Massacres in Dismembered Yugoslavia, 1941-1945

The acts of mass violence committed on Yugoslav territory between 1941 and 1945 are dealt with in a Yugoslav context, not in that of each of the countries making up Yugoslavia. While the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was dismantled in April 1941, it has to be said that the country did not collapse from within and that important political and military actors continued to act with a view to restoring Yugoslavia. This is true of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland (or movement of the četnici), led by General Dragoljub Mihailović[1] and supported by the Yugoslav government in exile, but also of the movement of the communist partisans (partizani), who, while fighting the occupiers, wanted to take power in a reshaped Yugoslav state. The Second World War only affected Yugoslavia from April 1941 onwards. In fact, Hitler’s Germany had no particular designs on this state. It was only following a putsch on 27 March 1941, resulting in the overthrow of the Yugoslav government which had adhered to the Tripartite Pact two days earlier, that Germany, supported by its Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian allies, decided to invade the country.

This chronological index is not exhaustive. Rather than cataloguing the totality of atrocities committed during the Second World War – which would be a tedious and rather indigestible undertaking – the aim here is to reflect the violence committed by each of the parties involved (occupiers and internal agents) by selecting the most relevant instances. The regions treated are mainly Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The mass violence perpetrated on the territory of Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1945 is still the subject of lively polemics, especially as regards the total number of victims. The official figures established by the Yugoslav authorities after 1945, fixing the number of victims at 1.7 million people, were challenged in the second half of the 1980s by independent researchers (Bogoljub Kočović and Vladimir Žerjavić), who estimated the total number of war casualties at around one million.

I. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes 1918-1929

The early years of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes revealed the enormous complexity of the single state. It was in fact a composite state, bringing together populations of diverse religious, political and cultural traditions: of a total of 12,017,323 inhabitants, the Serbs accounted for 38.83 per cent, the Croats for 23.77 per cent, the Slovenes for 8.53 per cent, and non-Slav minorities (Germans, Hungarians, Albanians, Rumanians, Turks, Italians, etc.) for 16.5 per cent. The drawing of the border with Italy left more than 500,000 Slovenes and Croats outside its frontiers. Official discourse presented the Macedonians as southern Serbs. Serbs and Croats disputed the allegiance of the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Moreover, there were significant demographic losses during the World War, especially in the territories of the Kingdom of Serbia: 1.25 million victims (400,000 military, 850,000 civilian) out of 4 million inhabitants (or 28 per cent of the total population), according to the official figures communicated to the Peace Conference of 1946 by the Serbian government.

Political Instability and Unrest in the South of the Country

The 1920s were a period of political instability in the new kingdom. The country’s institutions were slow to be established: elections for the Constituent Assembly were only organized in November 1920 and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was only proclaimed in June 1921. It was not adopted by a qualified majority of two-thirds of deputies, as anticipated in the Corfu Declaration of 1917, but by a simple majority. The Croatian Peasant Party of Stjepan Radić boycotted the work of the Constituent Assembly and his movement did not recognize the new state, because the Croatian Diet did not declare for unification.

The new kingdom came under strong challenge in the south-east of the country, in Macedonia and
Kosovo – new territories integrated into Serbia at the end of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes faced the resistance of Albanians in arms (kačaci) attacking the security forces and engaging in acts of pillage, but also of gangs of armed Macedonians who supported the incorporation of Vardar Macedonia into Bulgaria (actions of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, VMRO). In autumn 1918, action to disarm the Albanian population resulted in the destruction of several villages (Janjetović, 2005: 111). In 1919-1920, several Albanian uprisings were put down (Tasić, 2008: 229-278). The families of the insurgents were deported to internment camps and saw their property confiscated. Albanian political representatives (the Kosovo Committee supported primarily by Italy) deplored the thousands of victims and the houses that had been razed: the figures vary between 6,000 and 100,000 casualties (Janjetović, 2005: 113). Interior Ministry data for the years 1918-1923 refer to approximately 600 victims among the police (Jovanović, 2007: 15). In Macedonia, several hundred political assassinations were organized by the Yugoslav security forces (Jovanović, 2007: 13-14). Following several attacks by pro-Bulgarian Macedonian komitadži on Serbian villagers and gendarmes, the government appealed to the head of the Association against Bulgarian Bandits, Dobrica Matković, responsible for the massacre of 53 inhabitants of the village of Garvan in early March 1923 (Jovanović, 2007: 14).

Political life was dominated by parties supporting centralism and a unitary Yugoslav state: the Democratic Party and the Serbian Radical Party. There was a succession of governmental crises. Although the 1921 Constitution had established a parliamentary regime, power in fact lay with King Alexander. Between 1918 and 1929, out of 23 governmental crises, 21 were provoked by the King, with Parliament being responsible for the other two. During this period, none of the assemblies elected (1921, 1923, 1925 and 1927) served its full term.

The Croatian Autonomy Movement

The Croatian question dominated political life. In its struggle for the establishment and recognition of a Croatian state, the Peasant Party acted with an eye to the great powers. In 1923, Stjepan Radić undertook a long trip through European capitals (Vienna, London and Moscow) in order to defend the Croatian cause there, without any real success. In 1925, the government decided to ban his movement and arrested its leaders. Faced with the prospect of political marginalization, and after King Alexander had initiated a compromise, Stjepan Radić decided to recognize the Constitution of the Kingdom in March 1925. In October 1925, the Croatian Peasant Party entered the government. Divergences between centralist forces and parties defending federalism persisted. On 20 June 1928, Stjepan Radić was assassinated during a session of the National Assembly. After ten years of living together, the political elites of the different national groups had not managed to reach a consensus on the organization and form of the state.

II. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1929-1941

Proclamation of the Dictatorship

The 1930s were marked by the establishment of a dictatorship and a rapprochement with the fascist powers. On 6 January 1929, the King, Alexander Karadjordjević, proclaimed a dictatorship with the support of the army. He took control of executive and legislative power, suspended the 1921 Constitution, banned political parties and associations claiming to represent a particular identity, and strengthened the law on state security. He sought to impose the idea of a unitary Yugoslav nation against national diversity. In October 1929, he renamed the country ‘Kingdom of Yugoslavia’.

Lacking a solid base, the King attempted to improve his position by providing the kingdom with a Constitution in September 1931. It conferred the essentials of legislative power on the sovereign. The old parties remained banned and political liberties were restricted; parties based on a national identity other than Yugoslav were not recognized by the law. In November 1931, elections were organized and assumed the form of a referendum, in as much as only the government could constitute an electoral list. The regime created its own party in December 1931: Yugoslav Radical Peasants’ Democracy.
At a time when the country was being undermined by the world economic crisis, the fascist states were growing stronger and external threats were taking shape, King Alexander was assassinated in Marseille on 9 October 1934, by a Macedonian killer from the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization in the service of Croatian nationalists from the Ustashi movement and Macedonians.

Towards a Settlement of the Croatian Question

Since the heir to the throne, Peter II of Yugoslavia, was a minor, a regency was established, headed by Prince Paul Karadjordjević. New elections, which opposition parties were able to contest, were organized in May 1935. The government list, backed by the police and administrative apparatus, won. A new government was established, led by Milan Stojadinović until February 1939. He carried out a reorientation of the country’s diplomacy by gradually abandoning the Little Entente (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Rumania), as well as France and England, in favor of a rapprochement with the Axis Powers (Germany and Italy).

In 1939, a new government, entrusted to Dragiša Cvetković, had as its first task concluding an agreement with the Croatian Peasant Party, in order to consolidate the kingdom and resolve the Croatian question, which remained a constant source of tension. Long, difficult negotiations ended in August 1939 and an agreement established an autonomous Croatian entity within Yugoslavia. However, this agreement came under strong challenge from some Serbian intellectual circles, including the Serbian Cultural Club presided over by Slobodan Jovanović, who demanded the creation of a Serbian entity within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

After the defeat of France in spring 1940, Yugoslavia’s policy of neutrality became uncertain. In fact, the government was unable to hold out for long and ended up adhering to the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941. On 27 March 1941, a coup d’état organized by the army overthrew the regency in protest at this rallying to the Axis.

III. Yugoslavia and the Second World War: 1941-1943

Aside from monographs dealing with specific regions, the mass violence in dismembered Yugoslavia has not been the subject of systematic study, either during the period of communist Yugoslavia (1945-1990) or after the country’s break-up in 1991-1992. Historiography favorable to the resistance movement of the communist partisans has been followed by writings tending to rehabilitate the nationalist forces that tied their fate to that of Nazi Germany. Researchers must therefore be cautious when confronted with these sources. In most instances, monographs on mass violence focus on the crimes of ‘others’, Croatian historians concerning themselves with the crimes committed by the Serbian četnici (chetniks), while Serbian historians publish works on the crimes committed by the Croatian ustaše (ustashi) and the Independent State of Croatia.

For the dismembered Yugoslavia of 1941, the war contained several dimensions: what followed the war against the Axis forces and the occupying powers was a civil war pitting not only national communities against one another, but also members of the same community (the case, for example, of Serbian communist partisans against the Serbian soldiers of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland). Following the adhesion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941, a coup d’état was organized on the night of 26-27 March. The government of Dragiša Cvetković and the regency were overthrown, the ministers were arrested, and the majority of King Peter II Karadjordjević was proclaimed. A new government led by General Dušan Simović was constituted. The same day, Hitler took the decision to attack Yugoslavia militarily.

On the night of 5-6 April, Germany launched its military operations against the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. With few modern armaments at its disposal, the Yugoslav armed forces were defeated in a few days. Zagreb, capital of Croatia, was taken on 10 April; Belgrade, capital of Serbia, on the 12th. The country officially surrendered on 17 April. The government derived from the putsch left the country with the young King Peter II, withdrawing to Great Britain. The victors divided up Yugoslav territory in accordance with their strategic interests or national claims.

Croatia’s independence was proclaimed on 10 April 1941 by the Ustaša (‘insurgent’), organization
created in 1929 in response to the royal dictatorship of Alexander Karadjordjević. This organization exploited the Croatian people’s profound exasperation with the Yugoslav state. Its nationalist discourse met with the approval both of the militants of the Croatian Peasant Party and of the Catholic hierarchy. However, this nationalism soon took the form of a militant racism: ‘Nuremburg laws’ against Jews and Roma were introduced, as in the whole of Europe subject to the Third Reich. On the other hand, the anti-Serb policy of the regime was peculiar to it. 1.9 million Serbs made up around 30 per cent of the population of the country, which included Bosnia-Herzegovina within its borders. Wishing to settle the Serbian question once and for all, the Croatian authorities resorted to the expulsion of Orthodox Serbs to Serbia, to their assimilation to Catholicism by forced conversion, and finally to their physical extermination. The ustaša state set up concentration camps, of which the most infamous is Jasenovac. Much of the mass violence was committed between the months of May and August 1941. A memorandum sent by the Serbian Orthodox Church to the German military command in Belgrade in August 1941 estimated the number of victims at 180,000 (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenata, 1993: 594-625).

This violence contributed to the development of the Serbian resistance (the movements of the communist partisans and the četnici), in particular in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatian Krajina (Redžić, 1998: 26, 37). In September 1941, Italian military reports cited 80,000 Serbs killed in the regions of Lika and Bosna, as well as 30,000 victims in other regions of Yugoslavia (Redžić, 1998: 34).

In Serbia, an administration of commissars (Komesarska uprava) headed by Milan Aćimović, also responsible for Internal Affairs, was formed on 30 April 1941. However, incapable of restoring order in the face of the activities of the communist partisans and četnici, this structure was replaced on 29 August 1941 by a new government headed by Milan Nedić. The latter rejected the Yugoslav state and declared for the integration of the Serbs into a single state, relying on Nazi Germany. The government’s propaganda was mainly directed against the ‘English plutocracy’ and Bolshevism.

On the night of 10-11 May 1941, a group of 26 officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Yugoslav Royal Army arrived from Bosnia in the hills above Ravna Gora. These men, led by Colonel Dragoljub M. Mihailović, refused to capitulate and planned to organize resistance to the German occupier. In their view, Yugoslavia had been defeated as a result of the actions of politicians and the treason of the Croats. During the months of May and June 1941, they devoted themselves to the organization of their movement. Their vision of Yugoslavia was that of the Karadjordjević monarchy. Their strategy was cautious and attentiste: they preferred to gather their forces in the expectation of a potential landing by the Allies in the Balkans. They nevertheless conducted guerrilla actions against their Croatian or Muslim adversaries on the territory of the Independent State of Croatia, as well as against the communist partisans. After 1941, their actions against the occupying forces were mainly limited to acts of sabotage (railway tracks, bridges, etc.). Unlike the ustaše, Dragoljub Mihailović’s movement did not control a state apparatus during the war years; nor did it possess a legal framework for possibly excluding sections of the population (Dulić, 2006: 267). It did not resort to organizing concentration camps.

The communist resistance movement launched an armed uprising in July 1941 in Montenegro and Serbia. The partisans experienced a setback in Montenegro and, following a pacification operation in Serbia in the autumn, the small army of partisans fell back on Sandžac and eastern Bosnia. It spent the winter of 1941-1942 in Foča, in the eastern confines of the Independent State of Croatia. During 1942, Tito and his fighters crossed Bosnia from east to west.

IV. The Independent State of Croatia (including Bosnia-Herzegovina)

1941; 27-28 April: The first mass slaughter in the independent state of Croatia occurs in the village of Gudovac, near Bjelovar, where ustaše armed forces kill 184 Serbian peasants from that locality and neighboring villages, in reprisal for the death of two agents of the Croatian security forces killed on the road from Gudovac to Bjelovar (Jelić-Butić, 1977: 166; 195 peasants killed according to Bulajić, 1988: 252-264). The execution of these civilians occurred in the presence of Eugen Dido Kvaternik [2], head of public order and security for the Independent State of Croatia.**
11-12 May: Violence against the Serbs continues in the district of Vojnić and Glina. In the latter locality, situated in the Kordun region (military confines), more than 300 Serbs are arrested and then killed by ustaše armed forces on the night of 12-13 May (Zečević and Popović, 1996: 236-237).**

2 June: In the month of June, the massacres carried out by ustaše armed forces assume sizeable proportions in Herzegovina, where the Serbian population has withdrawn to the mountains with its livestock. On 2 June, in the area around Ljubinje, around 140 Serbs are killed by ustaše forces. On 5 June, approximately 140 Serbian peasants are massacred with mallets in the village of Korito, near the locality of Gacko, on the initiative of the ustaša commander Herman Tonogal (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenta, 1993: 144-145; 180 victims according to the collective work Hercegovina u NOB, 1961, 42, 97; Bulajić, 1988: 473-481). The bodies are thrown into the Golubija gorges, which are thirty meters deep. ***

4 June: During a meeting presided over by the German representative in Zagreb, Siegfried Kasche, which brings together the German and Croatian authorities, the decision is taken to transfer en masse Slovenes living within the borders of the German Reich to Croatia, and then to Serbia, as well as Serbs from Croatia to Serbia. Several waves of popular transfer are projected. In the first wave (up to 5 July 1941), 5,000 Slovenes – among them intellectuals and politically ‘dubious’ elements – are to be expelled from Styria to Serbia. As for Catholic priests, they will be settled in Croatia in the place of the Orthodox priests expelled to Serbia. In the second wave, 25,000 Slovenes sent to Styria since 1914 are to be settled in Croatia between 10 July and 30 August 1941. At the same time, an identical number of Serbs is to be transferred to Serbia (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenta, 1993, 78-81). The third wave anticipates the expulsion of 65,000 Slovenes from Lower Styria and 80,000 from Carinthia to Croatia, from 15 September to 31 October 1941. At the same time, 30,000 Serbs are to be transferred to Serbia.**

18 June: The first concentration camp complex is established in the Independent State of Croatia at Gospić, where mass crimes will be committed. The Gospić prison receives many people from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of the prisoners are sent to a labor camp (Ovčara), not far from Gospić. The bulk of the prisoners are transferred to the camps of Jadovno (the Velebit region) and Slano on the island of Pag. From mid-July to the end of August, thousands of people perish in them (Mataušić, 2003: 24).***

23 June: In the villages of Popovo Polje situated in the Ljubinje district, ustaše forces arrest 200 Serbs and throw them into the Ržani Do crevasse, near the village of Kotez (Hercegovina u NOB, 1961: 43). The victims are peasants caught in an ambush in their fields. Out of 167 people, only three are able to escape from the grave (Hercegovina u NOB, 1961: 124).*

22 July: On the orders of Ljubomir Kvaternik, brother of Slavko Kvaternik, head of the armed forces of the Independent State of Croatia, the Serbs of Bihać and its environs are arrested and imprisoned. On 23 July, they are led to the plateau of Čeravci, two kilometers from Bihać, having been led to believe that they were setting off to work in Germany. Stripped, they are shot and, in some cases, have their throats cut. The bodies are then thrown into graves that had already been dug, as well as into the small River Klokot. This scenario is repeated several times in late July and during August. A subsequent document of the War Crimes Commission of the Yugoslav state refers to 10-12,000 victims in this sector (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenta, 1993: 983).*

24-25 July: More than 1,200 Serbs are arrested in the village of Banski Grabovac near Petrinja, following acts of resistance by Serbian peasants in arms. Around 800 of them are shot on the spot and buried in communal graves near the station of Banski Grabovac. The other people arrested are taken to the camp of Jadovno, situated near Gospić, where they too are killed (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenta, 1993: 380-383). Under the command of Miro Matijević, the Orthodox population of Kulen Vakuf and its environs is exterminated from 25 July onwards. The number of victims of violence by ustaše forces in this locality and its immediate environs is estimated at around 4,500.*
27 July: In the commune of Petrovo Selo (Lika region), *ustaše* forces under the command of Petar Šimić conscript around 250 people supposedly to send them to work in Germany. They are imprisoned and suffer serious torture in the prison of Petrovo Selo. The following day, 204 of them are transported to Bihać (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and 46 towards Prijepolje, where they are killed and thrown into a ravine. The people in the first group are killed at Bihać on 28 July (Vezmar, 2004: 102). On 29 July, a second group of Serbs is arrested: 155 of them are killed the same evening after having suffered tortured (Vezmar, 2004: 103).**

On the orders of Ljubomir Kvaternik, the Serbs of Bosanska Krupa and its immediate environs are arrested and killed in that town. The victims are subjected to cruel physical assaults and then stripped of their valuables, before dying a painful death (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom rata: zbornik dokumenta, 1993: 989).**

29 July: The first mass crimes against the Serbs of Volika Kladuša occur in the environs of this locality, under the Ičungar Hill where anti-tank trenches are situated. The Serbs are killed by automatic weapons and also with knives. These massacres take place over several days under the orders of the *ustaša* officer Vidaković. The number of victims is estimated at more than 4,000 (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenata, 1993: 990).**

30 July: Hundreds of Serbs (approximately 900) are killed by *ustaše* forces in the locality of Glina, in the Serbian Orthodox Church which has been transformed into a detention centre (Zečević and Popović, 1996: 236-237).***

31 July: On the orders of Ljubomir Kvaternik sent to the *ustaša* officer Ale Omanović, Serbs are arrested in the Cazin district. On 2 August, the prisoners are killed and slaughtered in their hundreds, women and children included. Several hundred are taken to the slaughter site of Garavica in the environs of Bihać (Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenta, 1993: 1015).**

23 August: The first detainees, mainly Serbs and Jews, arrive in the camp of Jasenovac. The Gospić and Velebit camps having been closed at Italy’s request, the prisoners are transferred to the Jasenovac camp. The latter is composed of two parts: the Krapje camp (camp I), built on marshy ground, and the Bročice camp (camp II). In October 1941, the two camps contain 4-5,000 prisoners. The flooding of camps I and II prompts the transfer of the prisoners to the *Ciglana* camp (‘polisher’), or camp III, from 14-16 November 1941. There are only around 1,500 (Mataušić, 2003: 35-36), a number of them having been killed in late October–early November. For over 60 years attempts have been made to establish or estimate the number of victims in this concentration camp complex. The figures vary from a few thousand to 700,000 or even 1 million dead. According to the inventory, probably incomplete, of victims of the Second World War carried out in 1964 by the Yugoslav Federal Bureau of Statistic, it is possible to establish a list 72,193 victims (33,860 men, 19,327 women and 19,006 children), of whom 40,251 were Serbs, 14,750 Roma, 11,723 Jews, 3,583 Croats, 1,063 Muslims, and so on (Smreka, 2007: 7-10).***

5-20 December: Serbian *četnici* enter the town of Foča following an agreement made with the Italian army, which held the town until 4 December. Under the orders of the commander Sergije Mihajlović, the *četnici* kill approximately 300 Muslims in Foča itself, as well as several hundred others in the neighboring districts of Goražde, Višegrad and Čajniča. In Foča, the victims are taken to the bridge across the Drina, where their throats are cut and their bodies thrown into the river (Dizdar and Sobolevski, 1999: 249-250).**

1942; 15 August: Detachments of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland (JUVO, also known as the Ravna Gora Movement) take the town of Foča, situated in eastern Bosnia. A report signed by Petar Bačović and Dobrosav Jevdević to their superiors mentions more than 300 women and children killed by the *četnici* (Dizdar and Sobolevski, 1999: 311).**

V. Serbia
1941; 21 October: German forces are under orders to crush the insurgents, who control numerous localities in Serbia. The task is entrusted to General Franz Böhme who, from 22 September–December 1941, will succeed in militarily defeating the forces of the communist resistance and the royalist forces of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland, causing the deaths of around 26,000 people in the process. Among these mass crimes, those committed at Kragujevac on 21 October 1941 occupy a special place on account of the number of victims and the modus operandi. Having suffered losses during clashes with the forces of the communist partisans and the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland on 16 October 1941, reprisals are ordered (Petranović, 1992: 264). On 19 October 1941, several hundred peasants are executed in the villages around Kragujevac. On 20 October, hundreds of men are arrested in the town itself. They are shot on the 21st between 07.00 hrs and 14.00 hrs. Among the victims are several hundred of the town’s secondary school pupils. These operations are supported by Dimitrije Ljotić’s Serbian Volunteer Corps, formed in September 1941 and linked to the political organization ZBOR. According to German sources, 2,300 are shot. Official communist historiography refers to 7,000 victims. Kragujevac’s Memorial Museum of 21 October lists 2,797 victims executed and 61 survivors (Brkić, 2007: 214).***

9-30 October: 2,200 Jews and Roma are killed by the German occupation forces. These mass executions occur at a time when the insurrection against the occupation forces is spreading through western Serbia. The order to shoot 2,100 prisoners from the concentration camps of Šaba and Belgrade is given by the German military command following the death of 21 German soldiers. Between 9 and 11 October 1941, 449 people are shot. On 12 and 13 October, 868 Jews and Roma are killed. According to the police authorities, 2,200 Serbs and Jews are killed in the course of these reprisals (Koljanin, 1992: 39). From 27-30 October 1941, new executions are organized targeting Jews and Roma. In total, the number of male Jewish victims over the age of fourteen is estimated at 5,000. The aim of the German authorities was to exterminate Jewish and Roma men and detain women and children in camps. The place selected for the detention of these thousands of people is the Belgrade Exhibition Park (Beogradsko sajmište), situated in a suburb of the Serbian capital at Zemun, a locality that had been attached to the Independent State of Croatia. Up to 15 December 1941, 5,281 people, Jews and Roma, are interned in the camp called Judenlager Semlin (Koljanin, 1992: 58). According to the calculations of the German command in Belgrade, 20,149 are executed in Serbia between 1 September 1941 and 12 February 1942 (Petranović, 1992: 330).***

21-28 January: Following attacks by communist partisans in the south of Bačka, the Hungarian army undertakes an operation supervised by Lieutenant-General Ferenc Feketehalmi-Czydner to ‘cleanse’ the Šajkaška region and its localities – Titel, Žabalj, Novi Sad and Srbobran – of communist insurgents. Between 21 and 23 January, 879 people are killed in Novi Sad. In the course of these days, hundreds of people are arrested and driven by lorry to the banks of the Danube, where they are thrown into the icy river. These atrocities shocked some of Hungary’s leaders and a trial was organized in Budapest between 14 and 23 December 1943. It mainly involved non-commissioned officers, since the main perpetrators were neither heard nor pursued (Klajn, 1991: 202-208). According to the indictment of the Military Tribunal, the number of civilian victims was as high as 3,309, including 147 minors. However, according to the post-war Yugoslav authorities, and more particularly the Commission to Establish the Crimes of the Occupier and its Collaborators of the autonomous Province of Voivodina, the estimated number of victims was 4,000.**

March: In the first half of March, the decision is taken in the German security apparatus in Berlin to kill all the Jews still in Serbia. To this end, two SS non-commissioned officers, Goetz and Meyer, are sent to Belgrade with a special lorry of the Saurer brand name, equipped to cause death by asphyxiation with carbon monoxide gas. The enterprise of destroying Jews by this means begins with the patients, personal care assistants and doctors of the hospital of Belgrade’s Jewish community, situated in the Dorćol district. Between 19 and 22 March, 700-800 Jews are asphyxiated in the special lorry. Once the method has been tried and tested, the operation continues with the Jews of the Zemun camp, numbering 5,293 detainees as of 31 March 1942 (Koljanin, 1992: 124). Between the beginning of April and 10 May 1942, all of these people are killed. The person in charge of Jewish issues in the German Foreign Ministry, Fritz Rademacher, declares in a memorandum dated 29 May 1942 that the Jewish question is no longer pertinent in Serbia. In sum, the number of Jews killed in this camp is estimated at 7-11,000 (Koljanin, 1992: 127-128).***
VI. Yugoslavia and the Second World War: 1943-1945

The start of 1943 was marked by two consecutive German operations aimed at destroying the partisan army. The latter succeeding in breaking out of its encirclement during two battles, on the Neretva in March and the Sutjeska in June. Severely shaken, but not broken, the army of the partisans re-crossed Bosnia from west to east, reaching the confines of Montenegro. Italy’s capitulation in September 1943 enabled the partisans to recover a significant amount of war material. On 29 November 1943, the second session of the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation (AVNOJ) took place at Jajce. It was intended to be a political forum representing the Yugoslavia engaged in the anti-fascist struggle. A National Committee, a kind of provisional government headed by Tito, was set up. The principle of the federal organization of the future Yugoslavia was proclaimed.

In 1944, the defeat of the Third Reich seemed assured and the partisans continued to consolidate their positions, extending their control over Macedonia. At the end of September 1944, the Red Army reached the Yugoslav border on the Danube and linked up with partisan units. Belgrade was liberated on 20 October 1944. The Serbian and Croatian forces that had supported the puppet regimes and fought the communist partisans fled towards Slovenian and Austrian territory, followed by civilians. It was not until May 1945 that the western part of Yugoslavia was liberated.

Yugoslavia was one of the European countries hardest hit by the world war. As early as spring 1945, the Yugoslav federal authorities announced a figure of 1.7 million war victims, which was repeated during the Peace Conference of 1946 (it included the 305,000 victims of the National Liberation Army). In 1947, the Yugoslav Federal Bureau, in accordance with the assessment by Vladeta Vučković, provided an identical figure, but relative to total demographic losses (natural deaths, deferred births, killed, disappeared) and not solely people killed during the conflict (Kočović, 1999: 8-14). Nevertheless, this figure was adopted in communist historiography and the discourse of the political authorities for several decades. It was from the mid-1980s that debates on the victims of the Second World War emerged in the public sphere. The official figures were challenged in the works of Bogoljub Kočović (Kočović, 1985) and Vladimir Žerjavić, an economist from Zagreb and expert at the United Nations (Žerjavić, 1989). Basing themselves on the pre-war demographic data and projected developments between 1941 and 1945, as well as the 1948 census, the two authors arrived at roughly proximate figures – respectively, 1,014,000 killed (demographic losses assessed at 1,985,000) and 1,027,000 killed (demographic losses assessed at 1,696,000).

VII. Serbia/Montenegro/Bosnia

10 January: The commander of the četnici units of Lim and Sandžak, Pavle I. Djurišić, reports to chief of staff Draža Mihailović that the recent action of his men in the Plevlje, Sjenica, Peć and Kolašin sectors, comprising 33 villages, has resulted in the death of ‘around 400 Muslims’, as well as ‘1,000 women and children’. All the villages in question have been razed to the ground (Dedijer and Miletić, 1990: 299-302).

7 February: In a report dated 13 February and addressed to chief of staff Draža Mihailović, Pavle I. Djurišić, commander of the četnici units of Lim and Sandžak, indicates that ‘the action against the Muslims in the districts of Plevlje, Čajniča and Foća has been carried out’ on 7 February 1941. He specifies that ‘the Muslim population has been completely destroyed’ during this operation. He refers to 1,200 deaths among the Muslim fighters and ‘8,000 victims among the women, elderly and children’ (Dedijer and Miletić, 1990: 329-333). The number of victims of the anti-Muslim operations conducted by the forces of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland between January and February 1943 is estimated at 10,000 (Tomasevich, 1975: 258).

3 November: Red Army troops enter Voivodina, in the north of Serbia, in October 1944. They reached Novi Sad on 22 October. Communist partisans gradually take power in the neighboring localities. On 3 November, 122 Hungarian men from the village of Bezdan are led to a farm away from the market town. They are then shot by communist partisans (Cseres, 1993: 39-42). From late October 1944 to early 1945, thousands of people are killed by the Yugoslav National Liberation Army in a spirit of revenge. Estimates of the number of victims vary from 20-50,000. In February 2009, the
leaders of the Hungarian political parties of Voivodina addressed the highest authorities of the state of Serbia to demand a serious inquiry into these crimes.**

VIII. The Independent State of Croatia/Slovenia

1945; 14 May: On 6 May 1945, Ante Pavelić [3] and his troops, accompanied by numerous civilians, leave Zagreb for Slovenia and Austria in the wake of the retreating German troops. Other armed forces that had collaborated with the occupiers (Serbian četnici, Serbian Volunteer Corps, etc.) take part in this exodus, or a total of 400,000 soldiers if German units are included (Jelić-Butić, 1977: 309-310). Encircled by the Yugoslav army controlled by communist partisans in the Dravograd region, several thousand Croatian soldiers and civilians manage to cross the border with Austria and surrender to the Allied forces under British command in the Bleiburg region. The bulk of the Croatian troops and other formations that had collaborated (Serbian četnici, Slovenian domobranci, etc.) are taken prisoner by Tito’s Yugoslav army, or more than 120,000 people (Jurčević, 2005: 363). However, the British forces decide to hand over the totality of these refugees, numbering around 70,000 people (Jurčević, 2005: 233), to the new Yugoslav authorities. These tens of thousands of people are then escorted by members of the Yugoslav Army to prison camps in the direction of Croatia. But on this ‘station of the cross’, as Croatian witnesses or actors in these events have called it, thousands of soldiers and civilians are killed by Yugoslav Army forces in numerous places (Kočevski Rog, Maribor, Celje, environs of Zagreb, etc.). In the territory of Slovenia, around 400 mass graves have been counted (Corsellis and Ferrar, 2005: 202). Depending on the source, the number of victims varies from 50-140,000, or even more (Nikolić, 1998: 99; Geiger, 2009: 340).***

May: Concentration camps are set up near Osijek in Josipovac and Valpovo for the Germans of Slavonia, Srem and Baranja. More than 3,000 people are interned in May 1945 in the camp of Josipovac, before being expelled to Austria. Thousands of Germans expelled to Austria are returned to Yugoslavia by the Allied forces. From August 1945, the camps of Valpovo and Krndija become the main internment centers for Germans in Croatia. Out of 20,000 Germans from Croatia, 10-18,000 were interned in camps, where several thousand of them lost their lives, including a high proportion of children and women (Geiger, 2008: 20). They mainly died from hunger and illness (typhus, dysentery, etc.) and, to a lesser extent, after suffering physical violence. According to the Yugoslav Interior Ministry, 117,485 German were detained in camps as of 18 January 1946 (Geiger, 2008: 23).**

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