

The Independent State of Croatia 1941–45

Edited by
Sabrina P. Ramet

The Independent State of Croatia 1941–45

The Independent State of Croatia 1941–45 contains important new scholarship from a variety of perspectives on the structure, ideology and political history of the central fascist group in interwar and World War II Yugoslavia, the Croatian Ustasa.

This book represents the first study in English to closely explore the Ustasa's Independent State of Croatia between 1941 and 1945, a period when it was active collaborator with nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. By using the top scholars in the field to explore the nature of the NDH, this book contributes to scholarly understandings of Croatian nationalism, Balkan politics, European fascism, and genocide in World War II.

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The NDH – An Introduction

SABRINA P. RAMET

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

The Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska, NDH) lasted barely four years, from its proclamation on 10 April 1941 to the entry of Partisan forces into Zagreb on 8 May 1945. During those four years, the Ustasa Party that ruled the NDH conducted a savage policy aimed at fashioning a largely homogeneous state out of a heterogeneous population. The method which was employed involved a combination of extermination and expulsion of Serbs, Jews, Roma,¹ and others deemed 'undesirable' by the ruling party. About 1,027,000 people of all nationality groups lost their lives as a result of unnatural causes in Yugoslavia during the Second World War, according to scholarly research conducted by the Croatian demographer, Vladimir Zerjavić; of this number about 623,000 lost their lives in the Independent State of Croatia.² Of the latter, some died in concentration camps operated by the Ustase, others died as a result of exterminations, whether by the Ustase,³ the Chetniks, the Partisans, or by Axis occupation forces. Still others were combat casualties.

The NDH regime was the most brutal and most sanguinary satellite regime in the Axis sphere of influence during the Second World War.⁴ From time to time there have been those wanting either to whitewash the NDH or to equate the Serbian collaborationist state of Milan Nedić with the NDH, whether in moral terms or in functional terms. Both of these theses must be rejected. Although the NDH was occupied by Axis troops, the Ustase enjoyed tangibly more internal autonomy than Nedić's state; thus, while the NDH operated the concentration camps within its territory, the camps in occupied Serbia were operated by German occupation forces. Indeed, General Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, the General-Plenipotentiary representing the *Wehrmacht* in the NDH, met with Ante Pavelić, the *Poglavnik* [Leader] of the NDH, as early as July 1941, to express 'his grave concern over the excesses of the Ustase'; and Herbert Troll-Oberfell, *chargé d'affaires* in Croatia, reported back to Berlin that same month that there had been 'acts of terror and excesses by the Ustase committed against the Serbian population in many regions of the country', and characterised these acts as 'dangerous' for the war effort. He drew the logical conclusion and declared that it was 'necessary ... to limit these occurrences'.⁵

Nor would it be appropriate to suppose that wartime Croatia and Serbia were morally equivalent. The Ustasa movement was founded on the principles of racialism and intolerance and welcomed the break-up of the Yugoslav state, equating the Axis occupation with national freedom. By contrast, Milan Nedić, in a speech delivered on 2 September 1941, admitted more forthrightly that the German occupation signified a loss of freedom and warned that Serbs 'are facing

the danger of national extinction', claiming that he 'came into the government to save the people, to keep them from destroying each other'.⁶ This by no means diminished the high esteem in which German authorities held Nedić, however.⁷ (Some observers might also note that the NDH was ethnically more heterogeneous than Nedić's Serbia, although the relative heterogeneity of a country does not, in and of itself, say *anything* about the character of its regime.)

Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged, as already noted, that the NDH was an occupied country and that Ustasa rule was sustained for four years by the presence of German troops and, until 1943, Italian troops as well. Moreover, as early as May 1941, the German and Croatian governments agreed that German economic interests in Croatia would enjoy 'special consideration', that Germany might 'continue unrestricted exploitation of industrial raw materials, in particular minerals', that German companies would enjoy concessions in the oil sector in Croatia, and that 'the expenses of German military installations, in so far as these are expenses arising within the country itself, will be borne for the duration of the war by Croatia'.⁸

Even today, 60 years after the end of the Second World War, the NDH remains the subject of controversy. There are controversies about how many people were killed at the Jasenovac concentration camp,⁹ about what happened to gold held by the Ustasa regime,¹⁰ about the attitude of Zagreb's Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac toward the NDH and the Church's response to the NDH's use of force to promote the conversion of Serbs to Catholicism,¹¹ even about whether the NDH should be seen as having been an embodiment of Croatian statehood, as suggested at one point by Franjo Tuđman, president of Croatia in 1990–99. Where Stepinac is concerned, one may distinguish among 'hard critics', 'soft critics', 'hard defenders', and 'soft defenders'. The 'hard critics' accuse the archbishop of various things, including treason, outright collaboration with the NDH, complicity in the forced conversions of Serbs, silence in the face of Ustasa atrocities, and sometimes even complicity in war crimes. At the other extreme, 'hard defenders' view Stepinac as a saint, whose every word and action stands as an inspiration for subsequent generations, a courageous critic of the NDH, the rescuer of Serbs and Jews, a man who refused to condone the regime's efforts to usurp the Church's authority in conversions, and an orator, the transcripts of whose sermons were read over the Partisan radio. While the 'hard critics' are typically motivated by Serb nationalism, old-style communism, hatred of Croats, or naïve ignorance, the 'hard defenders' are driven by wishful thinking and, usually, by Croatian nationalism as well. Between these extremes one may identify 'soft critics' and 'soft defenders', who share a mixed view of Stepinac, rejecting monochromatic representations of the archbishop. The chief difference between the two consists in the tendency of the 'soft critics' to downplay or ignore those sermons of Stepinac in which he criticised the NDH and its practices, and the tendency of the 'soft defenders' to emphasise precisely these sermons. Both groups admit that Stepinac's visit (*prior* to the capitulation of Yugoslavia) to Kvaternik in order to congratulate him on the establishment of the NDH was inappropriate – though Stepinac's critics are more likely to trace this to nationalism on Stepinac's part – while his defenders are more likely to suggest that the visit was due to a lapse of judgment on his part. Both groups further point out that *Katolicki list*, the official organ of the archdiocese of Zagreb, repeatedly condemned racism, and that Stepinac repeatedly sought to defend and assist the victims of the NDH, as in May 1943, when the archbishop wrote to Andrija

Artuković to demand that he allow the Jewish religious district to continue to function freely.¹² But both 'soft critics' and 'soft defenders' also note that Stepinac was less resolute about defending non-Catholics than he was about defending Catholics, including recent converts to Catholicism. Moreover, 'soft defenders' have trouble explaining why, just two weeks after the proclamation of the NDH, Archbishop Stepinac contacted Artuković, Minister of the Interior, *not* to try to protest against the restrictions which were being imposed on the country's Jews, but to ask for an exemption for 'good Catholics of the Jewish race who have been converted to Catholicism', whom Stepinac characterised as 'good Croatian patriots'.¹³

As Nada Kisić Kolanović has pointed out,¹⁴ there have been alternative schools of thought among Croats in approaching the NDH. She notes that, until 1990, two schools dominated scholarly approaches to the NDH: the Marxist school of critical analysis, which she identifies with Fikreta Jelić-Butić and Bogdan Krizman, whose works commanded the field in the 1970s and 1980s; and the nostalgic-apologetic school, which began among Croats in Buenos Aires and which she identifies with Vinko Nikolić and Antun Bonéfacić. She credits Jere Jareb, who occupied academic positions in the United States between 1966 and 1992 before returning to Croatia, with having made the first serious endeavour to write about Croatian history free of either Marxist methodology or nostalgic-apologetic assumptions.¹⁵ Today one can also speak of a liberal school of analysis, which is critical of the NDH from a classical liberal point of view, rather than from a Marxist perspective.¹⁶

Because of its independence from Belgrade (though not from Berlin) and because of its association with anti-Serb and anti-Allied politics, the NDH would later serve as a rallying symbol for those wanting to declare their antipathy toward Serbia (during the War of Yugoslav Succession¹⁷) and the European Union (since 1995). Hence, in late 2004, as the EU turned up the heat on Zagreb to pressure the Croatian government to locate the fugitive General, Ante Gotovina, who had been indicted for war crimes in connection with the liberation of the Krajina from Serb occupation, graffiti appeared in Zadar for Gotovina and the NDH!¹⁸ In response to such expressions, Stjepan Mesić, president of Croatia since 2000, declared in April 2005: 'Those who think that by defending the NDH they are defending Croatia, are completely confused, because [the Independent State of Croatia] was not independent, was not a state, and was not Croatia'.¹⁹

Nearly a decade earlier, President Franjo Tuđman stirred controversy by suggesting that the body of Ante Pavelić be returned to Croatia from Spain and that the last remains of Yugoslavia's long-time president, Josip Broz Tito, be turned over to Croatia by Serbia, so that the bodies of the two sworn enemies might be buried side by side.²⁰ Tito's body remains in Belgrade and Pavelić's in Madrid. Ominously, at about the same time the New Croatian Right (*Nova Hrvatska Desnica*, or NHD)²¹ registered its demand that Zagreb's Marshal Tito Square be renamed for Pavelić.²² Tuđman, who had served in the ranks of the anti-fascist Partisans during the Second World War, continued to nurture respect for Tito,²³ but his endeavour to achieve a 'reconciliation' of antagonistic political currents in Croatia created a space in which strange things happened, such as the memorial mass conducted in Zagreb by Father Vjekoslav Lasić in December 1998 – the 39th anniversary of Pavelić's death – attended by several members of parliament. Following this mass, Archbishop Josip Bozanić asked the head of the Dominican Order to check into the allegation that Lasić had conducted such a

mass, while a spokesperson for Tudjman's HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) condemned the holding of a memorial mass for Pavelić as 'unacceptable and undemocratic'.²⁴ In spite of the government's efforts to stop such occurrences, there have also been reports of several similar incidents after the death of President Tudjman in December 1999. For example, the pop singer Marko Perković Thompson became popular with right-wing Croats, through his racist and xenophobic songs. After the performance of his song 'Jasenovac and Gradiska Stara' (named for concentration camps in the NDH) in 2004, Thompson was brought in for questioning by the police in Zagreb.²⁵ Later that same year, the HDZ expelled from its ranks Davor Aras, President of the city council of Zadar, after he attended a gathering of the Croatian Domobran association, where members wore Ustasa insignia and displayed photographs of Pavelić; President Mešić also condemned the rally.²⁶

One of the *Poglavnik's* most ardent defenders has been his daughter, Visnja, who has claimed, against all evidence, that her father 'never liked fascism and certainly not Nazism', but that he 'had to accept certain things that he didn't like' for the sake of Croatia's own welfare.²⁷ Her selective interpretation remains a minority view; indeed, most of Pavelić's latter-day defenders are happy to defend fascism as well. In fact, the record of what happened in the NDH and who was responsible is both clear and well documented.

The population of the NDH as of April 1941 stood at about 6 million,²⁸ consisting of about 3 million Croats, almost 2 million Serbs, between 500,000 and 800,000 Bosnian Muslims, 140,000 *Volksdeutsche*, 70,000 Hungarians, 35–36,000 Jews, and about 150,000 members of other nationality groups (including Slovenes, Czechs, Slovaks, and Ukrainians).²⁹ About 307,000 Serbs are reported by Vladimir Žerjavić to have perished within the territory which would later comprise the socialist republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, alongside 255,000 Croats.³⁰ About 28,000 Jews either lost their lives at the hands of the NDH authorities or ended up in German concentration camps; another 4,000 or more managed to escape from the country, in many cases as a result of assistance from the Italian forces.³¹

Insofar as the extermination and expulsion of entire groups of people lay at the very core of NDH policy, that programme must be judged to have been genocidal in character. Indeed, the decree on the defence of the people and the state, already issued on 17 April 1941, laid the groundwork for the subsequent terror. The NDH authorities established the Office for Public Order and Security, as well as the *Ustaska nadzorna služba* [Ustasa Surveillance Service, or UNS, which would be renamed in January 1943 and placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior³²]; the Third Division of the UNS was known as the Ustasa Defense and, together with the Office for Public Order and Security, was responsible for killing those who were judged to be 'undesirable'.³³ Although Jasenovac is the most notorious and best known of the NDH's concentration camps, it was not the only one. There were some 26 concentration camps in all, including installations at Drnje (the first such camp to be established),³⁴ Stara Gradiska, Jadovno, Slano, Metajna on the island of Pag, Kerestinec (in the vicinity of Zagreb), Lepoglava, Jastrebarsko (for the internment of children), Tenje (used for the internment of Jews), Djakovo, Lobograd, and elsewhere. (The camps at Jadovno, Slano, and Metajna were closed in August 1941). According to recent scholarly research in Croatia, some 80,000–90,000 persons were liquidated at Jasenovac alone.³⁵

The NDH endeavoured to represent itself as an organic part of Croatian culture and history, rather than as representing and effecting a dramatic rupture with the

past. To this end, the Ustase tried to lay claim to the legacy of Ante Starcević, Milan Suflyay, and even the Radić brothers.³⁶ In this connection, the Ustase drew up plans to erect monuments to Starcević, the renowned Croatian liberal, in Zagreb and Banja Luka.³⁷ This was a falsification of Starcević's legacy, causing the nineteenth-century liberal's championing of human equality – including women's equality – to disappear from (their) sight.³⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, in spite of the regime's promotion of 'traditional' models of gender behaviour,³⁹ the regime was relatively tolerant in the cultural sphere.⁴⁰ Be that as it may, in spite of the Ustasa regime's professed Catholicism (a faith preaching centrality of Natural Law and Natural Right), citizens of the NDH were advised that they had no rights save those recognised by the state since, as the regime news organ *Hrvatski narod* (Croatian people) put it in 1942, 'Neither the individual nor the group is comprehensible outside the framework of the state'.⁴¹ Within that framework, the regime issued two decrees at the end of April 1941, defining what it is to be Aryan and prohibiting marriage between Aryans and non-Aryans. The regime also paid attention to language issues, issuing a decree on 14 August 1941 regulating the orthography of the Croatian language and banning the use of foreign (i.e., Serbian) pronunciation and spelling, as well as foreign words 'borrowed from other, even similar languages' where they were not in conformity 'with the spirit of the Croatian language' and where Croatian equivalents were available.⁴² The NDH banned the use of the Cyrillic alphabet as early as 25 April 1941, and undertook efforts to root out words that were viewed as Serbisms.⁴³ The regime also demanded that people think in an Ustasa way and talked of eradicating those thought to be behaving in an 'un-Croatian' way.⁴⁴

Given their racial orientation, the Ustase inevitably thought also of population exchange as a 'remedy' for ethnic heterogeneity. In practice, the NDH thought in terms of swapping 179,000 Serbs, whom they would expel to German-occupied Serbia, for 179,000 Slovenes who would be deported from German-occupied Slovenia (earmarked for incorporation into the Third Reich) and sent to Bosnia, with a somewhat smaller number to be settled in northern Croatia. But the resettlement of Serbs from the NDH was not carried out in an organised way, and was accompanied by a level of violence which even German authorities found shocking.⁴⁵

During the War of Yugoslav Succession (1991–95), the Serbian propaganda machine made much of the atrocities committed in the NDH, and even managed to convince some naïve western journalists that the sins of the fathers somehow justified the sins of the sons. Yet, in spite of the long shadow cast by the NDH over socialist Yugoslavia (including the use made of the NDH by the communist regime to tarnish those advocating greater autonomy for Croatia); in spite of the way in which it figured in Serbian wartime propaganda more recently and, for that matter, in spite of the importance of analysing the NDH as a historical phenomenon, as a first step toward establishing what is common and what is not common to fascist regimes, there has been little published in English up to now. The collection of articles in this volume is an attempt to remedy this deficit.

This collection takes, as its focal points, the themes of ideology, genocide, and religion. As a renegade state surrounded by renegade states, the NDH's pursuit of genocidal policies and forced religious conversion was facilitated by the continent-wide war as well as by the Axis occupation of Croatia itself. But for the presence of German and Italian forces, the Partisans might – it may be speculated – have overthrown the NDH state much earlier. But genocide and forced religious