Gacko massacre, June 1941

A. Context

As a result of the invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941 and the subsequent capitulation on 17 April, Serbia proper was placed under direct German occupation, while Bulgaria received the bulk of present-day Macedonia and smaller sections of Serbia. Bačka, in northern Serbia, was apportioned to Hungary, while Italian-dominated Albania received westernmost Macedonia and Kosovo, south of Mitrovica. The power struggle between Italy and Germany permeated much of the negotiations regarding the dismantling of Yugoslavia’s western regions. Slovenia was split between Italy and Germany, meaning that southern Carinthia and Styria were the only parts of Yugoslavia to be included in Germany’s Lebensraum. Germany’s negative response to Italy’s extensive demands on Croatian territory was facilitated by the Italian army’s poor performance in Greece the year before, but also by Hitler’s final decision to create the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH) in order to pacify the remaining territories. The NDH roughly consisted of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (excluding Dalmatia and including all of Syrmia)1. Due to Germany’s political support for Zagreb, the Italians in the end only managed to incorporate a few islands and, most notably, large sections of northern Dalmatia, including Split (for details, see Rodonog 2006; Steinberg 1991; Olshausen 1973; van Creveld 1973; Pavlowitch 2008). Nevertheless, the Italians did manage to retain considerable political and military influence in the NDH through the 18 May 1941 Rome Agreement. This agreement divided the Italian sector west of an Italo-German demarcation line into three zones; the first included the territories annexed by Italy (most notably Dalmatia); the second covered a region where the NDH authorities were not allowed to keep any military or security forces; and the third was only temporarily controlled by Italy until the forces of the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH) were able to take responsibility for security. The existence of these zones was of crucial importance for Gacko municipality, since it was located in zone III, very close to the zone II border (Tomasevich 2001, 237).

B. Decision-making

Within a fortnight of the establishment of the NDH, the Ustašas and their Poglavnik (“leader”) Ante Pavlić adopted racial laws modelled on the Nuremberg Laws, targeting the Jewish and Roma communities. Soon, however, protests emerged among Bosnian Muslims, who became disquieted when settled (gurbeti) Roma were arrested by the authorities (Lengel-Krizman 2003: 37). Some of them had assimilated with the Muslim population, and it was difficult for locals to distinguish them from other Muslims. In order to calm the situation, the authorities in Zagreb instructed Hakija Hadžić, the Commissioner for Sarajevo and “former Drina Banovina (district in interwar Yugoslavia)” to come up with a solution to the problem. Following consultations, Hadžić argued that the settled Roma should be exempted from racial persecution, which was only to affect the migrant (ćergaši) Roma (HR HDA 223/25/21868).

The racial laws did not apply to Serbs, meaning that they were not excluded on the basis of their race, but on their allegedly inferior “eastern” culture. This is an important difference, since it meant that Serbs could at least theoretically avoid persecution by converting to Catholicism or by fleeing to German-occupied Serbia proper (Dulić 2005, 93–94). Such an option was never present for the Jews or Roma, since their blood, according to Ustaša racial ideology, could not be allowed to “defile” the Croatian “national body”.

The Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, were assimilated into the Croatian nation in a form of “benevolent assimilation”. This was based on the idea that Muslims were descendants of the Croatian medieval nobility and were therefore the genetically purest Croats (Tomasevich 2001:...
In order to secure the loyalty of the Muslims, the Ustašas promised to reverse the effects of the agrarian reform of the 1920s, which in Bosnia almost exclusively affected the Muslims, since they made up the vast majority of the landholding elite. This inclusive policy in respect to Islam was important, since it enabled the Ustašas to claim that a majority of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina was actually Croatian (see Pavelić 1941, 13).

The preparatory phase of the Ustaša attack on the Serbian community began in the first weeks and months of the existence of the NDH, when the authorities initiated a propaganda campaign that served the purpose of identifying the new enemies of the state. Sometimes, the exclusion went along the “racial scientific” argument that one had to protect oneself from the uncivilised traits of a “serbdom” that carried a specific “Serbian soul” emanating from centuries of “bad breeding” (Hrvatski narod, 31 July 1941). Mostly, however, the Ustašas depicted the Serbs as threats to the existence of a Croatian state or as obstacles that had to be removed if that nation was to enjoy a utopian future existence as part of the European “community of nations”. On 3 June, for instance, Minister of the Legislative Committee Milovan Žanić said that all means would be used to “make this country truly Croatian and cleanse it from the Serbs who have threatened us for centuries and would threaten us at the first opportunity” (Hrvatski Narod, 3 June 1941). At the height of the second wave of terror in late July, Foreign Minister Mladen Lorković specified that “the Croatian nation needs to be cleansed from all the elements which are a misfortune for that nation, who are alien and foreign in that nation, who dissolve the healthy strength of that nation, who for decades have been pushing that nation from one disaster to another; those [elements] are our Serbs and our Jews (Hrvatski narod, 28 July 1941; for more on NDH propaganda, see Ademović 2000).”

Apart from preparing the ground for persecution through identification and stigmatisation of the targeted minorities, the Ustašas established a number of governmental bodies that were charged with overseeing the nationalisation of Serbian property and the deportation of Serbs to Serbia proper. For the latter purpose, the Ustašas also reached an agreement with Nazi Germany in early June on the deportation of some 200,000 NDH Serbs – particularly priests, administrators and other members of the elite – to Serbia proper in exchange for an equivalent number of Slovenes, whom the Nazis wanted to deport from German-occupied Slovenia in order to create “living space” for German nationals (Zbornik DNOR 1973, doc. 58).

The “Aryanisation” of the economy and the public space was organised and carried out by the Office for Economic Revision, the Office for Colonisation and the Office for Nationalised Property. These administrative bodies acted in conjunction with the adoption of a number of legal decrees and orders, which gave the looting a semblance of legality (Kisić-Kolanović 1998). Moreover, the state institutions had access to various military and security bodies while carrying out the deportations, such as the Office for Public Order and Security (RAVSIGUR) and the Ustaša Supervisory Service (UNS). Finally, the Ustašas established a network of concentration camps throughout the NDH, which were run by Vjekoslav Luburić and Section III within the UNS. The first major camps were created in Jastrebarsko, Sisak, Gospić and Krušćica in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Peršen 1990). Following the Italian re-occupation of the littoral in August, however, the authorities had to close down the Gospić concentration camp and replace it with a new compound in the small town of Jasenovac, 150 kilometres southeast of Zagreb. The Jasenovac concentration camp soon became the primary killing ground for NDH Jews, Roma, tens of thousands of Serbs and a large number of Croatian and Muslim anti-fascists (Mataušić 2003; Dedić 1987; Miletić 1986-87).

The Ustaša armed forces consisted of the Domobranstvo (regular armed forces equivalent to the Wehrmacht in Nazi Germany) and the Ustaša Corps (political armed force equivalent to the Waffen-SS). Consequently, there existed a parallel line of command in the NDH, meaning that the officers of the Domobranservo did not command the Ustaša units (for more on the military organisations, see Jug 2004). These separate lines of command continued all the way up to the Ustaša Headquarters (Glavni ustaški stan, GUS) and the High Command of the Ustaša Corps (Glavni stožer ustaške vojnica). However, the GUS was never formally constituted, which means that it was Pavelić personally who became the leader of the Ustaška vojnica. At the same time, a large portion of executive powers lay in the hands of Eugen “Dido” Kvarternik, who headed the Directorate for Public Order and Security (Ravnateljstvo za javni red i sigurnost, RAVSIGUR) as well as the Ustaša
C. Local perpetrators

The signing of the Rome Agreement on 18 May 1941 and the subsequent withdrawal of Italian forces from zone III was immediately followed by the arrival of Ustaša units, who began the work of taking over the local administration. In Gacko municipality on the border with Montenegro, they prolonged the mandate of the acting municipal head, Josip Rom. The first enrolments into the new state administration followed. They included, among others, Hasan Čustović, the head of the post office, municipal official Mahmud Čampara, and business owners such as Džemo Tanović, Mustafa Hasanbegović and Omer Kapetanović, in other words members of the upper strata of the local Muslim community (AS G-2, f. 6, Bumbić, 6). Even so, violence did not break out until the arrival of Herman Tongl and a group of 15 other Ustašas from outside. Tongl immediately began his work on the organisation of a local Ustaša command in Gacko, headed by Ćustović. Subsequently, they began to “mobilise homeless and failed individuals from the Muslim part of the population into their ranks by promising them rewards” (AJ 110-493, fol. 434).

Tongl also organised a meeting with the Muslims in a local hotel, which has come to represent a key event in the historical narrative about the killings in Gacko. He provided the participants with an historical exposé, during which he allegedly said that the time had come for the Muslims – who for the first time were informed about their allegedly privileged position in the NDH – to take power in the region. Most notably, he said that Muslim landholdings were to be returned and that mosques were to be built in villages such as Kazanci and Korita. He then ended his speech by arguing that all Serbs had to be killed, “the last bullet for the last Serb” (AJ 110-493, fol. 445–6, inv. br. 55.695). An elderly Muslim objected and said that such deeds could not succeed. According to Džubur – who is the only source to provide names and details regarding the meeting itself – he also pointed out that Muslims and Serbs had lived together in the area for centuries, and that they had always paid dearly for the inter-ethnic strife that outsiders had prodded them into. Džubur also claims that “many of those present agreed with old Hamid, although they did not have the courage to say so publicly in front of the men of might, behind whom the authority and mighty Germany stood” (Džubur 1986, 358).

D. Victims and the killing process

Following the speech in Gacko, Tongl continued his journey to nearby Avtovac, where he gave a similar speech and organised an Ustaša command for northern Herzegovina under the leadership of Tanović. Upon his return on 2 June, he issued an order to the population of the villages Korita and Zagradci, according to which all men above 15 years of age were to report in person at the Sokol Society building in Stepn. There they would be issued with passports in order to be able to cross the border into Montenegro, while those who failed to attend would be executed or punished by deportation (AJ 110-493/56.223).

This important order placed the locals in a difficult situation, since they had to choose between abiding by the orders of an authority that must have appeared malevolent, or to remain at home and face the consequences of disobeying official regulations. At this stage of the killing process, the Ustašas had not yet committed any massacres in the region, which probably influenced the majority of Serbs to yield to their demands. Consequently, all Serbs – save a few who fled into the mountains – let themselves be imprisoned (some were brought in under Ustaša escort) (AJ 110-493/56.223).

Most of the prisoners – totalling well over 100 individuals – were placed in the Sokol Society building,
while another group of 12 individuals were incarcerated in the nearby school. The prisoners were locked up for two days, which means they had time to evaluate and consider their options. At this point, the younger prisoners became suspicious, which resulted in a difference of opinion as to what one should do:

The younger men suggested that one should try to escape, because they understood that the Ustašas were preparing a massacre, but the older men were against it and suggested that one should keep calm and await further orders, since they strongly believed that there would be no massacre, but that in the worst case they might be sent to internment camps. They motivated their position with the argument that if they escaped, the Ustašas would have a reason to burn their homes and destroy their families, and that if they stayed they could be sent on internment and nothing else (AS/G2/f. 6/Stolac/Bumbić, 1).

The reason why the older prisoners decided to await further orders is to be found in a combination of stress, the perceived incongruity between resistance and security for family members, the fact that relatives were allowed to hand over food parcels, as well as the soothing message conveyed by the guards that “they were waiting for an Ustaša legal commission that would conduct interrogations” (AJ 110-493/56.223).

On 4 June, Tongl arrived in Korita with a group of 30 Ustašas. Instead of initiating inquiries, he simply informed the prisoners that the authorities had decided to send them on forced labour to Germany because they had been found guilty of hiding weapons, and because they did not “accept” the NDH authorities (AJ 110-493/56.223). What happened next was described in detail by Obren Nosović. The prisoners, numbering some 170 individuals, were first brought to a neighbouring room, where the Ustašas tied them together at the wrists in parties of two to three individuals. After that, they were loaded onto a lorry and driven to the Golubnjača limestone pit near Kobilja Glava:

When we arrived by car to the pit, the Ustašas – there were 100-200 of them there and I could not recognise them since it was dark – began to unload us from the car, after which every group of two, three people were brought to the pit, where they started shooting at us with their weapons, beating us with poles, cudgels, axes and picks. When they saw that those brought to the pit were dead, they pushed them inside with the poles. When I, Nosović Obren, was brought to the pit, tied to Krsto Svorcan, someone fired a rifle shot from a distance of two to three steps. Krsto Svorcan immediately fell down dead and pulled me unharmed with him. Since I did not utter a sound, the Ustašas, probably thinking we were both dead, pushed Krsto Svorcan and me into the pit with a pole. (…) During the fall with Krsto Svorcan, I landed on top of him and the already dead people, thanks to which I only broke a rib on my left side (AJ 110-493/56.223).

As we can see from the statement, the majority of victims do not appear to have tried to run for their lives and only one prisoner actually escaped from the scene. Nosović hid deep inside the pit and lived through a horrific experience as corpses kept falling through its entrance almost until dawn. According to his statement, other victims who survived the fall began moaning with pain. As a result, the Ustašas threw hand grenades into the pit before covering the entrance up with branches and leaves. Unfortunately, one of the victims died of his wounds within two hours of being saved by Serbian peasants living in the vicinity on 7 June (AJ 110-493/56.223).

The massacres in Gacko municipality did not only affect Korita and Stepen, but several other nearby villages and most of eastern Herzegovina (except Bileća, where local Muslims interceded on the behalf of their neighbours). As a result of the demographic structure of this Serbian-dominated region and its relative proximity to Montenegro, the initial massacres almost immediately provoked a rebellion that was first organised by Orthodox priest Radojica Perišić (who later became the commander of a Serbian nationalist Četnik unit). The first clashes between Ustaša patrols and locals occurred in the area of the Kurdulija bratstvo (clan), when gendarmerie stations in Jasen, Kazanci and Stepen were taken, only to be recaptured by the Ustašas within a couple of days. In order to
dissuade the locals from participating in the rebellion, the Ustašas responded by arresting some 200-250 prominent Serbs from Gacko and Avtovac. Most of them were released on 8 June, except for a group of 20 individuals including Orthodox priests Novak Mastilović and Špiro Starović (Starović was later found dead in Avtovac prison with a horseshoe nailed to his chest) (AVII, ANDH/143/6/1-1).

These arrests in Gacko municipality were not a spur-of-the-moment event; neither were they otherwise expressions of “Balkan hatreds” or irrational vengeance. Instead, they followed previous orders by the authorities, which were to be employed in the case of armed resistance to state authority. The orders stipulated, among other things, that in the case of rebellion, Ustaša and gendarmerie units should retaliate by arresting prominent members of the local Serbian communities, who were to be held hostage until the rebels ceased their activities. If the rebels refused to lay down their arms, the authorities should execute the hostages and take new ones as replacements (Zločini NDH, doc. 43). The link between macro-level decision-making and local events is further corroborated by the presence of Jure Francetić, the Ustaša appointee for Bosnia and Herzegovina and later the legendary commander of the infamous Black Legion. After arriving in Avtovac and Gacko on 9 June in order to acquaint himself with the reasons for the deteriorating security situation, he ordered the execution of the prisoners “because the rebels did not want to surrender and in order thus to influence them [to do so]” (Zločini NDH, doc. 61).

There is neither the space nor the necessity here to provide an overview of all or even the majority of the mass killings perpetrated in eastern Herzegovina during the summer of 1941. What needs to be understood is that the killings peaked once again during the period from the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June to 28 June (St Vitus’s Day, honoured by Serbs in commemoration of their defeat at the hands of the Ottoman at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389), due to the fact that rumours had developed that there would be a general Serbian uprising on that day.

D. Aftermath

As a result of the rebellion that followed the massacres, the magnitude of the killings in Gacko and Avtovac did not reach the levels experienced by some of the other municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the summer of 1941. According to a 1964 survey of the war dead, the total death toll for the war reached 1,367 individuals. Notwithstanding the fact that one would need to add those victims that the survey failed to reach (according to the report, the commission only managed to cover 56-59 percent of those that were to be included), the death toll in Gacko probably did not reach more than 2,400 “victims of fascism” (the survey did not include četniks, ustašas and other “quislings”). This would amount to an estimated 13.8 percent of the population in 1941 (Dulić 2005, 318), which, although considerably lower than in many other localities, was extremely high compared with the average death toll in Europe during the Second World War.

Apart from the rebellion, one can also find the reason for the lower magnitude of destruction in the fact that Muslims sometimes interceded with the authorities on behalf of the Serbs. This was for instance done in Avtovac, but the rebels unfortunately did not reciprocate when capturing the town on 28 June. In a report by the NDH gendarmerie, it is mentioned that the 250-man-strong garrison in Avtovac had to abandon the town when it was attacked by a thousand rebels. After capturing the town, the rebels “began looting and killing those civilians that had previously not been evacuated” (AVII, ANDH/143a/4/2-1, Skoko 2000, 151). It is unclear exactly how many people Muslims were killed, and the figures range from 11 to 30.

The attack on Avtovac also heralded a completely new turn of events that brings us back to the place of the very first killings in the district. A day before the attack, a detachment of Italian Blackshirts and the 55th Regiment of the Second Army’s “Murge” Division were ambushed by rebels at Kobilja Glava, at the cost of several Italian lives. Instead of being able to celebrate their achievement, however, the rebels found themselves in a confusing situation when the priest Perišić arrived and ordered the peasants to lay down their arms and hand over captured prisoners (AVII,
The underlying reason for Perišić’s intervention was that he had already had his first contacts with Alessandro Lusana (AJ 110/493/60789, 3), an Italian intelligence officer who wanted to exploit inter-ethnic hostilities to the benefit of Italy’s demands on Croatian territory (which resulted in the re-occupation of zone III in early September 1941).

The contacts between Perišić and Lusana are important, since they heralded events that were to come. Once full-scale rebellion broke out in the summer and autumn, the Italians sought to drive a wedge into the insurrection by exploiting political and ideological differences that existed between the communist People’s Liberation Movement (Narodnooslobodilački pokret, NOP) under Josip Broz “Tito” and various Serbian nationalist Četnik organisations. Most important among these were the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland (JVUO) under the leadership of Dragoljub “Draža” Mihailović, which in late 1941 was accepted as the legal military representative of the government-in-exile in London. Underlying conflicts pertaining to ideology and military tactics eventually resulted in clashes. After the outbreak of open conflict in early 1942, the JVUO gradually embarked on a process of “tactical” collaboration with the axis forces, and in particular the Italians. By mid-1942, the cooperation resulted in the official establishment of the Militari Volontari Anticommunista (MVAC), which consisted of Četniks who preferred to acquire a “legal” status than to fight as roving rebels (Rodogno 2006, 303). While the communists and JVUO had no influence on the events in June 1941 (at the time, the JVUO consisted of a very small group of rebels in Serbia, while the communists did not initiate their rebellion until the second half of July), collaboration eventually added yet another dimension to the complexity of the conflict.

E. Memories and the Nationalist Reinterpretation of the Recent Past

The events in Gacko municipality became symbols of Ustaša violence in the 1980s, which has to do with the fact that it was the first major rebellion that even preceded the “official” communist uprisings in July. Apart from printed collections of witness statements, Vuk Drašković’s bestselling novel The Knife (Nož) stands out as particularly important. The plot centres on a mix-up with dire long-term consequences, when a Serbian boy survives the massacre of the Jugović family on Orthodox Christmas (7 January) 1942. The boy is handed over by the Ustašas to the Muslim Osmanović family, who actually perpetrated the massacre of his relatives. He thus comes to live under the name Alija in complete oblivion of his origins until adulthood. Alija thus comes to symbolise a modern-day “janissary”, who, after realising his origin, contemplates seeking revenge upon his own family. Here, the author alludes to commonly held views of Bosniaks as apostates of Christianity.

Trtak (2003) has shown that Drašković’s classification of individuals and events emphasise a collectivistic view of the ethnic communities. As an example, Drašković depicts Croatian and Muslim perpetrators as individuals who take great pleasure in macabre atrocities, while Serbs are presented as strong freedom fighters who meet death without fear. However, the narrator also points to the futility of revenge in the story of Milan, who felt remorse over causing the death of the murderer of his family. After being ridiculed for his regrets by Alija, Milan replies that justice and revenge are pointless if they can only be achieved through crime.

Drašković’s book contributed to the national mobilisation 1980s, although it is difficult to say much about its impact on public opinion. It is probably more useful to view his work as an expression of nationalist sentiments that emerged alongside the gradual delegitimisation of the official master narrative about the partisan struggle, which accompanied the fall of communism in the 1990s. As a result of a “maximalist” reinterpretation of history that fed on the apparent “lies” of the official historiography, former “heroes” became villains, while those that had been defined as “traitors”
became the heroes of the day. Drašković, who became one of the most important politicians during the war, at least in part adhered to this view and gave it a literary form, which is evident from the comparisons between the intra-Serb conflicts during the Second World War and the divisions and betrayal of the Kosovo myth. More often, however, he simply ignored the communists, and when he did refer to them always did it in a negative light. Thus, he moved the communists from the forefront of the Yugoslav historical narrative to the background of the Serbian one. In the process, he appears to have made use of the type of “family narrative” that was probably handed down to him by relatives (his father joined the Partisans in 1942) and friends from the Gacko of his childhood.

E. References


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1. The term Independent State of Croatia is sometimes abbreviated to ISC, while some authors simply refer to “Croatia”. This might be confusing, since much of the violence actually occurred in present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this article, I use NDH, which is the most commonly used abbreviation in scholarly literature.

2. The choice of “Jugović” as surname for the Serbian family plays a particularly important role in this context, since it invokes a symbolic connection to the nine Jugović brothers that died during the battle in the Field of Blackbirds (Kosovo Polje) in 1389.

3. Drašković was born in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina in 1946, but his parents...
were settlers from the area of Gacko in eastern Herzegovina. Shortly after his birth, the family went back to eastern Herzegovina and Drašković finished high school in Gacko.