as Serbia as “Serbs,” but it was wrong to speak of Serbs as a nation. Those who insisted on calling themselves a Serbian nation the Ustashes viewed as enemies. Their aim was a great independent Croatian state whose borders would be almost the same as those of interwar Yugoslavia. Exactly these expansionist claims made the Ustashes utterly intolerant of any non-Croatian expression of national consciousness.¹⁹ What the Ustashes truly wanted was an ethnically pure Greater Croatia that would encompass, at a minimum, the territories

¹⁷ Bulgarian State Historical Archive, fund 176, inventory 8, file-number 1095, 16–19; Ante Oršanic, *Ustaštvo kao društveni pokret* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1942), 34–38; Pavelic, *Frage*, 67.

¹⁸ *Nezavisna drzava Hrvatska* (Zagreb), 14 April 1941; Ferdo Culinovic, *Okupatorska podjela Jugoslavije* (in Serbian) (Belgrade, 1970), 178–179.

¹⁹ Starcevic, *Misli*, 178–184.

of inner Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even some others, a state, cleaned of all Serbs and which would not form any alliance with other Yugoslav states. Independent State of Croatia should be set up on a historical principle, not on an ethnic one which was, in fact, the Greater Croatian idea.²⁰ But Croatian separatists never succeeded in creating Greater Croatia. The boundaries of the ISC were determined by Germany and Italy and included only the old province Croatia-Slavonia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, and a small part of Dalmatia.

The Ustashas also wanted their Croatian state to be a strictly centralized and unified one. There was never any mention of a regional autonomy for the areas in which there was a mixed Croatian and Serbian population. They never spoke of a federal constitutional arrangement for Croatia and believed that national government should be strong, authoritarian, and, naturally, in their hands. And the Ustashas achieved this supreme goal of their struggle during the Second World War when they assumed power over the new, created by Germany, Independent State of Croatia in April 1941.²¹

In fact the idea of Croatian independence was one deeply fair idea that was in the spirit of all national movements in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nationalism as a political principle and theory which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent was typical ideology for all oppressed nationalities. The Ustashas insisted on having their own state after eight centuries of foreign rule and political dependence, like all the other European nations. Nationalism, with its nineteenth century characteristics and some twentieth century modifications, was the core of Ustasha ideology, because of the unsolved Croatian national question.

Croatian nationalism, in the first place, was a force for unity for a Croatian nation that had been politically divided in the last centuries. Integration and consolidation of a Croatian ethnic territory was one of the main goal of Ustasha national policy. And another one was the achievement of complete national independence, which had been a desire of the Croatian people from 1918—to break away from Yugoslavia and to create a separate Croatian state based on national principle. For Croats, nationalism preserved the characteristics of early modern nationalism with its two main ideas: the primacy of the national state and the principle of sovereignty. The simple fact that the Croatian nation had no state until the mid-

²⁰ Pavelic, *Putem*, 56; Bzik, *Ustaška borba*, 34.

²¹ Stevan Pavlowitch, *Unconventional Perceptions of Yugoslavia, 1940–1945* (New York, 1985), 215–216.

twentieth century made so actual this problem. But the Ustashas' aims were not limited to those which were reasonable and fair, which had grown out of the modern nationalism of the nineteenth century. They developed an extreme nationalistic ideology whose purposes went far beyond the achievement of independence and unification into the field of national purification, extermination of national minorities, and the desire for territorial expansion beyond the ethnic boundaries of the Croatian nation (the creation of Greater Croatia).

Continuing the tradition of the pure Croatian nationalism of the nineteenth century, the Ustashas considered Serbs the biggest enemy of the Croatian people. Propaganda materials insisted that there was no place for Serbs in the Croatian state, because they were alien people who had entered Croatian territory uninvited and had become a political enemy of the new state. The Serbian question remained a substantial part of the Ustasha ideology both before and during World War II. Ustasha propaganda was anti-Serbian before as well as after 10 April 1941. The Serbs remained the permanent image of the enemy for the Ustashas, with the only difference being that until 1941 the enemy was Serbia (external Serbs) while after 1941 that were the Serbs living inside Croatia (internal Serbs).

The core of Ustasha ideology was fanatical anti-Serbian nationalism. After 1918 the threat of Magyarization was replaced by the fear of Serb hegemony, which was seen as being more insidious, because there is no decisive differentiation of language between Croats and Serbs, only those of religion and culture. Croatian nationalists refused to tolerate any form of Serbian national consciousness within the territory of their state. Their passionate and aggressive nationalism assumed the form of genuine animosity toward the Serbian nation, and its representatives began a real nationalistic war against it. Ustashas refused to acknowledge that having a Serbian national consciousness was not a political act or a deliberate choice. Such an admission would have made their anti-Serbian policies look like a campaign against innocent people. They therefore insisted that being a Serb was a political act and that those "who wanted to be Serbs" and "insisted on being Serbs" could be punished for it.²²

Paradoxically, Ustashas both included all Serbs in the Croatian nation and proclaimed them to be an inferior and evil race. Their idea of Greater Croatia encompassed all Serbs as long as they were ready to abandon their own national consciousness and became Croats. Ante Pavelic stated in *Neue Ordnung*, a weekly pub-

²² Archive of the [Bulgarian] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sofia, file 40, inventory 1aP, file-number 592, 45, 48, 54, 59; Ilija Jukic, *The Fall of Yugoslavia* (New York, 1974), 93.

lished by the Ustashas in German, that: “There were very few real Serbs in Croatia. They were mostly Croats of Orthodox confession.”²³ But in the moment when they showed their own consciousness, they became “Slavoserbi,” as Ante Starcevic proclaimed them, or “Vlasi”, as Ustashas sometimes called them.

Because of Hungarian pro-Serbian policy, in the middle of the nineteenth century Starcevic developed extremely anti-Serbian nationalistic ideas. He was not only the father of modern Croatian nationalism, he was also the progenitor of its extreme form, which sought to suppress all those who were non-Croats. With him there entered permanently into Croatian politics the idea that all those who had a different national consciousness (mainly Serbs) were racially inferior and fundamentally evil beings. Starcevic went so far as to deny the existence of Serbs in Croatia calling them Orthodox Croats “seduced by Vlach priests.” Yet in the nineteenth century, the leader of the Croatian Party of Rights did not consider “Slavoserbi” Slavs, since supposedly they derived this name from the Latin words *sclavus* and *servus*, both meaning “slave.”²⁴ This notion was further developed by the successor of the Party of Croatian Rights—the Pure Party of Rights (“Frankovci”). From the beginning of his political career until his death in 1911, its leader Josip Frank was a fanatical opponent of any cooperation between Croats and Serbs. Skillful in using nationalistic slogans and radicalizing the people, in the first decade of this century he became a leading anti-Serbian demagogue and an instigator of the persecution of Serbs in Croatian lands.²⁵

Serbian hegemony in the interwar period just reinforced the animosity between the two nations. Leading Croatian personalities were imprisoned, tortured, and even liquidated. Political assassinations and massacres of civilian population were among the main reasons for the increase of Croat hostility toward the whole Serbian nation. Serbian high authorities, officers, and bureaucrats with their Greater-Serbian notions and desire to liquidate any form of national opposition, just made enemies in the face of the Croats.²⁶

The Ustasha regime in 1941–1945 represented the extreme anti-Serb tendency in Croatian political life the main purpose of which was a revenge for the twenty years of subjugation, terror, and police methods of rule and to make the idea of

²³ Quoted in Fikreta Jelic-Butic, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska 1941–1945* (in Croatian), 2nd ed. (Zagreb, 1978), 173.

²⁴ Starcevic, *Izbrani spisi*, 123–125.

²⁵ Gross, *Povijest*, 212–230.

²⁶ *Hrvatski glas* (Zagreb), 25 June 1941; *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), 17 September 1941.

Serbo-Croatian coexistence unthinkable forever.²⁷ The Ustashas were irritated mostly by the Greater Serbia idea, which continued to predominate in the Serbian national consciousness even during the Second World War when the country was occupied by the Germans.²⁸ Though Yugoslav in name, the exiled government became increasingly Pan-Serb. It threw all the blame for the collapse of Yugoslavia in April 1941 on the “treachery” of the Croats. It was clear that if it would take power again, the retribution against the Croatian people would be cruel and outrageous. This fear incited Ustashas against Serbs with more passion and vehemence. Western democratic powers were on the side of Serbia and it was no secret that if they won the war, Croatia would again lose its freedom.²⁹ Because the fate of this small Balkan state has always been determined by the Great Powers, Pavelic tried to purify its territory of all non-Croats and to place Western countries in front of an accomplished fact. He was convinced that if there were no Serbs on Croatian territory, they would have no justification for their Greater Serbian claims on the basis of the Serbian minority in Croatian lands. That is why he put into practice his extreme nationalistic policy.³⁰

The Ustasha hatred towards the Serbs living in their territory was due to the fact that they were a sizable “minority” in the ISC. The Independent State of Croatia encompassed huge territories, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. For centuries disputed frontier lands, they contained a mixed population of Croats, Serbs, and Moslems, and in some regions Orthodox Serbs outnumbered the Catholic Croats several times. In the country only about one-half of a population of 6–7 million were Roman Catholics of Croat origin. There were also 2.2 million Orthodox Serbs; 750,000 Moslems; 45,000 Jews; and relatively few members of other minority groups. Thus the proportion of Serbs in ISC was quite high—they represented approximately one-third of the population of the country.³¹ It was clear that they would never accept the Croatian state as their own and would always struggle

²⁷ C. A. Macartney, *Problems of the Danube Basin* (Cambridge, 1944), 123; George Cesarich, *Croatia and Serbia: Why is Their Peaceful Separation a European Necessity* (Chicago, 1954), 99.

²⁸ Its bearers were the Chetniks.

²⁹ Mladen Lorkovic, *Govor Ministra M. Lorkovica pred Saborom. Medzunarodno politicki položaj Hrvatske* (Zagreb, 1942), 5.

³⁰ Ante Pavelic, *Poglavnik saboru i narodu: Govor Ante Pavelica na završnoj saborskoj sjednici 28.2.1942* (Zagreb, 1942), 7–8.

³¹ Fred Singleton, *Twentieth Century Yugoslavia* (New York, 1976), 176.

against it. According to the Ustashas, if the Serbs were not fully defeated, they would be always the “turbulent element” in the ISC and would always claim for their separation from Croatia, and for incorporation into Serbia. They would ask Serbia for support and appeal for its intervention to protect their rights. In practice, there was a danger of territorial loss for the young Croatian state—loss of lands acquired as an Axis ally. For this reason, the Ustashas directed their political energy predominantly against the Serbs. The Jews and Gypsies were fewer in number, much more quiet, and not as dangerous for the future of the ISC.

Croats were always struggling in Yugoslavia against the “foreign state” and wanted to secede and to create their own independent state. Now history repeated itself, and there was fear among the Ustashas that the Serbs would follow the same “rebellious line” of behavior. The Croatian question was the most burning and sharp national issue in Yugoslavia, disorganizing the life of the whole state. The Serbian question now played the same role in the Independent State of Croatia. The Ustashas knew well that if it was not settled quickly and radically it would disturb the future political life of the ISC, and the state would be never stable. They were in a hurry to settle the Serbian question during the war years when all of Europe was in a reign of terror and lawlessness and everything, even genocide, was possible and unpunishable. ISC was a replica of Yugoslavia on the national level. The role of the Croatian issue in Yugoslavia now was played by the Serbian one in the ISC. The roles were exchanged, but the problems that had national character remained. Earlier, the Ustashas had fought for freedom against the “foreign yoke,” but when they achieved their national ideal they denied the right of the Serbs to do the same.

The government introduced specifically anti-Serbian measures. The first legal initiatives of the Ustasha state were directed at eliminating the Serbs and taking away their national and citizens’ rights. Just one week after the proclamation of the ISC, a law was enacted whose declared purpose was “to defend the people and the state.” Severe punishment was introduced for all those who in any way offended “the honor and vital interests of the Croatian people” or who threatened the existence of the Croatian state.³² The main goal of this law was to provide the Ustashas with a legal framework broad enough to allow the encounter with all national “enemies” and revenge against the pre-war adversaries. Such laws were considered a natural element of the national state and a necessary precondition for its existence.

³² *Narodne novine* (Zagreb), 18 April 1941; *Zakoni NDH: Zakonske odredbe i naredbe*, vol. 12 (Zagreb, 1942), 86.

The right to political participation and citizenship in ISC was reserved exclusively for Croats. Against the enemies of the nation all forms of repression were permitted, ranging from imprisonment or physical assault on individuals to mass extermination of whole categories of human beings. Indeed, to take part in national repression was glorified as the heroic performance of a higher duty to the Croatian nation.

Thousands of people became victims of this “protection of the state,” a large majority of whom were Serbs. They were considered and treated as an enemy nation and rebels, and Ustasha police and military units were used for all encounters with them.³³ The structure and organization of the ISC were such that systematic persecution could begin without any previous comprehensive legislation or detailed written governmental instructions. All power was in Ustasha hands, and the laws and legal system could be interpreted and applied in whatever way they desired. On 2 June 1941, in a speech given at Nova Gradiška, Milovan Zanic, the Minister of Justice and author of many legal decrees, revealed quite clearly Ustasha’ anti-Serbian attitude: “This state, our country, is only for Croats and for no one else. There are no methods and means which we, Croats, will not use to make our country truly ours, and to clean it of all Orthodox Serbs. All those who came into our country 300 years ago must disappear.... It is the policy of our state, and during its realization we shall do nothing else than follow the principles of the Ustashas.”³⁴

From the moment Ante Pavelic came to power, he regarded it as his mission to clear the Croat state of “foreigners.” Feeling the threat of Serbian ethnic element, the Ustashas began a real internal war against it and accepted a program for its killing, expatriation, and converting to Catholicism. Ustasha’s plan included the following scheme: to slaughter one-third of the Serbian population, to expel one-third to its native country, and to convert the rest to Catholicism. This plan is very well represented in the statement of the Minister of Education and Religion, Dr. Mile Budak: “We shall kill some of the Serbs,” he announced at a banquet at Gospic on 6 June 1941, “we shall expel others, and the remainder will be forced to embrace the Roman Catholic faith. These last will in due course be absorbed by the Croat segment of the population.”³⁵ This is one of the clearest formulations of the Ustasha national strategy toward the Serbian population.

³³ Archive of the [Bulgarian] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sofia, file 40, inventory 1aP, file-number 589, 78, 85; Mijo Bzik, *Ustaška pobjeda* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1942), 56.

³⁴ *Novi List* (Zagreb), 3 June 1941.

³⁵ Avro Manhattan, *Terror over Yugoslavia: The Threat to Europe* (London, 1953), 60.

The violent anti-Serbian campaign and mass terror started immediately after the meeting of Pavelic and Hitler in June 1941, which gave *carte-blanche* to the Poglavnik³⁶ in domestic national policy and soon reached the proportion of real genocide. As early as July and August there were large-scale massacres, first in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then in Croatia and Dalmatia. The whole of Bosnia ran with blood. Ustashas turned with terrible vehemence to the systematic liquidation of Serbian villages, which were destroyed one after another. Sometimes all adult males were shot; more often the entire population was slaughtered.³⁷ Orthodox churches were destroyed, and Serbian priests were the first who were killed. Other villages whose names contained words associated with the Serbian nationality or were more typical of Serbian vocabulary were given new names. Use of the Cyrillic alphabet was banned. Serbs were no longer allowed to live in certain residential areas, and they had to wear a blue band with the letter “P” (for *Pravoslavac*, meaning Orthodox) on their right arm.³⁸ Pursuing a policy of Serbian extermination in Croatia, Ustasha’s fierce clashes with Chetniks³⁹ and slaughters of innocent people were beyond description. The unspeakable hatred, cruelty, and fanaticism were characteristic of the Ustashas’ attitude toward non-Croats in the ISC. Ustashas believed that Serbs had a national consciousness that was independent from their confessional affiliation, whereas illiterate peasants were expected to forget their Serbian identity when they were forced to abandon their Orthodox religion. In 1941–1942 alone around 240, 000 Serbs were converted to Roman Catholicism.⁴⁰

In regions with a mixed population, especially those with a tradition of animosity between Croats and Serbs, violent conflicts became an everyday event. Serbian hostility toward the new regime increased rapidly with the escalation of the Ustasha terror. Many Serbs fled to the mountains as a result of these reprisals and many innocent Croats had to pay for it. ISC was an incomparably more violent state than either the Kingdom of Yugoslavia or the Habsburg monarchy. It showed a profound contempt for legal procedures and for human life. The state used its police

³⁶ Pavelic was called “Poglavnik” of ISC, a term similar to “Führer” in Germany or “Duce” in Italy.

³⁷ Macek, *In the Struggle*, 234; Fitzroy Maclean, *Disputed Barricade: The Life and Times of Tito* (London, 1957), 161.

³⁸ Cherubin Šegvic, *U prvim mjesecima stvaranja NDH* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1944), 45–48; Paris, *Genocide*, 143–146.

³⁹ Serbian extreme nationalists.

⁴⁰ *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), 23 August 1942.

and military units to exterminate part of its own population.⁴¹ And in spite of the fact that Ustashas remained primarily a nationalist movement, in their policy towards Serbs during the Second World War they resembled German Nazis. The massacres of the Serbian population were not essentially different from the attempt of the Third Reich to exterminate Jews.⁴²

The Ustashas described Serbs in racial terms and began a real nationalistic war against them. Their propaganda was often purely racist, which was primarily a result of the acceptance of Nazi terminology. But the Ustashas never developed a coherent racist theory. They spoke of a “pure Croatian race”, but never defined the Croatian racial type. They made no attempt to establish which characteristics distinguished Serbs from Croats, although the Croats were officially defined as “Aryans.” Systematic legislation (with an insistence on family origin and physical appearance) was not enacted against the Serbs. Their persecution became a system itself, since the Ustashas considered them the greatest enemies of the ISC and made them the main target of their propaganda. For the Ustashas, the Serbs were a political enemy, whom they treated the same way the Nazis treated people they considered both racially inferior and dangerous. It was a racist hatred of a people who merely had a different national consciousness.⁴³

There is no exact account of the actual number of Serbs killed by the Ustashas during the period of the Second World War. Estimates varied widely and this is, perhaps, one of the most disputable questions, connected with the history of the ISC. Since there is no exact statistical data about the war victims, Croatian and Serbian authors calculated losses by different scientific methods based on demographic statistics. In the most systematic and objective study of war victims in Yugoslavia, a Serbian scholar, Bogoljub Kocovic, calculates the Serbs' losses in ISC to have been 334, 000, which means that approximately one of every six Serbs lost his life during the war. According to Alexa Djilas, after the Jews and Gypsies, this is the highest percentage of losses during the Second World War in all of Europe.⁴⁴

Regardless of the actual number of victims, the repression and terror of the Ustaša regime are without parallel in the history of South-Eastern Europe. Its main goal was to make the very idea of a Yugoslav state unthinkable. By provoking Serbs into rebellions, the Ustashas wanted to compel the Croatian nation to choose be-

⁴¹ Zagreb State Archive, fund 223 (Ministry of Interior), box 5, 16, 19, 43.

⁴² Djilas, *Contested Country*, 110, 208.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 118–119.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 126–127.

tween Serbian domination in common Yugoslavia or support for the Ustashas as masters of an independent Croatia. But often, the terror had the opposite effect, alienating the Croatian masses from the Ustasha movement which had become identified with violence and savagery. Neither Germany nor Italy forced the Ustashas to slaughter the Serbian population. Despite their own dedication to ethnic genocide, mainly against Jews, Nazi authorities had mixed feelings about their allies' violent campaigns of racial purification, which tended to alienate more and more of the population from the regime and the Axis powers. Sometimes they opposed Croatian nationalistic policy and reacted against the extreme terror because it sparked real chaos and disorder on the territories of the ISC. The Italians also never encouraged the Ustashas to commit genocide, and in some regions Serbs even regarded the Italian army as their protector against the Ustashas.⁴⁵

The Moslems were treated in Croatia with far greater consideration than were the Orthodox. They didn't complain that massacres against their believers had occurred, although they protested against members of Ustasha groups wearing a fez when they were attacking Orthodox churches and of their insulting behavior towards Moslems. In fact, the Ustashas regarded Croatia as a "state of two faiths—Catholicism and Islam."⁴⁶ Well-organized propaganda among the Moslems emphasized that they were, in fact, Islamized Croats. On this basis, a territorial claim was made over all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbo-Croatian rivalry over these territories had a century-long history and in the ideological sphere found expression in the attempt to prove Croatian or Serbian origin of the Moslem population.

In order to succeed in his national policy, the Poglavnik was obliged to assure himself of as much cooperation as possible, especially in the regions where the Serbian masses were more densely settled. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the Moslems constituted about one-third of the population, the Croats were one-fourth, and the remainder were Serbian Orthodox. The Croats, therefore, were unable to insist on their right to these territories without recognizing the Moslems as Croats. Hence Pavelic's theory that the Moslems were the "purest Croats."⁴⁷

The Ustashas needed Moslems support in the struggle against the Chetniks and Partisans in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁸ The Poglavnik understood perfectly the ad-

⁴⁵ Cohen and Warwick, *Political Cohesion*, 58.

⁴⁶ *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), 26 April 1941.

⁴⁷ Zagreb State Archive, fund 249, box 7, 51.

⁴⁸ Communist groups. Ustashas directed their propaganda against the Partisans not only as "Communists," but also as "Serbs."

vantages he could achieve by winning over the greatest possible number of Moslems and urging them to fight against the Orthodox Serbs. That is why he followed the policy of tolerating Moslems, giving them privileges and extraordinary concessions, promising their leaders high positions in the administration, and even admitting two of their representatives into the Ustasha government (including the vice-president of the country, Osman Kulenovic). The Poglavnik promised Moslems full realization of their material and religious aspirations, gave them opportunities to hold high civil and military positions in the state, permitted Moslem units in the Croatian army, subsidized their schools, and even made them a present of a huge new mosque in the center of Zagreb.⁴⁹

This policy brought the desired results and assured Pavelic with the cooperation and support of a part of the Moslem population in Independent State of Croatia. Many of these Moslems were always glad of a pretext for massacring Christians, whatever their denomination, but especially Serbs who were their main national enemy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The plans of the leader of the Chetniks, Draza Mihailovic were for the expulsion of all Moslems (who, were proclaimed by the Ustasha propaganda as the “purest part of the Croatian nation”) and Catholic Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina and from large regions of Croatia-Slavonia and Dalmatia, all of which were to become parts of the future Greater Serbia. Starting in 1941, the Chetniks carried out indiscriminate terror raids against Moslem settlements in Eastern parts of the country (especially in areas along the river Drina) and committed severe “punishing and cleansing actions” to ensure continued Serbian hegemony in the post-war period in these territories. For this reason Moslems were ready to support Croats in their nationalistic war against the Serbian population and accepted the government’s anti-Serbian policy. Most of them became loyal citizens of the Croat state, identified themselves with the Ustasas, and joined their military and police forces.⁵⁰

Several specialized Moslem Ustasha divisions were formed, with the main task of spreading terror in the Orthodox regions, and soon became notorious for their atrocities. Serbian churches were destroyed and numerous massacres of the Serbian population were conducted by Moslems. The Serbs in the region, in order to defend themselves against these specialized divisions, joined the Chetnik groups,

⁴⁹ *Zagreb State Archive*, fund 249, kut.7, 23,37,39; Ante Pavelic, *Dzamijska Poglavnik Ante Pavelica* (Madrid, 1988), 67, 70.

⁵⁰ *Hrvatski glas* (Zagreb), 20 September 1941; Mladen Lorkovic, *Odmjetnicka zvjerstva i pustosenja u NHD* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1943), 56–63.

which in turn, conducted reprisals against the Moslem population. Thus the blood of innocent victims was shed on both sides, just as the Ustasha government had anticipated, and with reprisals following reprisals, the Serbian Orthodox and Moslem elements destroyed each other, to the great benefit of Catholic Croats.⁵¹

There were some influences of Nazism on the Ustasha national program, like anti-Semitism and the struggle against Gypsies, but they didn't play such an essential role and never became a central element in Ustasha ideology. Jews and Gypsies were defined as non-Aryans and were persecuted as racially inferior and dangerous people. Ustasha's official newspapers were full of restrictions and bans, laws and announcements connected with them. These concerned especially Jews who were one of the main targets of Ustasha propaganda. Anti-Semitism was one of the important ideological postulates of Croatian separatists the roots of which could be found in the program of the Party of Croatian Rights. Ante Starcevic considered Jews aliens who had settled in purely Croatian territories and who, moreover, were instruments of Magyarization policy. Hence they should not be entitled to the same civil rights as the Croats.⁵²

The extermination of Jews in the ISC was parallel to the mass slaughters of the Serbian population. They were accused of being the murderers of Jesus and were considered propagators of Communist ideology in Europe. Thus the attitude towards them became as cruel and severe as that of the Nazis. Anti-Semitism was a manifestation of xenophobia, religious conviction, and the desire for economic reform in Croatian society. Because the number of Jews was too small, to make it a really popular slogan, Ustashes used anti-Semitism as a focus for the hostility that was felt toward non-Croats.⁵³ Jews became the "enemy" on whom the population vented its feeling of revenge for the long centuries of its political and economic oppression. That the Jews had little to do with this oppression did not matter. The fact that they were "different"—just as the oppressors had been—was the main reason for the xenophobic attitude towards them.⁵⁴

Anti-Semitism was something the Ustashes accepted from the ideology of National Socialism, but it never became a main element in their ideological system. Racist legislation against the Jewish population imitated the German model and, in

⁵¹ Bulgarian State Historical Archive, fund 176, inventory 8, file-number 1153, 122–126; Paris, *Genocide*, 119–121.

⁵² Starcevic, *Izbrani spisi*, 153.

⁵³ Different authors give the number of the Jews in ISC between thirty and forty thousand.

⁵⁴ Sugar, *Native Fascism*, 154.

fact, was a copy of the Nazi Nuremberg laws of September 1935. In fact, in all German satellites Jews suffered relatively more (Croatia, Hungary, etc.) than did their Serb, Romanian, or Czech brothers. Jews were compelled to wear a discriminatory mark—a yellow sign on their clothes—and were banished from certain sections of the cities. They were arrested in huge numbers and were sent to concentration camps. Some of them had been seized directly by the German Nazis who interned them at Graz in Austria.⁵⁵

The Ustashas had the consciousness that their mission was to clear the new state of Jews. The imprisonment and massacres started in large numbers in June 1941, and continued during the following months with severe determination. By December 1941, according to the figures which A. Pavelic himself gave to Count Ciano, the total number of Jews in Croatia had been reduced from 45,000 to 12,000. This was only the start of their extermination in ISC. The synagogues met the same fate as the Serbian Orthodox churches. They were pillaged and then burned by the Ustashas in many regions of ISC.⁵⁶

Finally, as a logical outcome of this violence, a decree was issued, on 9 October 1941, declaring the nationalization of Jewish enterprises and possessions. Article One of this decree stipulated: “The State Direction for reconstruction is authorized, in view of reconstruction and national economy, to nationalize all Jewish enterprises and possessions whatsoever for the benefit of the Independent State of Croatia.”⁵⁷

Jews who could prove that they had been active pre-war supporters of Croatian separatists could save themselves and acquire Croatian citizenship. In these cases some of them also acquired the title “honorary Aryan.” But such political loyalty was difficult to prove, and in any case very few non-Croats were sympathetic to the extreme Croatian nationalism of the pre-war period. Most exceptions were made for Jews who were related to members of the Ustasha movement (some leading Ustashas were married to Jewish women.)

The little-researched destiny of the Gypsies in the ISC was also tragic: of the 40,000 who lived in the territory of the state in April 1941, fewer than one thousand survived the massacres by Ustasha racists.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Zagreb State Archive, fund 252 (Ustasha police. Jewish department), box 1, 45,49,53; Djilas, *The Contested Country*, 210.

⁵⁶ Zagreb State Archive, fund 252, box 1, 58, 60.

⁵⁷ *Zbornik zakona i naredba NDH 1941* (in Croatian) (Zagreb, 1941), 126.

⁵⁸ Jelic-Butic, *Ustaše i NDH*, 182.

In their activity to create the Croatian national state, the Ustashas accepted extreme methods of struggle and rule, which were widely spread in Europe by Nazi and Italian fascist movements. They saw the contemporary political situation as a struggle for the survival of their nation against all enemies—Serbs, Jews, Gypsies, and Communists. Considering Jews and Communists a real danger that wished to destroy and conquer Europe, Ustashas sought the fight against them as a test of strength of the Croatian nation. They interpreted the aggressive, ruthless character of their movement as the expression of the nation's strength and will. Political violence and terrorism were defined as the only way of protecting the survival of their nation.⁵⁹

Ustashas committed the most brutal crimes. The most elementary rights of man were unscrupulously violated. The security of life and property, the liberty of religious belief and thought no longer had any value for a great majority of the people in the ISC. The executions of priests and many notable men, the massacre and the torture of numerous innocent people just because of their different national consciousness, the massive expulsion of numerous families from their homes and their deportation outside the borders of the country were without parallel in the history of South-Eastern Europe during the Second World War.⁶⁰ Although it is sometimes overlooked that the historical roots of Ustasha racial tactics lay in the hegemonistic violence done to the Croatian nation in interwar Yugoslavia, it is indisputable that the ethnic slaughter committed under the ISC regime, which lasted for only five years, far surpassed the extent and brutality of ethnic persecution during the interwar period. The Ustashas operated in a small area, but the proportion of their victims to the total population was probably surpassed only in occupied Poland, Ukraine, and Bellorussia.

The similarities between the ISC and the Third Reich included the conviction that terror and genocide were necessary for the preservation of the state. However, they were extremely damaging to both states, to the point of endangering their very existence. They led directly to the destruction of social order and engaged enormous material and human resources of both countries, which they needed for the war. The Ustashas' terror had consequences that Pavelic had not foreseen, provoking massive Serbian rebellions as early as the summer of 1941, which would have caused an early collapse of the ISC if it had not been supported by the German and

⁵⁹ Zagreb State Archive, fund 223, box 6, 26, 29; *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), 17 October 1942.

⁶⁰ Lenard Cohen, *Broken Bonds: The Desintegration of Yugoslavia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 58.

Italian armies. The Serbs reacted to Ustasha's nationalistic policy, to the crimes and excesses, in the same way. They created their own terrorist groups and bands and a real ethno-political civil war spread in the territories of the new state. Ethnically mixed areas (especially multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina) were transformed into permanent battle-fields. Acting in the name of preserving the nation and faith, the main ethnic groups waged a holy war in which they tried to exterminate people of the opposite religion and nationality.⁶¹

There is a great discussion in the historical literature over the question of whether the Chetnik's activity was the main instigator for the Ustashes' severe nationalistic policy. The Croatian and Serbian authors defend two completely contrary opinions. Serbian historians blame the Ustashes for the beginning of the nationalistic war on the territory of the ISC. According to the Croatian authors, Ustashes were not instigators but victims of the Chetnik attacks. They answered brutality with brutality, and committed likewise such crimes against Serbs.⁶²

Serbian irreconcilability toward the whole Croat nation and conviction that they were called to rule South Slav lands could explain Croat hatred and anti-Serbian sentiment but could not excuse them. The Ustashes answered one terror with another one, but they could not realize that this would simply complicate the national question, not solve it. In fact, the discussion in the historical literature over the question of who started the blood bath on the territory of the ISC is completely inconclusive. The truth is that both sides participated in the conflict with equal bitterness, and both Croats and Serbs gave thousands of victims to it. According to the contemporary Croatian nationalist Ivo Korsi, Ustashes had the power in the state, so they were responsible for stopping the terror, regardless of who had started it, and for stabilizing the country.

The situation resulted in the spread of an extreme nationalism and chauvinism in the Croatian state that left no room for any reconciliation between the Croatian

⁶¹ Bulgarian State Historical Archive, fund 176, inventory 8, file-number 1249, 65.

⁶² The Croatian commentary of those events was published in *Unitas*. It stressed the following points: (1) "Before the Croatian nation was able to organize its power throughout the country, the Serb Chetniks began with the killings of the unarmed people and the disarmed Croatian soldiers, adherents of the former Yugoslav army in April 1941...;" (2) "Serb Chetniks...undertook to destroy Croatia and to extirpate biologically the Croatian nation...;" (3) "During the war no Croats crossed the Serbian border while the Serbs from Serbia came to Croatia in tens of thousands causing trouble and massacring innocent Croatian people...;" and (4) "The Croatian nation was in a state of self-defense..." *Unitas* 2 (1946), quoted by Cesarich, *Croatia and Serbia*, 59.

and Serbian nations. All of Ustasha's power was directed in a destructive trend, toward the extermination of their enemies. In Nazi Germany and the ISC the main victims of terror were not enemies and opponents of the regime, but peaceful, innocent, and unprotected people. Both Nazis and Ustashes hoped that the terror would destroy their opponents but, in fact, it did just the opposite. The terror actually helped the real enemies of both states.⁶³

The Ustashes involved as many of their members and sympathizers as possible in acts of terror against the Serbs. The genocide was not concealed and even deliberately was made known publicly. There were many reasons for the participatory and open character of the Ustasha terror. First, the new state apparatus and administrative machinery were not large enough for an organized liquidation of Serbs solely in concentration camps. Their expatriation and forced conversion could be achieved only by inspiring a high level of fear in them, and well publicized terror could help move things in just that direction. Ustasha was a relatively small movement before the war, mostly isolated from Croatian society. Terror seemed to be the best method by which it could enter the mainstream of national politics.⁶⁴ Even when the Ustashes doubted that they would be successful in exterminating, expelling, or converting to Catholicism all the Serbs, they still firmly believed that they had begun an irreversible Croat-Serbian war and had made the very idea of these two hostile nations living together impossible.

Ustasha terror was primitive and traditional and carried numerous distinctively Balkan traits. The terrorist groups resembled gangs more than an organized army or organs of a state. Local Ustasha commanders pursued an arbitrary policy of terror, and their crimes often became real orgies of violence.⁶⁵ But exactly that repelled the population from the Ustasha's regime. The Ustasha method of ruling was terroristic and genocidal, and therefore incompatible with any concept of legality and constitutionality, and this alienated the majority of the Croatian people. For the Ustashes the real enemy was not abroad but inside the country. Not only all persecuted "minorities" (Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies), but also many Croats and Moslems, were totally opposed to the government of the state.

Ustashes hoped to achieve the Croatian national ideal with the help of Italy, Germany, Austria, and Hungary—the only outside powers that had been ready to

⁶³ Paris, *Genocide*, 163–168; Culinovic, *Okupatorska podjela*, 317–329.

⁶⁴ Archive of the [Bulgarian] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sofia, file 40, inventory 1aP, file-number 591, 59.

⁶⁵ Djilas, *Contested Country*, 122–124.

support their struggle. The paradox was in the fact that all these countries, especially Italy, had traditional expansionist demands on Croatian lands. The Ustasha movement was really supported by Italy, but at a very high price. According to the Pact of Rome signed on 18 May 1941, in return for Italian recognition of him as Poglavnik, Pavelic was compelled to abandon to Italy nearly all the Croatian islands, almost all of Dalmatia and a substantial slice of the hinterland backing Rijeka. The Ustasha regime had to accept an Italian prince, the Duke of Spoleto as “King of Croatia.” All these turned the country into a completely unlivable organism, which was precisely what Mussolini had planned. And, if he was disappointed in his hopes of establishing a protectorate over the rest of Croatia, it was only because the ISC was from the first moment of its existence supported and protected by its German ally.

At the same time, Hungary annexed Backa, Baranja, Prekomurje, and Medjumurje, the last of which had a 100 percent Croatian population. The remainder of the ISC was divided into German and Italian zones of occupation. The struggle of the Croats over the past twenty years to become masters of their country had suffered a tremendous setback. The tragedy of the Croatian patriots was in the fact that they made a lot of compromises with the Croatian national ideal. They had to cede large parts of their territory and population. The Ustashes wanted to create an independent and strong state, but in fact their ISC was one puppet state, just a satellite to Nazi Germany. Its frontiers did not fulfill the expectations of Croatian citizens and its “independence” and “freedom” were no more than a fiction. Great parts of the country’s territory fell into the hands of the Chetnik and Partisan units and were beyond the control of the Ustasha government.

The outbreak of the Second World War and especially the German aggression against Yugoslavia was a real chance for the Ustashes. Germany was the Great Power that destroyed Yugoslavia and created an Independent State of Croatia on its former territory. But Germany did not intend to give real independence to its people. The country was one of its satellites in the Balkans, which was too far from the idea of state independence. It was occupied by German and Italian armies which was obliged to upkeep on its territory. Croatia had no independent foreign policy. In joint operations with the German army, the Ustasha military units were always under its command. German military commanders and German diplomatic representative in Zagreb (Siegfried Kasche) frequently interfered in the internal affairs of the ISC, even appointing local civil authorities. There were also tensions and clashes between the Italian forces and the Ustashes. Even outside their zone of occupation, Italian troops often took over civilian and military power from them.

The Independent State of Croatia was in general chaos—in national, political, social, and economic crisis—and the Ustasha power was entirely supported by German military forces. Neither the Italian nor the German military and political circles believed that their Croatian ally was capable of surviving on its own. This led to the collapse of the Ustasha regime at the end of war simultaneously with the German capitulation. The Ustashes lost not just political power in 1945 but the historical chance for the Croatian people to have their own state for a long period of time. The Yugoslav Communist Party accomplished its long-standing desire, creating a new, federated Yugoslavia. In 1945, the Croatian people lost their brief, although somewhat fictitious state independence and were compelled to enter this new state as a federated republic.