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Filip Škiljan*

*Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies
Zagreb, Croatia*

Abuses against Serbs in the Districts of Otočac and Brinje in World War II with a Special Focus on Religious Conversions^{}**

Abstract: The text brings an overview of the abuses against Serbs in the districts of Otočac and Brinje, focusing on religious conversion in this area. It draws on archival sources, secondary literature, and verbal witness accounts. After a general introduction about the attitude of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) toward the Serbs, the author offers information on the mistreatment of Serbs in the Otočac area. He then discusses the position of the Roman Catholic Church on religious conversion, especially conversion from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism in the territory of the Diocese of Senj-Modruš and 70 persons who requested religious conversion between May and July 1941. Finally, he recounts the fate of Orthodox churches in the Otočac area and the attitude toward the religion of the Serbs in Lika under the socialist regime as a result of Serbian suffering during World War II.

Keywords: Serbs, Lika, Otočac, Brinje, World War II religious conversion.

The Attitude of the Ustaše Regime toward Serbs in NDH

In 1941, the religious composition of NDH was as follows: out of a total population of 5,655,750, there were 2,993,335 or 52.93% Roman Catholics, 1,809,613 Orthodox (31.99%), 772,794 Muslims (12.78%), 59,281 evangelicals (1.05%), and 32,372 Jews (0.57%).¹ The Ustaše project of creating an exclusivist Croat nation-state excluded Serbs, Jews, and Roma, going as far as to posit their

* filip.skiljan@imin.hr

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¹ The calculation is based on the Yugoslav population census of 31 March 1931, with the birth rate added – R. Landikušić, ed., *Priručnik o političkoj i sudbenoj podjeli Nezavisne Države Hrvatske: sa abecednim popisom občina-gradova-kotareva, te popisom i ustrojstvom svih državnih ureda-ustanova i škola po njihovim sjedištima u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb, 1942), 13. The population figures vary in other publications of the time.

biological extinction. Whereas in the resolution of the “Jewish question,” they followed their role model, the racial policy of Nazi Germany, the resolution of the “Serbian question” was specific to the NDH. The planned extermination of Serbs – whom the Ustaše characterized, in terms of religion, as Greek easterners, and in terms of race, as akin to the Jews and Roma – began immediately after the establishment of the NDH, with the promulgation of a string of laws that would serve as a strategic lever of the extinction policy.

On the very first day of the new state’s existence, Slavko Kvaternik expelled Serbs, Jews, and Roma from public service. The only exception was made for Pavelić’s personal friends. The first regulation to be passed by the Poglavnik, Dr. Ante Pavelić, was the Law on the Protection of the People and the State, issued on 17 April 1941, a copy of a similar German law from February 1933. It declared that “whoever in any way does or has done harm to the honor and vital interests of the Croatian nation or who endangers in any way the existence of the Independent State of Croatia or its government authorities, shall be considered guilty of high treason, even if his act was but a mere attempt”. The second article added that acts of treason were “punishable by death”.² With this, Pavelić secured a very broad field for retroactively punishing those who he believed could in any way hamper the new regime. On the same day, the first People’s Court began operating in Zagreb, with such courts soon organized in other larger towns in the NDH.³ Those “people’s courts” had a broad scope and passed several hundred convictions daily. To be charged with grand treason, it was enough for someone to privately say a few words against the Poglavnik or the newly established state. A month later, the regime also introduced courts-martial.⁴ There were few differences between the people’s courts and the courts-martial. The first mobile court-martial was established in Zagreb on 24 June 1941 and then in Banja Luka, Bihać, Brčko, and Derventa. Mobile courts-martial had jurisdiction in the entire territory of the NDH.⁵ On 25 April 1941, the Law on the Prohibition of the Cyrillic Alphabet in the Territory of the NDH was passed. Concurrently, the regime launched an extensive campaign of changing the names of streets and settlements and, soon after that, cutting out some words from daily usage.

² *Narodne novine* 4 (17 April 1941), 2.

³ People’s courts were also established, for instance, in Banja Luka and Karlovac. *Narodne novine* (8 May 1941), *Narodne novine* (9 May 1941).

⁴ *Narodne novine* 32 (20 May 1941), 1. *Zbornik zakona i naredaba NDH* 1, 152 (1941), 104–105.

⁵ *Narodne novine* 58 (24 June 1941), 2. *Zbornik zakona i naredaba NDH* 1, 275 (1941), 196.

The Law Concerning Nationality,⁶ passed on 30 April 1941, declared that a citizen of NDH could only be a person “who has proven by his conduct that he did not engage in activities against the liberation efforts of the Croatian people and who is ready and willing to serve faithfully the Croatian nation”. On the one hand, this law contained a clause stating that a national of the NDH must be of Aryan origin, which essentially targeted Jews and Roma; on the other hand, it allowed for an arbitrary interpretation of one’s anti-Croatian sentiments in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, meaning that anyone could be accused of anti-state activities and denied citizenship. On 3 May, the Law on Religious Conversion was passed, replacing all existing legislation for converting from one religion to another – to convert, one had to apply to the authorities and meet the religious requirements of the religious community one wanted to join, which essentially gave the state complete control over would-be converts.⁷ Early June saw the promulgation of a directive banning all Serbian-confessional local schools and nurseries;⁸ in mid-July, the phrase “Serbian Orthodox faith” was banned and replaced by the phrase “Greek Eastern faith”.⁹ The use of the Julian calendar was forbidden in the territory of the NDH in December.¹⁰

Besides the legislation they passed, the Ustaše used the press and public gatherings to disseminate propaganda against Serbs, making their position in society even more difficult. Immediately after the formation of the NDH, the regime began dismissing Orthodox public servants from the bureaucratic apparatus and state-controlled companies. Thus, the Ustaše pursued a policy of final solutions for Jews and Roma, emulating the Nazi ideological matrix; however, the attitude toward Serbs was an idiosyncrasy specific to the Ustaše, even though the instruments and methods of terror they used were not significantly different.

In the book *Ljudski gubici Hrvatske 1941–1945. godine* [Human Losses in Croatia 1941–1945], Igor Graovac and Dragan Cvetković included tables specifying the national composition of the casualties by region. During World War II, 17,465 Serbs from Lika (16.6% of Lika’s total Serbian population) were killed. The scope of the atrocities committed against Serbs in the NDH in 1941 is aptly illustrated by the data on the civilians killed in the districts with an absolute or relative Serbian majority or a significant presence. Serbs constituted an overwhelming majority of the civilians killed in those districts. The table below

⁶ *Narodne novine* (1 May 1941), *Zbornik zakona i naredaba NDH* 1 (1941), 42.

⁷ *Narodne novine* (4 May 1941).

⁸ *Novi list* 55 (23 June 1941), 10. *Narodne novine* 56 (21 June 1941).

⁹ *Narodne novine* 80 (19 July 1941).

¹⁰ *Narodne novine* (4 December 1941).

includes all districts in Lika except Otočac and Brinje, which will be discussed separately in this text.

Table I. Civilian deaths in the districts of Lika

District	Population in 1931	Orthodox population in 1931	Population in 1941 (the census result of 1931 was increased to reflect the birth rate)	Civilian deaths in 1941	Percentage of civilian deaths in 1941 among the district's total population in 1941	Civilian deaths 1941–1945 and percentage of the district's total population in 1941
Korenica and Udbina ¹²	26,458	20,943 (79.15%)	28,839	1,429	4.95%	3,193 (11.07%)
Donji Lapac ¹³	16,554	15,047 (90.89%)	18,043	890	4.93%	1,388 (7.69%)
Gračac ¹⁴	27,859	19,818 (71.13%)	30,366	971	3.19%	1,601 (5.27%)
Gospic and Perušić ¹⁵	53,820	19,845 (36.83%)	58,663	3,217	5.48%	4,740 (8.08%)

The intensity and scope of the pogrom of Serbs in the first year of the Ustaše regime are indirectly attested by the civilian deaths of 1941 compared to the total civilian casualties in those districts during the entire war (1941–1945): districts of Korenica and Udbina 44%, district Donji Lapac 64%,¹⁵ district Gračac 61%,¹⁶ and districts Gospic i Perušić 68%.¹⁷ The name lists of the victims compiled for these districts show that they were mostly Serbs and predominantly civilians.

¹¹ D. Zatezalo ed., *Kotar Korenica i kotar Udbina u NOB i socijalističkoj izgradnji* (Karlovac: Historijski arhiv u Karlovcu, 1979), 974.

¹² D. Zatezalo ed., *Kotar Donji Lapac u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945* (Karlovac: Historijski arhiv u Karlovcu, 1985), 1108–1109.

¹³ D. Zatezalo ed., *Kotar Gračac u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945* (Karlovac: Historijski arhiv u Karlovcu, 1984), 895.

¹⁴ D. Zatezalo ed., *Kotar Gospic i kotar Perušić u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945* (Karlovac: Historijski arhiv u Karlovcu, 1989), 982–983.

¹⁵ Zatezalo, *Kotar Donji Lapac u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu*, 1108–1109.

¹⁶ Zatezalo, *Kotar Gračac u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu*, 895.

¹⁷ Zatezalo, *Kotar Gospic i kotar Perušić u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu*, 982–983.

Serbian Casualties in 1941 in the Area of Otočac and Brinje

The districts of Brinje and Otočac are in the northwestern part of Lika. They had a combined territory of 1,117 square kilometers, and both districts bordered the districts of Novi and Senj in the west, Ogulin in the north, Korenica in the east, and Perušić in the south. According to the population census of 1931, the Brinje district had 15,991 inhabitants, including 4,740 of the Orthodox faith. The Otočac district had 33,688, including 16,075 Orthodox.¹⁸ The Orthodox settlements in the districts of Brinje and Otočac were Vodoteč, Prokike, Rapain Klanac, Brlog, Drenov Klanac, Dabar, Glavace, Škare, Staro Selo, Podum, Doljani, Srpsko Polje, Ponori, Gorići, Zalužnica, Vrhovine, Gornje Vrhovine, Turjanski, Gornji Babin Potok, Donji Babin Potok, and Rudopolje. Žuta Lokva and Brloška Dubrava, as well as the town of Otočac, had a mixed Serbo-Croatian population. After the short-lived April War, the Ustaše and Italian forces entered the territory of Otočac. The Italians stationed their troops at all important checkpoints and roads in the Gacka Valley. The highest organ of civilian and military authority in Lika became the Great County (*velika župa*) of Gacka and Lika, with its seat in Gospic, which included the Otočac district. The district of Brinje became part of the Great County of Vinodol and Podgorje, whose center was Senj. Besides these, the Great County of Gacka and Lika included the districts of Gospic, Perušić, Udbina, and Gračac, whereas the Lika districts of Korenica and Donji Lapac were integrated into the counties of Krbava and Psat, whose seat was Bihać. From the occupation of 14 April to the Treaties of Rome of 18 May 1941, the Italians held military and civilian authority in the territory of Lika. From the Treaties of Rome to 26 August 1941, the territory of Lika was the second demilitarized zone. In this stage, the Italians had only military authority in Lika, ceding civilian authority to NDH organs. This essentially gave the Ustaše a free hand to begin their mass crimes.

The declaration of the establishment of the NDH caught the Ustaše in the territory of Otočac in the woods around Švica and Prozor. They were deserters from the April War, and their leader was a student from Ličko Lešće called Delko Bogdanić. The organs of the Ustaše movement and civilian organs were established in Otočac on 11 April. Krunoslav Lokmer became the chief of the Ustaše camp (*logornik*) and Drago Žubrinić his deputy. The Ustaše also took control of Brinje on 11 April. As soon as they took power in the territory of those two districts, the Serbs who worked in public service were let go. A people's court was established in Gospic on 2 May 1941, followed by a court-

¹⁸ "Prisutno stanovništvo po veroispovesti i maternjem jeziku, popis 1931", Republički zavod za statistiku, accessed December 23rd 2024, <https://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/G1931/pdf/G19314001.pdf>.

martial on 27 May 1941.¹⁹ Along with those courts, the Ustaše in Lika spread hate against Serbs in their speeches at rallies in some towns. Mile Budak was one of the Ustaše leaders from Lika who held anti-Serbian speeches in Lika's villages and towns. For instance, in Lovinac, on 31 May 1941, he issued a call to arms against the Serbs to his compatriots after recently having done the same in Gospic. One of the more ceremonious speeches was delivered in Otočac on 2 June 1941. It was attended by Jure Francetić, who received the main speaker Jurica Frković, Minister of Forestry in the NDH government. Jurica Frković thanked the inhabitants of Otočac for having successfully harbored the Ustaše under the former regime, describing this effort as a mother's tender care.²⁰ The first stage of terror in Lika followed in April and May 1941 when some were arrested – mostly men who were taken to prisons and then largely executed at secret locations. These victims were distinguished and wealthier individuals. Later, in the second stage, the terror campaign spread to all men between 16 and 60 years of age and then to all younger and older males. This stage unfolded in June and July 1941. The third stage began in August, bringing mass killings of Serbs, ranging from children to the elderly. The first Serbs to be arrested in the territory of Otočac were reserve officers, who were taken into custody by the Peasant Protection during the April War and were in prison when the Italians and Ustaše arrived. In the territory of Otočac, the first organized arrests of Serbs took place in May 1941 and included Serbs in Švica, Staro Selo, and Podum. The arrested Serbs were held captive at the local police station, and several were killed there. According to the testimony of Josip Barković, a teacher from Otočac, it seems that the arrest took place in late April 1941 and that around thirty Serbs from Otočac and its area were arrested, killed in Otočac itself, and thrown into pits near Janča. Some bodies were buried at Špilnik, not far from Otočac, and other victims were buried next to the Soko Movement House in Otočac. Barković notes that in the first three or four months, the Ustaše had *carte blanche* to do whatever they liked and arrested and killed Serbian inhabitants without trying to hide their misdeeds from the Italians.²¹ In late May 1941, a merchant from Otočac called Vlado Karleuša was arrested, after which no trace of him could be found. His wife and two children were sent to Serbia. In June 1941, Mića Brakus, school inspector, Pero Branković, merchant, Bude Ružić, bank clerk, Stevo Žegarac, tax official, Sekiz, pensioner, and Nikola Vranješ and his

¹⁹ G. Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2004), 42–43.

²⁰ *Hrvatski narod* (4 June 1941).

²¹ Hrvatski Državni Arhiv (henceforth HDA), Zemaljska komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača Hrvatske (henceforth ZKRZ-Zh), box 163, 2741/1945.

brother, merchants, all of them from Otočac, were arrested. At the same time, some other Serbs from nearby settlements were taken into custody and brought to the Jadovno concentration camp in Velebit and executed there. According to the account of Mile Brakus from Vrhovine, on 18 April 1941, the Ustaše from Gospić arrested 23 people in Vrhovine, killing seven and letting the remaining 16 go.²² Sofija Levnajić also talked of this arrest, recounting the arrest and partial execution of all prominent Serbs in Vrhovine, perpetrated, among others, by local Croats from Čorkovo Selo.²³ The fourth round of arrests followed on 26 July 1941. The detainees included Angelina Grozdanić and her husband Stevan Grozdanić, Dr. Staniša Ilić, a lawyer, Rade Varda, an innkeeper from Otočac, Jovo Popović, a merchant, and several peasants from Švica. In this round, around twenty people were taken into custody. The Ustaše took all the detainees to the camp at Gospić. Staniša Ilić and Stevan Grozdanić were moved from Gospić to Jadovno. Angelina Grozdanić recalled that the Serbs who were to make the trip from Gospić to Jadovno were tied with wires two by two. She survived because she was sent from Gospić to Jastrebarsko, Kruščic, and Lobor-grad and from there to Serbia.²⁴ Nikola Grozdanić testified before the Committee for Ascertaining the Crimes of the Occupiers and Their Abettors that twelve peasants from Ponor were apprehended on 2 August 1941 and killed in the Otočac prison.²⁵ On 11 August 1942, Žarko Cvjetičanin of Brlog told the Commissariat for Refugees and Settlers in Belgrade that 37 Serbs had been taken from his village of Brlog already in May 1941. Some of the people arrested on that occasion were killed in Otočac and the pits at Gacko Polje, e.g., the Žuti Bezdan pit near Ličko Lešće. Those who were not killed in Otočac died in the Jadovno camp in Velebit. Žarko received a pass for Stara Pazova from the Italian authorities on 3 August 1942 and reached Belgrade on 10 August 1942.²⁶ Marta Ljubobratović, another resident of Brlog, also gave a statement on the Brlog arrests to the Committee for Ascertaining the Crimes of the Occupiers and Their Abettors. She said that there were three rounds of arrests, with nine people arrested in the first, eight in the second, and six in the third.²⁷

Some Serbs in the villages of Švica, Ponori, and Gorići were arrested in much the same way as those in Brlog. That spring, two members of the Kangrga

²² HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 620, 48106/1945.

²³ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 66–68.

²⁴ D. Zatezalo, *Jadovno – zbornik dokumenata*, vol. II (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2007), 211–212.

²⁵ HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 202, 6629/1945.

²⁶ Zatezalo, *Jadovno – zbornik dokumenata*, vol. II, 213–215.

²⁷ HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 613, 47507/1945.

family, father and son, farmers, were taken from Staro Selo near Otočac, along with some other peasants who can be traced no further than the Jadovno camp near Velebit. Three peasants were taken from Vrzići near Brlog and executed, and some Serbs in Žuta Lokva suffered a similar fate – they were arrested by the Ustaše in September 1941 and killed in a nearby forest. After that atrocity, the Serbs from Prokike retreated to the woods to avoid the same fate. In Prokike, as Evica Smiljanić recalled, twenty or so people lost their lives. Among the first to be arrested were the priest Đuro Marjan and Lazo Knežević, a native of Prokike who was working as a pâtissier in Senj. The first killings in the Brinje area happened on 25/26 May 1941 when the Brinje priest Vujadin Skendžić-Vuja, Luka Tomić, a farmer from Tuževići, Rade Rajačić, an official of the district court in Brinje, and Dmitar Maravić, a farmer from Brinje, were killed in the Škamrica forest.²⁸ In June 1941, the Ustaše began raiding the Serbian villages of Gornji kraj, Lučani, Prokike, and Županjdol, but failed to catch the local peasants. Concurrently, Orthodox priests were being forcibly deported and robbed. Đuro Orlić, a parish priest from Otočac, packed all of his property into wagons. However, when he reached Zagreb, the wagons were plundered, and Orlić lost all of his possessions.²⁹ A smaller number of Serbs from the Otočac area then fled, with or without passes, to Serbia.³⁰ Others fled to Dalmatia, a region fully under Italian control.³¹ Mass deportations took place in the area of the Plitvice Lakes, whose Serbian population was deported on 29 June 1941. After a brief stay in Bihać, they were resettled in the district of Bosansko Grahovo.³²

It was not until the first victims died and the first peasants were hurled into the pits around Lešće and Janča that the Serbs of the Brinje and Otočac districts realized the criminal nature of the NDH, which led to the appearance of the first Partisans in the territory of these districts.³³ The de-escalation of the Ustaše's terror campaign began when the Italian army took military and civilian control in the so-called Zone II. The sphere of Italian interest in the NDH was divided into the so-called Zones I, II, and III. The section of Dalmatia that had become part of the Italian sphere of interest was called Zone I. Zone II included Gorski Kotar, Lika, a considerable part of Herzegovina, and the entire Adriatic coastline with all islands. After August 1941, the NDH regime could

²⁸ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 69.

²⁹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 126.

³⁰ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 132.

³¹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 134–135.

³² Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 138–139.

³³ M. Bukvić, *Otočac i Brinje u NOB 1941–1945* (Otočac: Savez udruženja boraca NOR-a općine Otočac, 1971), 54–55.

no longer keep its navy, build fortifications or other structures, and deploy its law-enforcement forces in this zone. Starting from 1 September 1941, as per the agreement with the NDH government, the Italian army took total military and civilian power in Zone II, with the NDH troops in this zone operationally subordinated to the command center of the Italian 2nd Army in Karlovac. Thus, from 1 September 1941, the Ustaše and Home Guard (Domobran) troops fell under the control of the Italian army. Of course, the Italian forces terrorized Serbian villages in Lika due to the emergence of Partisan units. The Partisans clashed with Italian troops at Crna Vlasta on 27 September 1941, leading to the arrest of 14 persons from Crna Vlasta, Vrhovine, and Babin Potok. The conflict spread to Zalužnica, where four Serbian households were set on fire on 29 September 1941.³⁴ After that, the Italians raided Serbian-populated villages on several occasions, committing one-off crimes, burning and plundering the locals' property, etc.³⁵ In two noteworthy cases, the local population tried to protect the local Serbs. A camp for Serbs was to be established in Stajnica, and the district governor, Jurica Frković, wanted to resettle the Croatian population of Ličko Lešće in the depopulated Serbian villages in the Plitvice Lakes area.³⁶

As early as 1941, the Italians convinced some of the Serbs from the Otočac area to join the Četniks, who cooperated with the Ustaše and the Germans. The Otočac area was precisely where the Četnik strongholds were located, with centers in Vrhovine, Škare, Zalužnica, Donji and Gornji Babin Potok, Prokike, and Brlog, and a base in Lipovo Polje.³⁷ In May 1942, the Italians raided Brlog and killed 29 Serbian men without a hearing. They accused them of having robbed a wagon loaded with wine that had belonged to the merchant Blažo Biondić. In September 1942, the Italians burned and ransacked Drežnica, Brezno, and Jasenak in the Ogulin area, and Vodoteč, Tužević, Škalić, Gostovo Polje, and Vojvoduša in Brinje.³⁸ In 1943, typhoid fever claimed many lives – as many as 200 in the districts of Otočac and Brinje. The Ustaše committed horrifying atrocities in the spring of 1944 when the bulk of the Partisan forces was quite far from the Gacka Valley. Namely, at that time, the German 392nd Infantry Division was stationed in the Gacka Valley. In 1944, more civilians from the Gacka Valley were killed than at any other time – according to Vezmar's research, as

³⁴ *Hronologija narodnooslobodilačkog rata 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Vojno-istorijski institut, 1964), 106. Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici*, 244.

³⁵ HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 267, 14128/1945. On the People's Liberation War (NOB) in the area of Otočac and Brinje see M. Bukvić, *Otočac i Brinje u NOB 1941–1945*.

³⁶ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 186.

³⁷ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 267.

³⁸ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 269, 293–294.

many as 624.³⁹ In Lučani near Brinje, eight people were murdered on 26 February, and in the hamlet of Divjaci in Škare, the Brinje Ustaše from Mesić's regiment killed 17 women, children, and elderly people. The entire settlement of Škare would have perished had the German troops not happened to arrive and rescue the locals.⁴⁰ In early April 1944, at Donji Babin Potok, the Ustaše killed 128 people, mostly in the hamlets of Bige and Gulani, wounding 30 in flight.⁴¹ That spring, the whole village of Turjanski with the remaining inhabitants was burned. In April, the Ustaše raided the village of Crna Vlast (Vrhovine), killing eleven.⁴² Vezmar claims that in 1944, as many as 150 were killed in Turjanski and Crna Vlast.⁴³ The most horrifying atrocity against the population of Brakusova Draga happened on 19 June 1944 when the Ustaše killed everyone they found in the hamlet, predominantly women, children, and the elderly. On that occasion, they killed 57 Serbs in the home of Branko Brakus Đidara after having encircled it and positioned machine guns in front of it. Having killed the imprisoned Serbs, they set fire to the house with the victims. A few people managed to flee the house and later testified about the killings of the local Serbs.⁴⁴ Then, at Vodoteč, a village in the northern part of the Otočac area, 128 people were killed on 12 November 1944. The massacre was perpetrated by the Ustaše of Križpolj, who attacked the village after the 13th Primorsko-Goranska Assault Division had left and gone deeper into Lika. The hamlets of Orlići, Bukvići, and Kosovci suffered the heaviest casualties, with 74 houses burned.⁴⁵ The slaughter continued in December, when the towns of Tužević, Lučani, and Vodoteč bore the brunt of the attacks. After these massacres of the civilian population, the surviving Serbs of Vodoteč and its area were evacuated to Kordun, Gorski Kotar, and Žumberak. The killings continued into 1945, for instance, in Vojvoduša and Tužević⁴⁶ and later in Prokike, Škare, and Zalužnica,⁴⁷ to a somewhat lesser

³⁹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 373.

⁴⁰ On these atrocities see Bukvić, *Otočac i Brinje u NOB*, 382–387.

⁴¹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici*, 375.

⁴² HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 620, 48127/1945.

⁴³ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 376.

⁴⁴ Đ. Zatezalo, *Radio sam svoj seljački i kovački posao, svjedočanstva genocida* (Zagreb: Prosvjeta, 2005), 271–284.

⁴⁵ HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 235, 10230-10242/1945.

⁴⁶ HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, box 238, 10578/1945. For instance, the Germans and Ustaše attacked Tužević on 19 January 1945 and killed 15 inhabitants, took 14 to a camp, and burned and plundered the property of 55. On the same day, they raided the Ivakuša village, destroying 33 buildings and killing eight people. Nine were taken to camps. (HDA, ZKRZ-Zh, kutija 246, 11731–11741).

⁴⁷ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 403–405.

extent, until the liberation of this region. The atrocities against the local Serbian population were largely committed by the Ustaše, followed by the Germans, Italians, and Četniks.

The list of victims provided by Dane Lastavica shows that the fascist terror campaign in the Otočac district claimed 691 lives during the four years of World War II – 211 in the first year, 47 in 1942, 51 in 1943, 377 in 1944, and five in 1945. 488 victims were men, and 203 were women. The largest group among them was men over twenty years of age (at least 345). The victims listed by name included 16 from Otočac, 89 from Brlog and Drenov Klanac, 20 from Dabar, 31 from Doljane, 59 from Donji Babin Potok, 4 from Dugi Dol, 17 from Gornji Babin Potok, 46 from Gornje Vrhovine, 9 from Glavci, 15 from Gorići, 4 from Oravac, 34 from Podum, 28 from Ponor, 32 from Rudopolje, 7 from Srpsko Polje, 6 from Staro Selo, 51 from Škare, 11 from Švica, 81 from Turjanski, 25 from Vrhovine, and 96 from Zalužnica. For the purposes of this research, the most pertinent are the victims of 1941 – those who played a part in the decision of some Serbs to convert to Roman Catholicism. Following the first arrests and executions of the most prominent Serbs in Otočac (14 in the first year of the war), the Serbian inhabitants of Otočac must have felt unsafe. Extensive arrest and execution campaigns were implemented in Brlog and Drenov Klanac, with 44 victims, most of whom were killed right there in Brlog. The execution of the detainees from Gorići took place at Janča, a village halfway between Otočac and Gospić. Twelve inhabitants of Podum were killed in Janča and Jadovno and 24 of Ponor in Janča. Six from Staro Selo and ten from Švica were killed in 1941 at Janča. Ten inhabitants of Turjanski were murdered at Jadovno in 1941, while ten from Zalužnica died at Janča. Besides the victims of fascist terror, some also fell in the People's Liberation War (Partisan casualties) – 621 in the Otočac district. In the Brinje districts, the fascist terror campaign killed 422 during World War II (230 men and 192 women). Twenty-seven men and six women died in 1941. The highest number of victims came from Prokike (31), followed by Gornji Kraj (15) and Brinje (7). The largest killing sites were Bukvići (36), Orlići-Vodoteč-Kneževići (88), Škalić-Malinsko (24), and Prokike (14). In addition to the victims of the fascist terror campaign, 317 Partisan victims fell in the Brinje district.⁴⁸ According to the list provided by Đuro Zatezalo in his book on the Jadovno concentration camp, 233 victims from the districts of Otočac and Brinje were killed at Jadovno and the complex of Ustaše camps

⁴⁸ D. Lastavica, *Hrvatski genocid nad srpskim i jevrejskim narodom u koncentracionom logoru Gospić (Lika) 1941–1945, a Srbima i 1991–...?* (Novi Sad: SP, 2011), 461–471. A list of the victims' names was provided in M. Bukvić, *Otočac i Brinje u NOB*, 411–532.

(208 from Otočac and 15 from Brinje).⁴⁹ Gojko Vezmar's research suggests that in the first year of the war, 320 civilians and 219 combatants were killed in the Otočac district, whereas 81 civilians and 14 Partisans fell in Brinje.⁵⁰ In the second year of the war, according to Vezmar's research, 122 died in the Otočac district and 58 in the district of Brinje.⁵¹ The same source suggests that the total number of victims in both districts amounted to 2,272 (1,535 in Otočac and 737 in Brinje).⁵² There were 1,232 combatant casualties (823 in Otočac and 409 in Brinje). Adding up these figures, the total death toll in both districts, according to Vezmar, was 3,404.⁵³ The number of victims, particularly in 1941 and 1942, shows that the Serbs had little interest in converting from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism when such a move did not guarantee their survival.

Religious Conversion in the Diocese of Senj-Modruš and the Territory of Otočac and Brinje

As soon as the NDH was proclaimed, Archbishop Stepinac paid a visit to Slavko Kvaternik and soon, on 16 April, had an audience with Dr. Ante Pavelić.⁵⁴ At these meetings and later, in an epistle sent to the clergy of the NDH on 28 April 1941, the archbishop expressed great satisfaction with the formation of the NDH and called on the clergy to undertake the "exalted work toward the preservation and progress of the Croatian state" (the bishops of Split-Dalmatia, Krk, and Senj did the same).

The Ustaše saw the Serbian Orthodox Church as the bearer and cornerstone of Serbian identity in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and hence Orthodox priests were their first targets. The plan was to get the Orthodox believers to convert to Roman Catholicism, ultimately resulting in their assimilation, i.e., Croatization. A law on religious conversion was passed as early as 3 May 1941. With this act, the Ustaše regime positioned itself above the Roman Catholic Church, ruling that would-be converts had to address "their first requests to the executive authorities" (the district, i.e., the township governorate).⁵⁵ The Roman

⁴⁹ D. Zatezalo, *Jadovno kompleks ustaških logora 1941*, vol. I (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2007), 731–732.

⁵⁰ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 196–197.

⁵¹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 290–294.

⁵² Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 417.

⁵³ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 421.

⁵⁴ J. Krišto, *Sukob simbola: politika, vjere i ideologija u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Globus, 2001), 37–39.

⁵⁵ *Narodne novine* (4 May 1941).

Catholic Church was displeased with this interference of the state in religious affairs. The historian Jure Krišto compellingly shows how the correspondence and circulars between the Church and organs of governance were exchanged and how the state and the Church responded.⁵⁶ According to Archbishop St-

⁵⁶ The Archbishop's cathedra reacted to the law of 3 May on 8 May 1941, saying that "accession to the Catholic Church can only be allowed to persons confirmed to want to do so genuinely and convinced of the truthfulness of our faith and the need for the salvation of the soul" and advising that those "who want to join the Church out of the wrong motives, seeking in it nothing but protection of their material interests and egotistical objectives" should be rejected. Soon after that, on 27 May, the Ministry of Justice and Religion of the NDH published the Guidelines for Religious Conversion. In this document, Minister Mile Budak instructed the district and township authorities that only they were authorized to issue papers approving requests for religious conversion. In June, rules on receiving new members into the Roman Catholic Church came out. On 14 July, the Ministry of Justice and Religion of the NDH sent the diocesan ordinaries of the NDH a letter that showed that the Ustaše did not want Orthodox priests, teachers, merchants, craftsmen, and wealthy peasants to convert to Catholicism. It is also evident that the state did not want the Orthodox population to convert to Greek (Eastern) Catholicism and that issuing permits for religious conversion was the prerogative of the state. On 16 July, the Church sent a communiqué to the Ministry of Justice and Religion expressing its disagreement with prohibiting conversion into Greek Catholicism and the view that conversions should be allowed to the Orthodox intelligentsia. On 30 July 1941, the State Agency for Renewal (which had, in the meantime, gradually taken over matters pertaining to religious conversion) sent a circular reiterating its request for the authorities not to allow conversions to Greek Catholicism except in cases where there were already Greek Catholic parishes in place. The circular also mentions certificates of honesty that only district and municipal governorates could issue and which were a necessary prerequisite for beginning the process of religious conversion. These guidelines were valid in the entire territory of the NDH except for the region of Krbava and Psat and the county of Gora. A communiqué sent by the Church leadership to its hierarchy in early August 1941 plainly shows that the Church consented that the state authorities would issue honesty certificates, essentially letting the regime decide who would be issued a permit to convert and who would not. Would-be converts had to undergo "preparations" for converting to Catholicism, and these "preparations," i.e., religious instruction, were led by local priests or so-called missionaries who assisted the clergy. The pace and intensity of conversion were set by the Ustaše regime rather than the church hierarchy. Because of the chaotic situation and the changing circumstances (the uprising of the people and the German and Italian critical attitude toward the Ustaše's conversion policy), in September 1941, the Ministry of Interior Affairs sent a circular to the organs of the state and church ordinaries, hastening religious conversions and asking them not to make bureaucratic problems for those who wanted to convert to Catholicism. The Department of Religion of the State Agency for Renewal was formed in early October 1941 and took charge of all matters concerning religious conversion. Nevertheless, the Church expressed its official position on religious conversion and the state's interference

epinac's report to Pope Pius XII in 1943, 240,000 Serbs were Catholicized from May 1941 to the spring of 1942 in the territory of the NDH.⁵⁷ The campaign of mass Catholicization ended in the spring of 1942 with the establishment of the Croatian Orthodox Church.⁵⁸

To make it easier to get the Serbs to convert, the Ustaše killed or forcibly deported a part of the Orthodox clergy. For instance, in Lika, they killed Dimitrije Jerković, a priest in Široka Kula, already on 13 April 1941. Priests Nikola Bogunović of Donji Lapac and Petar Majstorović of Doljani were killed in May. In the early days of the terror campaign, the priests in Plaško were murdered alongside their superior, Savo Trlajić. All of them were killed at the Jadovno camp in Velebit.⁵⁹

The religious conversions in Otočac were individual rather than collective. Unlike northern Croatia (the Archdiocese of Zagreb and the Diocese of Đakovo and Srijem), which saw an exceptionally high rate of religious conversions, in the Diocese of Senj-Modruš, conversions were much fewer. There are three reasons for that. Namely, in this territory, the Ustaše had committed a string of atrocities against the local Serbian population shortly after the establishment of their regime, leading to an uprising of the people in Lika, Bosanska Krajina, and Kordun. In addition, in these zones, Serbs were later protected from Ustaše attacks because the Italians had taken control of the territory

in this matter at the bishops' conference of 17–19 November 1941, issuing a ten-point conclusion. Firstly, it noted that only the Church could and must deal with conversions to Catholicism; secondly, it emphasized that only the church hierarchy could appoint those who would instruct would-be converts; thirdly, these instructors must be tied to church institutions; fourth, the Catholic Church recognized only the conversions that were conducted in line with church rules; fifth, state institutions were not allowed to rescind the conversions done by the Church; sixth, the bishops' conference would appoint a committee to ensure the implementation of rules during conversions; seventh, the Church would admit only those who sought to join it of their free will; eighth, the conversion ritual could not be determined by the state; ninth, the committee would organize courses for those who would later teach would-be converts; and tenth, all civil rights must be guaranteed to the converts. In this way, the Roman Catholic Church put a safeguard in place, ensuring that it could not be accused of Catholic proselytism, encouraging the members of other religions to convert, etc. For more details see Krišto, *Sukob simbola: politika, vjere i ideologija u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj*, 177–202.

⁵⁷ J. Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija u Jugoslaviji: okupacija i kolaboracija* (Zagreb: EPH, Novi Liber, 2010), 629–631.

⁵⁸ See M. Radanović ed., *Pokatoličavanje Srba u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: SNV, 2019).

⁵⁹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 148.

south of the demarcation line that went through Kordun. Jure Krišto⁶⁰ based his conclusions about the number of Serbs who converted in the Diocese of Senj-Modruš on the reports of local parsons. Seventy out of 139 parsons replied to the communiqué sent by Bishop Burić to all parishes, and Jure Krišto published this list. The communiqué shows that most conversions took place in 1941 and that the majority were performed in the following towns and parishes: Cvitović kod Slunja, Donji Kosinj, Drežnik Grad, Gračac, Jasenak, and Komesarac. Three of these saw the highest number of conversions: Jasenak, Cvitović, and Komesarac. Fifty-four converted to Catholicism (33 women and 21 men) in Jasenak, 106 in Cvitović (46 women and 60 men), and 264 in Komesarac (101 adults and 163 children). The conversions in Komesarac probably involved the believers on the Bosnian side of the Korana River – those from the village of Crnaje and the nearby Orthodox villages in the Cazin Municipality, not far from Komesarac. Besides these parishes, the highest number of conversions took place in the Gospic parish (204), followed by Vrbovsko (65) and the parish of Ogulin (61). Sušak and Crikvenica each saw 17 conversions from Orthodoxy. The local parson explained that in Sušak and Crikvenica, almost all of them were returnees to Roman Catholicism. The total number of converts in the Diocese of Senj-Modruš, according to the data obtained by Krišto, was 942. According to the reports sent by local parsons, 454 converted from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. 472 persons and 22 families submitted requests to convert from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. Thus, Krišto's research suggests that the number of Orthodox converts to Roman Catholicism in the Diocese of Senj-Modruš reached 926, in addition to 22 family requests (from the territory of Gračac and Drežnik Grad). However, there must have been more converts, as Krišto did not list all instances of conversion. According to Vezmar's data, preparations for Catholicizing Serbs took place in Ličko Petrovo Selo, but the conversions never took place because the inhabitants of this area were targeted in pogroms that led to the uprising. Conversion also proved unsuccessful in the Lovinac area, where parson Andrija Depeder refused to convert the Serbs of Ploča and Kike and sent them home, saying: "You've already been baptized; this is not about baptism but something else".⁶¹

In the territory of Otočac, 70 religious conversions not listed in Krišto's work took place in the first year of the NDH regime. These converts were prominent members of the local community or public servants. The listing for each family included a note on their financial status. The majority of conversions happened from May to July 1941, and those who requested them believed that

⁶⁰ J. Krišto, "Prijelazi na katolicizam u Senjsko-modruškoj biskupiji 1941–1943," *Riječki teološki časopis* 12, 1 (2004), 269–296.

⁶¹ Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945*, 145–152.

this would help them retain their jobs or businesses and, ultimately, save them from the Ustaše pogroms. The table below shows that only 22 families sought to convert to Catholicism in that period. This does not mean that no religious conversions took place in the Otočac area after July, but their number is likely to have been negligible because the Italians took complete control of this zone.

Table II. Number of requests for religious conversion in the Diocese of Senj-Modruš (Krišto 2004)

Parish	Number of submitted requests for conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism
Boričevac	1
Bribir	2
Crikvenica	1
Cvitović	106
Donji Kosinj	20
Drežnik Grad	15 families and 1 person
Generalski Stol	1
Gospic	1
Gračac	7 families and 1 person
Jasenak	54
Komesarac	264
Kraljevica	1
Ogulin	2
Ravna Gora	1
Ričice	1
Saborsko	4
Selce	3
Sveti Juraj	1
Široka Kula	2
Unknown	5
Total	472 and 22 families

Table III. Data from parsons' reports on the number of conversions from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism (Krišto 2004)

Parish	Number of conversions from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism
Crikvenica	17
Crni Lug	1
Fužine	2
Gospic	204
Grižane	6
Jablanac	3
Josipdol	4
Karlobag	1
Kostrena – Sveta Lucija	1
Kraljevica	1
Ledenice	3
Lič	1
Lički Novi	15
Lokve	1
Lukovdol	9
Modruš	1
Novi Vinodolski	2
Ogulin	61
Oštarije	9
Selce	3
Slunj	22
Sušak	17
Škrljevo	5
Vrbovsko	65
Total	454

Table IV. Name list of converts from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism in Otočac and its area⁶²

Surname and name	Year of birth	Occupation and social class	Village	District	Financial Status	Date of conversion request / date of conversion approval
Tardi Pavle	1881	Merchant	Otočac	Otočac	500,000 kn	17 June 1941/30 June 1941
Tardi Katica	1899	Housewife, homemaker	Otočac	Otočac		17 June 1941/30 June 1941
Tardi Marija Vukosava	1922	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		17 June 1941/30 June 1941
Tardi Jovanka	1929	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		17 June 1941/30 June 1941
Aleksić Đuro	1879	Farmer	Orovac	Otočac	50,000 kn	5 July 1941/15 July 1941
Balinić Mile	1883	Senior woodland officer	Orovac	Otočac	60,000 kn	5 July 1941/15 July 1941
Balinić Milan	1910	Farmer	Orovac	Otočac		5 July 1941/15 July 1941
Balinić Mane	1915	Farmer	Orovac	Otočac		5 July 1941/15 July 1941
Balinić Đuro	1920	Farmer	Orovac	Otočac		5 July 1941/15 July 1941
Balinić Milka	1915	Housewife	Orovac	Otočac		5 July 1941/15 July 1941
Balinić Nikola	1904	Retired first lieutenant	Orovac	Otočac	50,000 kn	4. July 1941./16. July 1941.
Šašić Vujo	1901	Cobbler	Otočac	Otočac	250,000 kn	7 July 1941/11 July 1941
Šašić Gojko	1929	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941./11. July 1941.

⁶² HDA, Ministarstvo pravosuđa i bogoštovlja Nezavisne Države Hrvatske (henceforth MPB NDH), box 40, 4759-B-1942.

Šašić Božo	1932	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 11 July 1941
Šašić Mladen	1934	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 11 July 1941
Ilić Milić	1899	Retired master sergeant	Otočac	Otočac	20,000 kn	17 June 1941/ 30 June 1941
Mihovilović Svetozar	1892	Private clerk	Otočac	Otočac	70,000 kn	17 June 1941/ 30 June 1941
Šuput Rade	1902	Retired master sergeant	Otočac	Otočac	60,000 kn	7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Šuput Ljubica	1931	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Šuput Bosiljka	1933	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Šuput Mile	1935	Child	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Božić Dane	1898	Retired master sergeant	Otočac	Otočac	20,000 kn	7 July 1941/ 15 July 1941
Božić Danica	1902	Housewife	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Božić Đorđe	1928	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Božić Nikola	1930	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Božić Bratislav	1938	Child	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/ 12 July 1941
Ljubotina Nikola	1897	Retired master sergeant	Otočac	Otočac	35,000 kn	10 July 1941/ 16 July 1941
Ljubotina Ljubica	1924	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		10 July 1941/ 16 July 1941
Ljubotina Đurđica	1925	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		10 July 1941/ 16 July 1941.
Ljubotina Zora	1926	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		10 July 1941/ 16 July 1941

Ljubotina Desa	1931	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		10 July 1941/16 July 1941
Grozdanić Rade	1881	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac	50,000 kn	22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Ana	1890	Housewife	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Mihael	1914	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Katarina	1921	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Marija	1922	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Daniel	1924	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Božidar	1928	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Grozdanić Nikola	1931	Farmer	Ponori	Otočac		22 July 1941/30 July 1941
Oršanić Boja	1915	Court clerk	Dubrava	Otočac	Receives a monthly salary as a court clerk	18 May 1941/2 June 1941
Ognjenović Đuro	1892	Retired repairman, previously in public service	Otočac	Otočac	20,000 kn	8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ognjenović Marija	1898	Housewife	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ognjenović Juraj	1921	Blacksmith	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ognjenović Olga	1928	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ognjenović Dušanka	1935	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ognjenović Jovanka	1928	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941

Ćuić Dane	1888	Merchant	Otočac	Otočac	600,000 kn	14 July 1941/21 July 1941
Ćuić Stanka	1900	Housewife	Otočac	Otočac		14 July 1941/21 July 1941
Miroslavljević Julka	1870	Housewife	Otočac	Otočac	15,000 kn	14 July 1941/21 July 1941
Šašić Milan	1912	Shoemaker	Otočac	Otočac	50,000 kn	7 July 1941/15 July 1941
Šašić Jelena	1912	Housewife	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/15 July 1941
Šašić Radmila	1932	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/15 July 1941
Šašić Marijana	1935	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		7 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ilić Božo	1894	Barber	Otočac	Otočac	150,000 kn	15 June 1941/1 July 1941
Ilić Katica	1928	Child	Otočac	Otočac		15 June 1941/1 July 1941
Ogrizović Rade	1890	Farmer	Otočac	Otočac	80,000 kn	8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ogrizović Anka	1900	Housewife	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ogrizović Đuro	1923	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ogrizović Julka	1925	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Eror Mile	1896	Merchant	Otočac	Otočac	100,000 kn	8 July 1941/16 July 1941
Ogrizović Ratko	1926	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941
Ogrizović Geco	1929	Pupil	Otočac	Otočac		8 July 1941/15 July 1941

Matulić née Grozdanić Dragica	1912	Teacher	Ponori	Otočac	Unknown because she is not a resident of the district	18 July 1941/31 August 1941
Žubrinić née Đurić Nada	1914	Independent business-woman	Otočac	Otočac	Unknown because she is not a resident of the district	23 May / 17 June 1941
Pejnović Kosta	1896	Cobbler	Vrhovine	Otočac	150,000 kn	Early July/7 August
Alinčić Vasilije	1906	Teacher	Turjanski	Otočac	30,000 kn	5 May 1941/25 July 1941
Alinčić Marija	1908	Housewife	Turjanski	Otočac		5 May 1941/25 July 1941
Alinčić Dragoljub	1933	Child	Turjanski	Otočac		5 May 1941/25 July 1941
Alinčić Dubravka	1935	Child	Turjanski	Otočac		5 May 1941/25 July 1941
Alinčić Milojko	1938	Child	Turjanski	Otočac		5 May 1941/25 July 1941

Religious Identity of the Serbs in the Otočac Area after World War II

After the formation of federal Yugoslavia, the campaign of converting the Orthodox population to Roman or Greek Catholicism received a universal epilogue: all religious conversions were rendered null and void. A surviving ledger of conversions in the parish of Kunić Ribnički, near Ozalj, reports: “The Presidency of the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH) issued on 16 August 1944 the following directive: starting from 1 October 1941, Orthodox conversions the occupying regime took place under duress and are therefore null and void. The keepers of vital records are obliged to remove all of those conversions. This should be done quickly and with no formalities”.⁶³ With the development of Yugoslavism, the Serbs of Lika lost their fundamental pillar of identity – the Orthodox faith. Assimilation through allegiance to socialism gained momentum, and the distrust of the Church had

⁶³ This was written in the Marriage Record Book of the Kunić Ribnički parish, now in the Croatian State Archives, by the parson of Kunić on 26 July 1945 (HDA, Matična knjiga vjenčanijh Kunić Ribnički).

its roots in World War II, when the priests of this region had been deported from their parishes, murdered at killing sites, or fled. Whatever the reason for their absence might have been, most of them did not spend the war years with their flock. The failure to restore churches in some settlements and the razing of churches by the local communist leaders suggested that the Serbs of this area had neglected the foundational pillar of their national identity. Other contributing factors included the insufficient number of priests at the disposal of the Orthodox Church to send them to all parishes and the failure to restore churches in many villages and towns either because the locals did not attend church services or because there was not enough funding to repair all places of worship.

During World War II, some Orthodox churches in the Brinje and Otočac area were heavily damaged, and many of those that had suffered lighter or heavier damage were completely removed after the war. The village of Lučane near Brinje, the birthplace of Patriarch Josif Rajačić, had a church which was heavily damaged during World War II; shortly after the war, the troops of the Yugoslav Army razed it to the ground.⁶⁴ Furthermore, according to the locals' accounts, several gruesome murders happened by the ruins of the church after the war. Dents in the ground can still be seen at the site of the demolished building. The Lučane parish also had the Church of the Descent of the Holy Spirit in Prokike, on the road to Senj. It was built in 1700 and shelled by the Italians during World War II.⁶⁵ After the war, the communist authorities razed the church and built a community center in the village. The locals report that ashlar with inscriptions can still be seen on the building of the community center.⁶⁶ There was another church in Vodoteč, not far from Lučane. The church in Vodoteč was destroyed during World War II and razed to the ground and replaced by a monument to the fallen combatants after the war.⁶⁷ The Church of St. Sava in Brlog was

⁶⁴ M. Kosovac, *Srpska pravoslavna mitropolija karlovačka po podacima od 1905*. (Sremski Karlovci: Saborski odbor, 1910), 959–960. “Naslovna,” Sveštena episkopija Gornjokarlovacka, accessed December 23rd 2024, www.eparhija-gornjokarlovacka.hr.

⁶⁵ Kosovac, *Srpska pravoslavna mitropolija karlovačka po podacima od 1905*, 960. M. Miljanović, “Devastacija pravoslavnih crkava u Hrvatskoj – gornjokarlovacka Eparhija,” *Srpski glas* (December 1990), 10.

⁶⁶ Looking for the site of the church at Prokike, I passed it by several times, unaware that it was hidden in some roadside bushes. It was not until a local helped me that I managed to locate the last foundations of the old church near the Orthodox cemetery southeast of the main road leading from Brinje to Senj and Otočac.

⁶⁷ HDA, Komisija za odnose s vjerskim zajednicama NR Hrvatske (henceforth KOVZ), box 261, 213/1985.

damaged in World War II but escaped demolition after the war.⁶⁸ In Gornje Vrhovine, east of the route Otočac-Korenica, a lone tombstone reminds us that this was where the Church of St. Nicholas once stood.⁶⁹ Built in the early 18th century, this old church was burned down in World War II. As early as 1947, the local People's Liberation Committee built a community center in the church-yard, demolishing the church and repurposing the material in the construction of the center.⁷⁰ The Church of the Nativity of the Holy Virgin was built in the late 18th century in Doljani. It was burned in 1943 and completely disassembled by the local Serbs in 1946–1948.⁷¹ In 1941, Professor Tkalčić came to the church in Glavace and took some of its icons to the Museum of Serbs in Croatia to save them from ruin. At Turjanski, the Church of the Dormition of the Holy Virgin was damaged in World War II by the Partisans,⁷² whereas the Church of St. Nicholas in Škare suffered the same fate at the hands of the Ustaše in 1944 only to be mined after the war.⁷³ Local People's Liberation Committees planned to clear all remains of churches, as can be seen from the plan for removing the church at Donje Vrhovine. The church, whose ruins stood on a road leading from Otočac to the Plitvice Lakes, irked the local People's Liberation Committee, which claimed that it portrayed the village in an unflattering light and told a group of German tourists taking photos next to the church "whose work this was". Hence, they suggested that the building should be removed. At Brinje near Otočac, the church in the heart of the town had fallen into disrepair and remained so for a remarkably long time. The liturgy was performed in it just once a year, on the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. As Miloš Spasojević, the diocesan steward of Lika and parish priest of Otočac, wrote to the Bishop of Gornji Karlovci in the mid-1980s, no more than twenty believers attended the liturgy, and there were both Orthodox and Roman Catholics among them. In 1984, after the service, the priest told the attendees that the church could no longer host devotional services and would be closed for entry because it might cave in during the ceremony, advising them to go to the Catholic Church on the feast of the Transfiguration and pray there. After that, he asked for donations in timber from the timber companies at Vrhovine and Titova Korenica and sought assistance from the Executive Council of the Otočac municipality, but all three

⁶⁸ S. Orlović, *Pravoslavna eparhija Gornjokarlovacka, Šematizam* (Belgrade – Karlovac: Izdavačka ustanova Eparhije gornjokarlovacke Martiria, 2017), 173.

⁶⁹ Kosovac, *Srpska pravoslavna mitropolija karlovacka po podacima od 1905, 953–954.*

⁷⁰ HDA, KOVZ, box 271, 239/1987.

⁷¹ Orlović, *Pravoslavna eparhija Gornjokarlovacka, Šematizam*, 178.

⁷² Orlović, *Pravoslavna eparhija Gornjokarlovacka, Šematizam*, 183.

⁷³ Orlović, *Pravoslavna eparhija Gornjokarlovacka, Šematizam*, 185.

stalled and tried to shift responsibility for this matter to each other. Finally, with four other Lika priests (from Suvaja, Velika Popina, Metko, and Gospic), he decided to take the matter into his own hands and procure the needed timber in the forest nearest to the Brinje church. Knowing that this might land him in prison and cost him his priesthood, he wrote a letter to the bishop of Gornji Karlovci and took full responsibility for this act.⁷⁴ The Partisans demolished the church in Dabar near Otočac in the fall of 1942. According to an eyewitness, Dmitar Zaklan, the commander of the battalion Božidar Adžija, ordered that explosives should be placed in the belfry of the church, although nobody had ever put up resistance from the church. After the Committee for Relations with Religious Communities was informed of who had demolished the church, Miloš Spasojević, the diocesan steward of Lika and parish priest of Otočac, suggested in July 1988 that the walls of the church should be repaired because the whole building might collapse when the bell tolls during funerals.⁷⁵ The church was never repaired. In some cases, émigrés from the USA, originally from Lika, financed the restoration of churches. In 1978, the former inhabitants of the village of Škare near Otočac funded the restoration of the Church of St. Nicholas.⁷⁶ Restorations funded in this way were relatively rare because the local population had little interest in investing their resources into religious buildings.

In an account given to the author of this paper in 2021, Nikola Ivančević of Zalužnica mentioned that there were no church weddings or baptisms during the socialist era. Priests rarely attended funerals. A priest came to cense with holy water, but not everyone received him in their homes. There were assemblies in Turjanski, Divosel, Zalužnica, Otočac, Doljani, and Škare, but accounts suggest that they were more of a secular than religious nature. Every village continued to have an assembly, but few continued to venerate saints and observe religious customs at the sites of erstwhile churches; instead, most inhabitants of Serbian nationality turned to the Communist Party as a pillar of their identity. A return to religion did not happen until 1991 with the awakening of nationalism in the war, which ultimately resulted in just 88 people living today in the Brinje municipality, 414 in the town of Otočac, and 311 in the Vrhovine municipality.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ HDA, KOVZ, box 271, 284/1987.

⁷⁵ HDA, KOVZ, box 274, 153/1/1988.

⁷⁶ HDA, KOVZ, box 239, 151/1978.

⁷⁷ Državni zavod za statistiku, accessed December 23rd 2024, www.dzs.hr.

Conclusion

Until World War II, the Serbs of the Otočac region were members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. During World War II, many Serbs from the Otočac and Brinje area were killed. The modest number of religious conversions suggests the futility of converting from Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. Namely, religious conversion could not save the lives of the Serbs of the Otočac region in the massacres and atrocities committed by the Ustaše, Germans, Italians, and Četniks. The low number of those who did request to convert, 70 in total, shows that the Serbs in Lika quickly understood the nature of the Ustaše regime, with many of them joining the Partisan movement as early as 1941. After World War II, due to the scarcity of priests, demolished churches, and the attitude of the socialist regime toward the Church, the Serbs in Lika mostly neglected religion and espoused the new communist pantheon. The situation remained unchanged until the war of 1991, when some Serbs in Lika returned to religion. However, after Operation Storm (Oluja) and the expulsion of Serbs from a part of the Otočac area, very few Serbs remained in the Gacka Valley, as evidenced by the most recent population census. Although some Serbs returned to the Otočac region, it was mostly an aging population rapidly waning away, sealing the future of this area, at least when it comes to its Serbian inhabitants.

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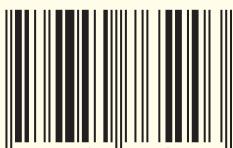
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