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The Role of Concentration Camps in the Policies of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in 1941

Abstract: The paper based on archival, published and press sources, and relevant literature presents the ideological basis and enforcement of the Croatian policy of the extermination of the Serbs and Jews in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) which had its place within the New Order of Europe. Soon after the establishment of the NDH in April 1941, the destruction process was partially centralised in a network of camps centred at Gospić. After the outbreak of a mass Serb uprising and the dissolution of the Gospić camp, a new and much larger system of camps centred at Jasenovac operated as an extermination and concentration camp from the end of August 1941 until the end of the war. In November 1941, the mass internment of undesirable population groups was provided for by law, whereby the destruction process was given a “legal” form.

Keywords: Independent State of Croatia (NDH), Ustasha, occupation, New Order of Europe, Serbs, Jews, Roma, destruction process, Holocaust, concentration camps, Gospić, Jasenovac

The establishment of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH) was made possible by the conjunction of opportune political and military circumstances following the military coup of 27 March 1941 and the attack of Nazi Germany and its allies on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on 6 April the same year. It opened the way for putting in place the Croatian ultranationalist political programme which had been taking shape since the second half of the nineteenth century. It soon became obvious that the ideological profile and political practice of the Croatian puppet state was much closer to the German Nazi model than to the Italian fascist one, even though it was from Italy that a new Croatian king, Tomislav II, was supposed to come.

The new state structure was set up surprisingly fast, mostly because it was able to rely on the administrative structures and paramilitary forces of the former Banovina Croatia.¹ After the public appeal of the vice-president of the Yugoslav government, Vladko Maček, issued upon the entry of Ger-

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¹ Banovina Croatia, an autonomous region of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia with broad powers, was created by the agreement between the Yugoslav prime minister, Dragiša Cvetković, and the leader of the Croatian nationalist movement, Vladko Maček, concluded on 26 August 1939.

man troops in Zagreb, which, by the way, were hailed with enthusiasm by the crowd that took to the streets, the former banovina authorities placed themselves at the disposal of the Ustasha regime. The significant role of the Roman Catholic Church in the inception and policies of the new state gave the latter a markedly clerical character. In the predominantly agrarian Croatian society, the Church's approval or disapproval carried crucial weight on both individual and collective psychological levels.

The newly-established NDH encompassed not only Croatia but also the areas which were neither ethnically nor historically Croatian (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Srem). This is obvious from its own population census: according to the data of the Foreign Ministry of 1 May 1941, of a total population of 6,290,300, Croats made up a little more than one-half (52.46%), while Serbs accounted for nearly one-third (1,925,000 or 30.6%). Muslims were officially subsumed under Croats, while Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Jews and Slovenes constituted larger minorities.²

The archbishop of Zagreb and metropolitan bishop of Croatia Alojzije Stepinac, who had been a supporter of the Croat "revolutionary movement" since 1936,³ extolled the new Croatian state as a divine creation. The archbishop saw its inception as "God's hand at work", as he put it in his circular letter of 28 April 1941 inviting the clergy of the Diocese of Zagreb to set to "the blessed work of preserving and improving the NDH".⁴ This fitted well into the Vatican's plans for expanding its jurisdiction over the "schismatics", i.e. Orthodox Christian Serbs, a goal which was supposed to be served by the creation of a large Croatian Catholic state.⁵ The annihilation of the Orthodox Serb population within the boundaries of that state, the obliteration of their identity and of all traces of their existence was supported by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and clergy. Some measure of disagreement between the Ustasha authorities and the archbishop Stepinac and some other prelates, which occasionally surfaced to public notice, was

² Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941–1945* (Zagreb: SN Liber, 1978²), 106.

³ Milorad Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja. Istorija Srba u novom veku 1492–1992* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2007), 415, 420, 423 and 431.

⁴ *Katolički list* no. 17, 197–198; Viktor Novak, *Magnum crimen. Half a Century of Clericalism in Croatia. Dedicated to Unknown Victims of Clericalism*, vol. II (Jagodina: Gambit 2011; English ed. of the book originally published in 1948), 720–721. The archbishop's circular letter was broadcasted on the radio for a few days in a row either in its entirety or in excerpts, ensuring its messages a much wider outreach than the printed version could have.

⁵ Carlo Falconi, *Il silenzio di Pio XII* (Milan: Sugar Editore, 1965); Avro Manhattan, *The Vatican's Holocaust. The sensational account of the most horrifying religious massacre of the 20th century* (Springfield: Ozark Books, 1988²), 89–104.



the result of divergent opinions on the methods of achieving the shared goal, not on the goal itself.⁶

As long as it was not a threat to German interests, the Croatian policy on the Serbs enjoyed Berlin's undivided support. The Italians had no doubts whatsoever that orders for the destruction of Serbs were coming from the government itself.⁷ As early as 11 June 1941 the Italian 2nd Army reported that Catholic priests and monks had been leading murderous raids on Orthodox Serbs and acting as promoters of Ustasha propaganda, being

⁶ Stella Alexander, *The Triple Myth. A Life of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac* (New York: East European Monographs, 1987), 71–72; Jonathan Steinberg, "Types of Genocide? Croats, Serbs and Jews 1941–5", in *The Final Solution. Origins and Implementation*, ed. David Cesarani (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 183.

⁷ Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 186–187.

convinced that the Catholic faith could not rise and grow stronger unless all Serbs were destroyed.⁸

The premises of the ideology of the pre-war Ustasha terrorist organisation, notably its anti-Serbian and anti-Jewish component, were promptly incorporated into racist policies created by the newly-established power structure. Those policies were pursued throughout the existence of the Croatian state within the New Order of Europe. State repression was dressed up in a pseudo-legal form, which opened the door to conducting a policy at the heart of which was the idea of a homogeneous state of (Muslim and Roman Catholic) Croats achieved through the extermination of Serbs, Jews and, somewhat later, Roma, as well as of politically undesirable citizens, at first Yugoslav nationalists, and then communists as well.⁹

Immediately upon the declaration of the establishment of the pro-Nazi puppet Croatia in 1941, public discourse became saturated with ultranationalist and racist rhetoric, and targeted against two main groups: Serbs and Jews, though Serbs principally.¹⁰ One may therefore speak of two Croatian nationalist-racist policies, Serbian and Jewish. Those policies, although pursued simultaneously and with the same ultimate goal, had their distinctive features, from ideological to practical. Hence the process of stigmatisation, social exclusion, dehumanisation, expropriation and extermination of the two national-racial groups was not entirely the same. Somewhat later, the annihilation project was expanded to include the Roma, with the exception of Muslim Roma (“white Gypsies”), the majority of whom lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina which had been annexed to the Independent State of Croatia.

Even though there were clear differences in the enforcement and final outcome of the policy of annihilating the “undesirable” when it comes to Serbs on the one hand and Jews and Roma on the other, the key fact is that there was a publicly proclaimed state policy of destroying all these groups and that it was pursued using all available means, depending on the circumstances and resources. That is the reason why the Croatian policy on all three groups had all elements of the crime of genocide throughout the existence of the NDH.¹¹

⁸ Ibid. 186.

⁹ Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, 158–184; Bogdan Krizman, *NDH između Pavelića i Musolinija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1983²), 117–137; Milan Koljanin, “Zakoni o logorima Nezavisne Države Hrvatske”, in *Jasenovac, sistem ustaških logora smrti* (Belgrade: Stručna knjiga, 1996), 30.

¹⁰ Krizman, *NDH*, 119.

¹¹ In the view of Tomislav Dulić, *Utopias of Nation. Local Mass Killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1941–42* (Uppsala University, 2005), 365, the extermination of Jews and Roma

The plan for the extermination of Serbs faced the Ustasha state with the fact that they made up about one-third of the population. Therefore, its putting into practice required full mobilisation of state institutions and resources. Besides the already existing institutions, new ones were set up with this as their main responsibility. The annihilation policy was carried out both by the Ustasha movement – its organs (central and local) and its military and police forces – and by administrative bodies, from the government and ministries down to the lower levels of public administration, counties and districts (*velika župas* and *kotars* respectively). The Croatian regular army (*domobranstvo*, Home Guard) and gendarmerie (*oružništvo*) were also assigned a role in the carrying out of the policy.¹² This is not contradicted by the fact that Croatian army officers sometimes voiced their disapproval of the methods used against the Serbs or by the occasional cases of Ustasas being disarmed by Croatian army units.¹³ The systematic and mass killing of Serbs was committed primarily by Ustasha military units (*Ustaška vojnica*) and, together with them or independently, armed civilians (“wild Ustasha” or Ustasha militia) led by local Ustasha officials.¹⁴ All of that was taking place in accordance with the general policy of destroying undesirable groups, and concrete actions were undertaken on orders orally transmitted from highest places.¹⁵

in the NDH was a genocide because a “substantial part of the population” was destroyed, while the case of Serbs is downplayed as an “attempted genocide” or ethnocide. On the other hand, Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkrieges. Massengewalt der Ustasa gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburg: Hamburg Edition, 2013), 259 and 268–269, argues that the crimes against Serbs were not a genocide and, what is even more shocking, that there is no evidence for a planned annihilation.

¹² More recent Croatian historiography on the Ustasha military organisation completely ignores this role of the movement’s military wing; see e.g. Amir Obhodjaš et al., *Ustaška vojnica. Oružana sila Ustaškog pokreta u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj 1941–1945*, vols. I and II (Zagreb: Despot Infinitus, 2013). Works on the Croatian regular army (*domobranstvo*) are almost equally silent on its role in the destruction of Serbs, cf. Nikica Barić, *Ustroj kopnene vojske domobranstva Nezavisne Države Hrvatske 1941–1945* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2003), 84 and 455–459.

¹³ Headquarters of the Croat Legions to the Commander of the Croatian Army, Main Headquarters, Bosanski Novi, 5 Aug. 1941, published in Slavko Vukčević, ed., *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske 1941–1945*, vol. I of *Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u Prvom i Drugom svjetskom ratu. Zbornik dokumenata* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1993), 454–456; Barić, *Ustroj*, 455–459; Ervin Šinko, *Drvarski dnevnik*, ed. Ištvan Bošnjak (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1987), 150–151.

¹⁴ Contemporary Croatian historiography tends to ascribe the crimes against Serbs to the “wild Ustasha”, cf. Barić, *Ustroj*, 455–459.

¹⁵ “Zašto je došlo do zločina u Bač jamama”, manuscript, Papers of Petar Drakulić, Muzej žrtava genocida [Museum of Genocide Victims], Belgrade; Branko Vujanović

Even though the methods, dynamic and means of the annihilation process varied, its ultimate goal was the physical destruction of the Serb population and of all traces of their group identity, notably its religious, Orthodox Christian, dimension. A series of laws banned all Serbian national symbols and institutions, followed by the seizure of their public and private property, followed by increasingly frequent murders.¹⁶ The first to bear the brunt were the cities and ethnically compact Serbian areas in the former Austrian Military Frontier (Lika, Kordun, Banija, west Slavonia and Srem), then Bosanska Krajina, Herzegovina and eastern Bosnia, i.e. the areas bordering Serbia and Montenegro. The Serb social elite was the first to be subjected to physical extermination. The Serbian Orthodox Church was outlawed, its bishops, priests and monks tortured, murdered or exiled, churches and monasteries systematically ravaged, their properties looted or destroyed. Besides priests, teachers were also seen as bearers of Serbian national identity and were subjected to ruthless repression. According to the official Croatian records of the second half of July 1941, “there still are 2,204 male and female teachers of the Greek-Eastern [i.e. Christian Orthodox] faith, and the Ministry of Education suggests that they be transferred to concentration camps”.¹⁷

The programme of the destruction of Serbs had a foreign policy dimension to it. It fitted into the Nazi German plan for an “ethnic reorganisation” of Europe aimed at the national homogenisation of the Third Reich and germanisation of the annexed parts of the occupied states. It was in keeping with that plan that Slovenes from the German-occupied part of Slovenia were expelled to the NDH and the German-occupied part of Serbia. The conference of German and Croatian representatives held in Zagreb on 4 June 1941 decided on resettling (expelling) to the German-occupied part of Serbia, apart from Slovenes, an appropriate number of Serbs from the NDH.¹⁸

Croatian anti-Serbian discourse was essentially contradictory. It denied the existence of the Serbian people as such on the one hand,¹⁹ while

& Čedomir Višnjić, *Glina 13. maja 1941. U povodu 70. godišnjice ustaškog zločina* (Zagreb: SKD Prosvjeta, 2011), 31.

¹⁶ Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše*, 158–178.

¹⁷ Vukčević, ed., *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, 392–393.

¹⁸ Slobodan D. Milošević, *Izbeglice i preseljenici na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1945. godine* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1981), 31–34; Tone Ferenc, *Nacistička politika denacionalizacije u Sloveniji u godinama od 1941. do 1945* (Ljubljana & Belgrade: Partizanska knjiga, 1979).

¹⁹ That was part of Croatia's official policy which Pavelić presented to Hitler at their first meeting on 6 June 1941; cf. Andreas Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei*

calling for, and working on, their elimination on the other. “Theoretical” basis for the dehumanisation of Serbs were the allegedly insurmountable civilisational differences between the Croats, as an eminently western people, and the Serbs, as the embodiment of an inferior and odious “Byzantium”. Overt or oblique, such a discourse had become commonplace in Croatian public life as early as the interwar period,²⁰ and so had the thesis about the Croat people being exploited, oppressed and existentially imperilled by “greater-Serbian” Yugoslavia and the Serbs as a whole.

The discourse about the necessity of defending the very existence of the Croat people that became prevailing immediately upon the establishment of the Nazi satellite state of Croatia came down to the following: the Croat people has been released from the unnatural and deadly political framework into which it was forced in 1918, and has now returned to its natural, civilisational, ideological and racial (Germanic) setting epitomised by Nazi Germany.²¹ Unlike the NDH, the other Slavic nations that had been given a place in Hitler’s “New Order” (Bulgaria and Slovakia) neither denied their Slavic origin nor sought to relate themselves to a Germanic ancestry. Continuing the nineteenth-century legacy of Ante Starčević, the originator of exclusive Croat nationalism, the Croatian state widened its distance from the Serbs in racial terms as well.

The basic discourse was disseminated to the propaganda beat set by the central press, notably the daily *Hrvatski narod* (Croatian People). Its editorial of 11 April 1941 claimed that never in its glorious and turbulent history had the Croat people paid such a high price “in blood and wealth” as it had in Yugoslavia, laying the blame for that on the “centuries-old enemy”, the local Serb population and the Serbs in Serbia, and their helpers, and

Hitler. *Vertrauliche Aufzeichnungen über Unterredungen mit Vertretern des Auslands 1931–1941* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard und Graefe Verlag, 1967), 577; Krizman, *NDH*, 48–49.

²⁰ Milan Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918–1941* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2008), 299.

²¹ As reported by Edmund Veesenmayer, a member of the German diplomatic staff in Zagreb, to the foreign minister Ribbentrop, on the occasion of his meeting with the designated head of the Ustasha NDH, Ante Pavelić, in Karlovac on 14 April 1941, Pavelić stated that he was going to prove that the “Croats are not of Slavic but of Germanic ancestry. And finally, he offered assurances that Hitler would not be disappointed in him” (quoted after Slobodan Milošević, *Nemačko-italijanski odnosi na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1942* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1991), 47. At his meeting with Hitler on 21 July 1941, Slavko Kvaternik, commander-in-chief of the Croatian army, also insisted on a non-Slavic origin of the Croats, cf. Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmänner*, vol. II, 612.

driving the message home with an open threat that “the just Croat people” would judge them all.²²

Both the anti-Serbian and anti-Jewish discourses drew on the thesis about the Croat people’s imperilment by the Serbs and Jews who had been working together against its vital interests. So, the Croat people was compelled to secure its future by radically removing those threats from its body. Still, on the list of Croatian enemies, the Serbs held the place of honour. Whether communists or not, they had begun to be arrested and murdered even before the mass arrests of communists that ensued after 22 June 1941. The beginning of the “crusade” against the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a large-scale internment and killing of Jews. The Jews were identified with bolshevism, one of two archenemies of humankind (the other was plutocracy, i.e. liberal capitalism).

The anti-Jewish discourse drew on traditional and modern anti-Semitism, and so did the anti-Jewish laws, starting with the “Legal Decree on Racial Affiliation” and the “Legal Decree on the Protection of the Aryan Blood and Honour of the Croat people” which were passed on 30 April 1941 and which were soon followed by a number of other anti-Semitic laws.²³ Moreover, to the accusations against the Jews yet another cardinal sin was added: collaboration with the already demonised Serbs. Anti-Serbianism/Yugoslavism and anti-Semitism had already been commonplace in the interwar papers of the Croatian extreme right.²⁴ After the establishment of the pro-Nazi Croatia they came to dominate public discourse, from the printed media to public addresses of highest state officials.

The attack of Nazi Germany, its allies and satellites on the Soviet Union gave another strong boost to the NDH’s repressive policies towards the Serbs as well as the Jews. Anti-bolshevist/anti-communist discourse introduced then would become an essential part of anti-Serbian and anti-Jewish policies too. The ideological label “communist” was attached not only to the communist opponents of the Croatian state but to all Serbs and Jews, be they communists and communist sympathisers or not. Therefore, from 22 June 1941 the policy of the destruction of Serbs and Jews was pursued in the sign of the struggle against communism in which the Croat people took part both at home and, together with the other peoples of the “New Europe”, in the East.²⁵

²² Krizman, *NDH*, 123.

²³ Ivo Goldstein & Slavko Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2001), 117–124.

²⁴ Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam*, 395–462.

²⁵ Note on the conversation that Hitler and Marshal Slavko Kvaternik had at the Führer’s Headquarters on 21 July 1941, in Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmänner*, vol. II, 575–580.

The invasion of the Soviet Union led the Croatian leadership to mobilise all resources for the struggle for the principles of the “New Order”. The Croat people was called upon to join the struggle of the great German nation in defence of Europe against “Jewish-bolshevist savagery”, the greatest enemy of humankind and the Croat people. According to the Croat leader Pavelić’s proclamation of 2 July 1941, calling upon the people to take part in the struggle against bolshevism, the Croats had yet another important reason for joining in: “The Moscow power-holders” had made an alliance with the “Belgrade power-holders” so as “to prevent”, at the last moment, “our national liberation and save the prison of the Croat people, the former Yugoslavia”.²⁶ That was a clear allusion to the Yugoslav-Soviet agreement signed on 5 April 1941, a day before the German and Italian invasion of Yugoslavia.

* * *

From the early days of Ustasha Greater Croatia there was an effort to bring system into the annihilation process. As far as the Serbs were concerned, the process began in their ethnic areas, and the countryside. Slowly but surely, however, an increasing number of executions were carried out in the newly-established system of camps. Until the end of the summer of 1941 the elimination of the Serbian population had the form of forced resettlement to the German-occupied part of Serbia, and therefore so-called resettlement camps for Serbs operated for a few months in Sisak (Caprag), Slavenska Požega and Bjelovar. Those camps were not intended for extermination, but acts of torture were carried out in them on a massive scale, and a large number of Serbs were killed either during transportation to or in the camps.²⁷ The “resettlement-to-Serbia” formula was useful in the process of physical elimination because it served as a pretext for concentrating Serbs in one place for execution.

Forced conversion of Christian Orthodox Serb population to Roman Catholicism was no doubt the main method of obliterating their national identity and of croatisation, and it was there that the symbiotic relationship between the Ustasha state and the Roman Catholic Church found its full expression. The Roman Catholic Church’s main motivation for supporting the Ustasha state was in that the latter was radically wiping out the Orthodox ecclesiastical organisation and was keenly committed to converting the Serbs to Roman Catholicism even at the cost of their large-scale

²⁶ *Poglavnik govori*, vol. 2 (Zagreb 1941), 51.

²⁷ Miodrag Bijelić, *Sabirni ustaški logor u Slavonskoj Požegi 1941. godine* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2008).

physical annihilation. Members of the Catholic clergy and religious orders performed the conversion rite with the assistance of Croatian military or police forces, under the grisly shadow of mass massacres and the aggressive anti-Serbian and anti-Orthodox propaganda campaign. It was not by chance that the “Legal Decree on Conversion from One Faith to Another” was enacted as early as 3 May 1941.²⁸ But the opportunity for conversion was not to be given to members of the Serbian social elite. In its circular letter of 30 July 1941, the Ministry of the Interior ordered that certificates of conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism not be issued to members of the intelligentsia, save by exception;²⁹ and the order for their transfer to the camp at Gospić followed before long. This went well with the policy of the Roman Catholic Church not to permit conversion to those who would do it out of “self-interest”, alluding to the Serbs of good financial and intellectual standing.³⁰

Nor was “voluntary” conversion to Roman Catholicism in itself a guarantee of life; sooner or later, many a “convert” ended up murdered.³¹ The main criterion for applying repression was affiliation, whether current or former, to Orthodox Christianity. In July 1941 the Ustasha Police Directorate (*Ravnateljstvo ustaške policije*) ordered the counties to compile, within fifteen days, a register not only of all local Serbs but also of all those who had ever been Orthodox.³² In that way, the religious-racial criterion was introduced into the annihilation process, because one’s Serbian descent was equated with one’s membership of the Orthodox Church regardless of one’s possible subsequent change of religion. The same criterion was applied to the Jews; namely, the change of religion was not enough to save them from annihilation.

The outbreak of a Serbian uprising in Herzegovina in early June 1941, and with full force in Lika and Bosanska Krajina in late July 1941, was a development which increasingly influenced Croatian policies. Once Serbian ethnic areas were liberated by the insurgents, among whom those of communist persuasion would prevail, the destruction process was increasingly carried out under the umbrella of military actions against the insurgents. At first carried out by Croatian forces alone, such actions were

²⁸ *Zbornik zakona i naredaba Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Ministarstvo pravosuđa i bogoštovlja, 1941), 56; *Narodne novine* no. 19, 5 May 1941; “Uputa prilikom prelaza s jedne vjere na drugu”, in *Zbornik zakona*, 122; *Narodne novine* no. 37, 27 May 1941.

²⁹ Vukčević, ed., *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, 412–413.

³⁰ Dulić, *Utopias of Nation*, 94.

³¹ Milan Koljanin, “Akcija ‘Diana Budisavljević’”, *Tokovi istorije* 3 (2007), 193–194.

³² Vojni arhiv [Military Archives; hereafter: VA], Fonds NDH, b. 179, no. 13/2-1.

more and more often undertaken in collaboration with German and Italian military forces.³³

The first camps in the NDH were set up within a few days of its inception. Relying on those that had been established for political opponents in the former Banovina Croatia, the Ustasha authorities soon created an entire system of camps in which the central place was occupied by the one at Gospić. Apart from the facilities at Gospić itself, the camp included a network of provisional camps and execution sites, to mention but the goriest: the environs of the village of Jadovno on Mt Velebit, and Slana and Metajna in the island of Pag.

The Gospić concentration camp was jurisdictionally under the Gospić County Police Department (*Župsko redarstveno ravnateljstvo*), but its command structure was under the authority of the NDH's central police institution, the Zagreb-headquartered Directorate for Public Order and Security (*Ravnateljstvo za javni red i sigurnost* – RAVSIGUR). In organisational and executive terms, the command structure of the camp was to come under the authority of the central Ustasha institution, the Ustasha Supervisory Service (*Ustaška nadzorna služba* – UNS), and its 3rd Office, Ustasha Defence (*Ustaška obrana*) which was charged with setting up and operating camps.³⁴ From the very inception of the NDH the camps were under the authority of the narrow circle of Ustasha leaders,³⁵ which is quite understandable given the intended role of the camps in the pursuit of the Ustasha genocidal agenda. The speed and efficiency with which the camps were set up suggests that plans had been made even before the Ustasas came to power. In the early months of the NDH, camps were set up by one of Pavelić's closest associates from the period of their emigration, Mijo Babić ("Giovanni"), a commissioner of the Ustasha Headquarters. After he was killed in an encounter with Serbian insurgents in Herzegovina in July 1941, authority over the camps, and then over the 3rd Office of UNS, was taken over by Vjekoslav Luburić ("Max"), who remained, with a break, in position until the end of the NDH.³⁶

³³ Klaus Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Mittler, 2002), 89–98.

³⁴ The section on the Ustasha Defence in Obhodjaš et al., *Ustaška vojnica* (pp. 91–99), makes no mention whatsoever of the operation of the camps and the Ustasha units that secured them.

³⁵ Dušan Lazić, "Organizacija policijsko-obaveštajne službe 'Nezavisne Države Hrvatske'. Ustaška nadzorna služba", *Zbornik za istoriju Matice srpske* 7 (1973), 144 and 176–177; Mirko Peršen, *Ustaški logori* (Zagreb: Globus, 1990), 76.

³⁶ Lazić, "Organizacija", 144 and 176–177; Peršen, *Ustaški logori*, 76; Koljanin, "Zakoni o logorima", 24–25.

The Ustasha Supervisory Service established under the law of 16 August 1941³⁷ was divided into four *branches*: 1) Ustasha Police; 2) Ustasha Intelligence Service; 3) Ustasha Defence; and 4) Ustasha Personnel Office. At the head of UNS was the *Ustasha supervisory commander* appointed by and accountable to the *Poglavnik* (title of Ante Pavelić, after the Nazi example, meaning a “leader”). The position was held by Eugen Kvaternik (“Dido”). Even though UNS ran affairs that fell in the purview of the police, it was independent of the Ministry of the Interior and answerable to Pavelić himself through the *Ustasha supervisory commander*, whereby the powers of Eugen Kvaternik, who had been holding the post of “director for public order and security for the NDH” (RAVSIGUR) since 7 May 1941, became even broader. He was vested with the power to exercise control “over the operation of the police districts in all branches of the police service”.³⁸ RAVSIGUR was the central police institution of the NDH. Formally part of the Ministry of the Interior, it was detached from it under the law on the government of the NDH of 24 June 1941.³⁹

Since the only purpose of internment in Gospić was the physical destruction of the interned, Gospić falls into the category of extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*).⁴⁰ Gospić and Lika were chosen as the location for such a camp for several reasons. They had a great symbolic significance for Croat extreme nationalism and for the Ustasha organisation itself. Ante

³⁷ “Zakonska odredba o ustaškoj nadzornoj službi”, *Narodne novine* no. 111, 26 Aug. 1941; *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 483. The *Zbornik zakona* published a second version of the law because the initial one, published in the *Narodne novine* no. 110, 25 Aug. 1941, gave UNS disproportionately broad powers, which met with opposition from other Ustasha structures. Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše*, 111–112; Lazić, “Organizacija”, 144–147.

³⁸ “Odredba o osnivanju Ravnateljstva za javni red i sigurnost za Nezavisnu Državu Hrvatsku”, Zagreb, 4 May 1941, *Narodne novine* no. 21, 7 May 1941; *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 61; D. Lazić, “Organizacija policijsko-obaveštajne službe ‘Nezavisne Države Hrvatske’. Ravnateljstvo za javni mir i sigurnost”, *Zbornik za istoriju Matice srpske* 6 (1972), 184–189.

³⁹ “Zakonska odredba o državnoj vladi Nezavisne Države Hrvatske”, *Narodne novine* no. 59, 25 April 1941; *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 204–208. Under art. 5 of the law on the division of the ministries into departments and on the purview of the departments (*Narodne novine* no. 99, 11 Aug. 1941), RAVSIGUR was reattached to the Ministry of the Interior as one of its two departments but was not under direct authority of the minister; *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 381–393. The law stipulated that RAVSIGUR collaborate with UNS in all matters of public security, even though UNS was not established by law until a week later. In fact, RAVSIGUR was, as it were, the executive organ of UNS; Lazić, “Ravnateljstvo za javni mir i sigurnost”, 186–187, has a somewhat different view of the position of RAVSIGUR in relation to the Ministry of the Interior.

⁴⁰ *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman, s. v. “Extermination camps” (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1990), 461.

Starčević and many prominent members of the Ustasha movement, including Ante Pavelić, were natives of Lika. The Ustasha terrorist attack on the Yugoslav gendarmerie post in the village of Brušani, assisted by Italy (from Zadar), in 1932, had been mythologised and celebrated as “the Lika Uprising”. The Ustasha organisation had already had fairly strong footholds in Lika, and agrarian overpopulation and poverty combined with religious fanaticism and militarist tradition ensured fast mobilisation. Last but not least, a convenience for the planned destruction of Serbs was the karst terrain of Mt Velebit with its many sinkholes suitable as mass execution sites. The importance of Gospić was emphasised by granting the municipality of Gospić the status of a city on 24 June 1941.⁴¹ On that same day, the largest camp in the Gospić system of camps was set up near the village of Jadovno, and a day later the Slana camp in the island of Pag received its first prisoners.

In the Ustasha system of concentration camps whence the road led to Gospić were the camps in Koprivnica (“Danica” factory) and Zagreb (“Zagrebački zbor”, a fairground facility). Political opponents were mostly held in prisons (Kerestinec and Lepoglava).⁴² There were also smaller camps and temporary detention facilities (in Petrinja, Jablanica, Trebinje, Mostar, Sarajevo and Kruščica), where mass killings occasionally took place.⁴³ As for the “final solution to the Jewish question” in pro-Nazi Croatia, it should be noted that the annihilation process was carried out in camps almost without exception. The Holocaust in the NDH began at the Gospić camp, was for the most part carried out at the Jasenovac camp, and was completed in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz in August 1942 and May 1943.⁴⁴

The large-scale incarceration of Serbs and Jews was stepped up in the second half of June 1941, which coincided with the beginning of the war in the East and the propaganda campaign against Bolsheviks and their domestic following. To forestall mass protests expected to take place on St Vitus Day (28 June), the Serbian traditional holiday and historically important date, Croatian authorities made a mass arrest of hostages, mostly distinguished Serbs. Some were subsequently released, only to be become

⁴¹ “Zakonska odredba o proglašenju općine Gospić gradom”, *Narodne novine* no. 58, 24 June 1941; *Zbornik zakona, 1941, 197*.

⁴² Peršen, *Ustaški logori*, 40–75.

⁴³ Report of Major Nikola Mikec to State Directorate for Reconstruction, Zagreb, 7 Aug. 1941, in Vukčević, ed., *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, 473–475.

⁴⁴ Holm Sundhausen, “Jugoslawien; Der ‘Unabhängige Staat Kroatien’ (einschliesslich Dalmatiens)”, in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Dimension des Völkermords. Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991), 321–326.

the target of repressive measures: they would be interned in camps or “go missing”.⁴⁵

All those measures, including internment in camps, were sanctioned by law. Two days before St Vitus Day, on 26 June 1941, an *Extraordinary Legal Decree and Order of the Poglavnik* was issued. It guaranteed the inviolability of life and property to “a part of the population”, i.e. Serbs, with reference to the rumours that they would be subjected to persecution on 28 June. Whoever should commit “any violence against the life or property of any citizen or member of the Independent State of Croatia” would be tried by courts-martial. That this was an attempt to pacify the Serbian revolt may be seen from the following provision: wherever “chetniks or remnants of the Serbian army” should appear, local authorities should promptly call upon the assistance of the gendarmerie, Ustasha units and, in the last resort, the Croatian army against them, using “cold weapons and firearms”.⁴⁶

The law of 26 June 1941 was not directed only against the Serbs but also against the Jews. Its wording made use of standard anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews spreading false news (a derivative of the accusation that the press was in Jewish hands and spread their destructive ideas) and preventing the supplying of the population by their speculative transactions. In line with the notion of collective responsibility, the Jews were declared guilty of those crimes as a group, and punished accordingly: by being sent to “open-air detention facilities”.⁴⁷

The importance that was attached to the decree of 26 June 1941 is obvious from the fact that an Order issued the same day by the interior minister Andrija Artuković required that its text be published on the front pages of newspapers for three days in a row, aired on the radio three times a day (in the morning, noon and evening), placarded in all towns, and announced in all municipalities. The order ended with a request of ecclesiastical authorities to convey the law “to spiritual shepherds”, i.e. priests.⁴⁸ On the day of their promulgation the law and the order were published in the *Katolički list* (Catholic Newspaper) as well, accompanied by the archbishop Stepinac’s instruction to the parish priests “to make the above law known to people from the pulpit on the earliest occasion, that is, when the congrega-

⁴⁵ Vukčević, ed., *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, 233–290; S. Skoko, “Zločini genocida Nezavisne Države Hrvatske u Hercegovini tokom 1941”, in R. Samardžić, ed., *Genocid nad Srbima u II svetskom ratu* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida & Srpska književna zadruga, 1995), 266–274; Krizman, *NDH*, 64.

⁴⁶ “Izvanredna zakonska odredba i zapovjed”, *Narodne novine* no. 60, 26 June 1941; *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 212–213.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 213.

tions gather in full attendance in church”.⁴⁹ The role of the Roman Catholic Church in propagating the law ensured not only its dissemination but also its acceptance. The fact that the law was backed by the authority of the Church brings to light the latter’s role in the carrying out of state policies.

By the beginning of July 1941, the stated policy of destruction of the Jews had been largely put into effect. In that respect, the highest officials had been given clear instructions from the top. In his address to the county prefects and Ustasha functionaries of 30 June 1941, Pavelić announced the imminent elimination of the Jews from Croatian society: “Jews cannot and must not stay in our midst; amidst the Croatian people; for all the reasons known to you, including the reason that they have done so much wrong to the Croat people.”⁵⁰

By July 1941 the system of camps centred at Gospić had been fully operational and integrated into the destruction process. On 8 July 1941 RAVSIGUR ordered all police departments that, when it should be required by the interest of public security, all “Greek-Easterners” (i.e. Serbs) and Jews be sent to the Gospić police department, i.e. to the camp of that department, and not any more to the camp “Danica” in Koprivnica. The order also applied to those who had converted to Roman Catholicism after 10 April 1941.⁵¹ The destruction process was thus stepped up because now Serbs and Jews were sent directly to Gospić. From then on, the camp at Koprivnica served for the internment of opponents of the regime, political above all.

The attitude of Ustasha authorities towards the communists tended to depend on their nationality. That it was so may be seen from the Ustasha police order of 23 July 1941 not to send Catholics and Muslims to Gospić,⁵² which implies that to be sent to Gospić meant a death sentence. The Muslim and Croat communists were exempted, at least temporarily, even though some groups of arrested communists were sent to Gospić nonetheless.⁵³ There followed new orders on sending Serbs to the Gospić concentration camp, both those intellectually prominent and those suspected, even if unproven guilty, of communist affiliation. The same applied to Jews. The arrest of Muslims and Croats of communist allegiance was still required, but they

⁴⁹ *Katolički list* no. 25, 26 June 1941, 285–286.

⁵⁰ *Poglavnik govori*, vol. 2, 42.

⁵¹ VA, Fonds NDH, b. 180, no. 10-1.

⁵² VA, Fonds NDH, b. 189, no. 31/7-1, Circular letter of the Ustasha Police Directorate, Zagreb, 23 July 1941; *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, 366.

⁵³ *Kotar Gospić i kotar Perušić u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945* (Karlovac: Histo-rijski arhiv Karlovac, 1989); Peršen, *Ustaški logori*, 53.

were to be detained in the place of arrest, while the Serbs and Jews were to be sent to Gospić straight away.⁵⁴

Word about the existence of camps in Gospić, Jadovno and the island of Pag, and about Serbs and Jews being killed there en masse, spread relatively fast. It was brought to occupied Serbia by refugees and exiles from Croatia. Based on their accounts, the Serbian Orthodox Church compiled an exhaustive memorandum and, in early August 1941, it was presented to the German Military Commander of Serbia, General Danckelmann. It contained comparatively detailed data about the camps at Gospić and Jadovno and about the terror and death suffered by Serbs in them.⁵⁵ As the memorandum soon reached the Yugoslav government-in-exile in London, and was published in the *Amerikanski Srbobran* (American Srbobran), the crimes that were being committed in the Gospić camp became known to a broader public. Presented with information about the mass incarceration of Jews in the camp in the island of Pag in early September 1941, the World Jewish Congress appealed to the Yugoslav government for help in relieving the situation of the imprisoned.⁵⁶ Italian military representatives had much more detailed information about the concentration camps in Gospić and the island of Pag. Italian army commands reported in detail on mass and horrendous crimes against Serbs, but were under strict orders not to interfere in the internal affairs of their Croatian ally.⁵⁷ The course of events, however, would soon compel them to make a radical change of policy.

The Roman Catholic Church and the archbishop Stepinac himself took an active part in promoting and propagating the law of 26 June 1941, the law which, among other things, provided for “open-air” internment. Yet, less than a month later, Stepinac reacted, in his own way, to the news of Serbs and Jews being, “occasionally”, mistreated during transportation to and in the camps. Without questioning the justifiability of the internment of the Serbs and Jews, including the children, the elderly and the sick, Stepinac’s letter to Pavelić of 21 July 1941 pleaded for a more “humane and considerate way” of transportation to and treatment in the camps.⁵⁸ Although the archbishop was no doubt aware of the mass expulsion and killing of priests

⁵⁴ VA, Fonds NDH, b. 169, no. 8/2, Circular letter of the Directorate for Public Order and Security, Zagreb, 23 July 1941.

⁵⁵ VA, Fonds NDH, b. 312, no. 17/1; *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, 594–625.

⁵⁶ Arhiv Jugoslavije [Archives of Yugoslavia; hereafter AJ], Fonds (no. 371) Legation of Yugoslavia to the USA, 208, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to Royal Legation in Washington, London, 18 Sept. 1941, conf. no. 6355.

⁵⁷ Rodogono, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 186.

⁵⁸ *Fontes. Izvori za hrvatsku povijest*, vol. 2 (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 1996), 266 and 291.

and monks of the Serbian Orthodox Church, seventy-two of whom were murdered in the Gospić camp alone, he had never stood up for them.

Different indicators of the structure of the imprisoned in the Gospić concentration camp make it possible to trace the dynamic of the destruction process and to identify some of its essential features. In the earliest period of its existence, most Serb prisoners were male, ranging in age from older boys to old men. By social status, they were predominantly members of the social elite. Most of the imprisoned Jews were youths, i.e. members of the community's most vital part. In the second phase of the camp, from July to August 1941, all other categories of the Serbian population, women and children, were also interned, less so the Jews. This is corroborated by the statistics established by Djuro Zatezalo.

According to the research done by Djuro Zatezalo, of a total of 42,246 persons deported to the Gospić camp as many as 40,123 (94.97%) were murdered, of whom 38,010 (94.73%) were Serbs, 1,988 (4.95%) Jews and 155 (0.28%) others. Of a total of 10,502 identified victims, 9,663 (92%) were Serbs of both sexes, including 1,014 children up to the age of fifteen. Among the 762 (7.25%) identified Jewish victims there were 15 children. It is indicative that there were no children in the other groups of identified victims (77, or 0.74%).⁵⁹ The most numerous of the latter groups were Croats (55, or 0.52%), who were victimised for their political allegiances, but these did not entail the internment of their family members. Unlike them, the Serbs and Jews were subjected to total destruction as collectives, which explains the presence of women and children in those two groups of prisoners.

The list of identified victims,⁶⁰ however incomplete, permits some conclusions as regards the dynamic of the destruction process in some regions of the Ustasha state. The largest number of victims came from the region of Lika, and the part of it which was in relative proximity to the camp itself. Of the total of 10,502 victims, 4,335 (41.28%) came from Lika, mostly from Gospić/Perušić District, followed by the districts of Korenica, Ogulin and Otočac. The number of victims from Donji Lapac District, where Serbs accounted for the vast majority of the population, was conspicuously small. In the course of July 1941, Ustasha and Croatian army units joined by armed Croat and Muslim peasants were systematically destroying the Serbian population of this district in order to break up the continuous ethnic area that it formed with neighbouring Bosanska Krajina. From 1 July to 10 August 1941, in this and adjacent districts 3,500 persons, mostly women,

⁵⁹ Djuro Zatezalo, *Jadovno. Kompleks ustaških logora 1941*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2007), 373.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 422–732. The author specifies the names of the identified 10,502 victims, as well as the place of residence and the place and time of violent death.

children and elderly, were killed in a most cruel way. In early August 1941, 560 Serbs from Smiljan, the native village of Serbian-American inventor Nikola Tesla, were slaughtered. It was in the area of Donji Lapac and Bosanska Krajina that a mass uprising broke out on 27 July 1941, spreading fast to the neighbouring Serb-inhabited areas.⁶¹

Nor was western Slavonia spared, notably Grubišino Polje, Pakrac and Križevci, with its 985 (9.38%) identified victims. From the regions of Banija and Kordun, including the towns of Sisak and Karlovac, there were 879 victims (8.73%), followed by Zagreb (460), Mostar (440), Bosanska Krupa (201), Travnik (188), Sarajevo (179), Slavonski Brod (150), and other places.

It is obvious that the destruction process in the NDH, apart from urban areas, towns and cities, targeted ethnically compact Serbian areas, in particular Lika and western Slavonia. There were also local destruction centres, and most Serbs from a particular region were killed there without ever being transported to Gospić. The number of victims from the Cazin (104) and Bihać (43) areas is markedly small, which may be explained by the fact that the destruction of local Serbs was carried out mostly in those two towns and their environs (execution sites Garavice, Mehino Stanje etc.), and with a mass participation of local Muslim population.⁶² Much the same goes for the regions of Banija and Kordun from where a relatively small number of people were sent to Gospić. The largest regional destruction centre was Glina and its environs.⁶³

The Gospić concentration camp occupied a central place in the initial phase of the extermination of the Jews (Holocaust). The first to be targeted were the largest Jewish communities, above all the Zagreb one: of the 762 identified Jewish victims, nearly one half, 369 (48.42%), came from Zagreb. The communities of Karlovac and Križevci suffered stronger blows relative to their size (45 and 33 victims respectively). It is indicative that the large Jewish community in Sarajevo was not yet targeted, as shown by a total of 25 identified victims.

Even though the only purpose of the Gospić camp was the carrying out of the destruction programme, i.e. incarceration and killing, a germ of yet another purpose of the Ustasha camps began to take shape. Under the strict watch of Ustasha guards, internees from the camp facility known as

⁶¹ Gojko Vezmar, *Ustaško-okupatorski zločini u Lici 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2005), 152–182.

⁶² VA, Fonds NDH, b. 153a, no. 23/1-1, Report of the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 10 Aug. 1941; *ibid.*, Ministry of the Interior of the NDH to the Ministry of Justice and Religion, 24 Sept. 1941.

⁶³ Djuro Aralica, *Ustaški pokolji Srba u glinskoj crkvi* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2010); Pero Drakulić, *Korak do smrti* (Zagreb: Srpsko narodno vijeće, 2014), 18–45.

Ovčara (seized property of the Serbian Maksimović family), mostly women and children, worked in the fields of the Serb owners who had been either murdered or managed to flee. Some prisoners, mostly Jews, crushed stone on the road or swept the streets in Gospić.⁶⁴

Speaking of the camps where the policy was being put into effect of mass destruction of ethnic, religious, national and racial groups within the “New Order of Europe” under the dominance of Nazi Germany, the Gospić concentration camp had priority. The beginning of the “crusade” against the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 marked the beginning of the mass and systematic killing of Jews on occupied territories,⁶⁵ ushering in the last and most horrible phase of the Holocaust: extermination. It was unleashed in its full magnitude at the end of 1941 and beginning of 1942, when death camps in occupied Poland were set in operation one after another.⁶⁶ In the NDH the Holocaust had by then been for the most part completed, in accordance with the available means and resources of the Ustasha state. The NDH’s manufacture of death centred at Gospić, and from August 1941 at the concentration camp of Jasenovac, had preceded Nazi Germany’s industry of death centred in occupied Poland.

As the Serbian uprising was growing in number, as of 15 August 1941 the Italian High Command began the reoccupation of a considerable part of the NDH (“Zone II”), where the Gospić camp was located.⁶⁷ As a result, Ustasha authorities were compelled to dissolve the camps in the island of Pag and Gospić, and on 19 August 1941 the prisoners were transferred to a makeshift camp at Jastrebarsko. On 2 September the Jewish and Serbian women and children were transferred from Jastrebarsko to the Kruščica camp near Travnik, and thence to the Loborgrad camp in Hrvatsko Zagorje.⁶⁸ The Jewish and Serb male internees were transported from Jastrebarsko to the Jasenovac railway station, and thence to the newly-established camp near the village of Krapje. That was the first in the Jasenovac system of camps, and it was designated as Camp I. Preparations for

⁶⁴ Zatezalo, *Jadovno*, vol. 1, 155 and 162–163.

⁶⁵ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 217–259.

⁶⁶ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: The Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945* (New York: Harper Collins Pub., 2008), 294–560.

⁶⁷ Dragan Nenezić, *Jugoslavenske oblasti pod Italijom 1941–1943* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut VJ, 1999), 98–101; H. James Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic. Mussolini’s Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941–1943* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005), 72–75.

⁶⁸ *Zločini fašističkih okupatora i njihovih pomagača protiv Jevreja u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština Jugoslavije, 1952), 74–76; Nada Trninić Šević, *U ustaškim logorima* (Novi Sad, Petrovaradin: Alfagraf, 2004), 29–65.

its establishing had begun on 24 July 1941 at the latest, which is the date when the Amelioration Directorate made an order for timber “for building wooden barracks in Jasenovac”.⁶⁹ At the same time or soon afterwards, yet another camp, Camp II, was set up near the village of Bročice. Only a month later, on 23 August 1941, the daily *Hrvatski narod* reported the completion of the barracks for workers who would be draining Lonjsko Polje. As it turned out soon enough, drainage work was just a front for the mass torture and killing of the imprisoned.

Command over the camps at Krapje and Bročice was headquartered in the village of Jasenovac, and every camp had its own command structure as well. The camps were guarded by members of the same Ustasha units that had guarded the Gospić camp. The Krapje and Bročice camps soon began to receive new groups of arrestees from various part of the NDH. Apart from Jews and Serbs, among them were also Croat communists and other antifascists.⁷⁰ In October 1941 the number of prisoners rose to between 4,000 and 5,000. The living and working conditions were horrendous. The prisoners building a levee along the river Strug were given only most primitive tools to work with, and many of them were killed on the site or died from exhaustion and diseases which soon began to spread. The situation was aggravated by heavy rains and the locations of the camps were threatened by floods.⁷¹

A new concentration camp began to be set up in the east part of predominantly Serb-inhabited Jasenovac on 20 October 1941. Prisoners from Bročice were taken daily to the site to build the fence and the levee. The camp made use of the buildings on the seized estate of the Serbian Bačić family which consisted of a large brickyard, sawmill, flour mill and chain factory. The transfer of prisoners from Krapje and Bročice to the newly-established camp was preceded by a large-scale killing. Thus, the number of prisoners transferred by 20 November was not greater than about 1,500 people. The estimated total deaths in those two camps range between 8,000 and 12,000 people.⁷²

The camp at Jasenovac itself was known as Camp III (*Cigłana*, “Brickyard”) or Concentration Camp III. It was to become the largest camp in the

⁶⁹ Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941–1945. Logor smrti i radni logor* (Jasenovac – Zagreb: Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2003), 30.

⁷⁰ Ilija Jakovljević, *Konclogor na Savi* (Zagreb: Konzor, 1999), passim.

⁷¹ *Zločini u logoru Jasenovac* (Zagreb: Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, 1946), 4 and 40–41.

⁷² Antun Miletić, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac 1941–1945. Dokumenta*, vol. I (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga & Jasenovac: Spomen područje Jasenovac, 1986), 20; and vol. II, 898–900.

Ustasha system of camps, assigned to play the central role in pursuing the NDH's repressive policies. It was conveniently located near main routes and connected with the Zagreb–Belgrade railway by an industrial branch line. The river Sava ran just past it and the confluence of the Una and Sava rivers was not far away. Being set up in a flat floodplain, it was relatively easy to secure. Moreover, strong military and police forces were stationed comparatively near. On top of all that, the camp was near the main Serb-inhabited areas, and in the vicinity of cities where most of the Jewish population was concentrated.

The organisation of the concentration camp at Jasenovac was accompanied by setting up the Command Headquarters of Concentration Camps as part of the Ustasha Defence, i.e. of the 3rd Office of the Ustasha Supervisory Service. The camp's official name, the one on its seal, was "Ustasha Defence, Command of Jasenovac Concentration Camps". In fact, the camp was hybrid in nature because its two main purposes were the destruction of undesirable population groups and the use of slave workforce, which amounted to destruction by backbreaking labour. In that respect, Jasenovac was no different from large German concentration camps, notably Auschwitz, which had the same purpose. Since the camp's main purpose was destruction, it may be classified as concentration and/or extermination camp.⁷³

During the setting up of Camp III at Jasenovac, the question of internment was "legally" regulated:⁷⁴ the *Legal Decree on Forced Confinement of Objectionable and Dangerous Persons in Concentration and Labour Camps* of 25 November 1941 specified in detail who was to be sent to a camp and for how long, which authority was responsible for establishing camps and deciding on internment in a camp, and who was responsible for internal organisation in a camp. Quite in line with the earlier Ustasha legislation, notably with the *Legal Decree on the Defence of People and State* of 17 April 1941, it specified which authority was responsible for setting up, and sending to, camps: "Objectionable persons who are a danger to public order and security or who might endanger the peace of mind and tranquillity of the Croat people or the accomplishments of the liberation struggle of the Croat Ustasha movement may be subject to forced internment in concentration or labour camps. Authorised to set up these camps in particular places in

⁷³ Friedländer, *Years of Extermination*, 337 and 495. Evans, *Third Reich at War*, 159, classifies the Ustasha camps as concentration camps, but notes that their role was not to confine opponents of the regime, but to destroy ethnic and religious minorities. At any rate, the camp at Jasenovac cannot be classified as a "death and labour camp" as it is in Mataušić, *Jasenovac*.

⁷⁴ *Zbornik zakona, 1941*, 868–869; *Narodne novine* no. 188, 25 Nov. 1941.

the Independent State of Croatia is the Ustasha Supervisory Service.” Even though the camps had been under the administration of Ustasha police and military forces from the very inception of the NDH, it was only in this law that the central role of the Ustasha police and security apparatus in establishing and managing the camps was expressly mentioned.

The length of internment as specified by the law was not less than three months and not more than three years, but the head of the Ustasha Supervisory Service, the *Ustasha supervisory commander*, was authorised to shorten it at any time. That the latter provision had only a nominal and propaganda character may be seen from other sources which show that internment was frequently prolonged and practically never shortened. Those subjected to three years of forced internment were usually murdered immediately upon arriving in the camp, and the same fate would soon befall most of the others.⁷⁵

It is obvious from the law that the whole procedure, from arrest, detainment and interrogation to internment decision, was in the hands of the Ustasha police, and that it was to them that all bodies of authority were to report all persons liable to internment under the law. Even though the law required that a prior interment decision be issued by the police, ample sources show that huge numbers of people, above all Serbs, Jews and Roma, were deported to the concentration camp of Jasenovac and immediately executed without any prior police decision.⁷⁶ Just as the Ustasha police had in their hands all matters preceding the internment, which can be seen from the law, so the Ustasha Defence had in its hands all matters following the arrival of internees in a camp, which cannot be seen from the law. The person responsible for the enforcement of this law was the head of UNS, *Ustasha supervisory commander* Eugen Kvaternik, which means that he was directly carrying out the state policy of terror. His main tool was the Ustasha Defence, i.e. the 3rd Office of UNS, which administered all camps of the Ustasha state.⁷⁷

With the enactment of the law on interment in camps, the procedure for the treatment of undesirable groups, from arrest to execution in camps, became fully regulated. The whole procedure was in the hands of two executive institutions, RAVSIGUR and UNS, whose head, Eugen Kvaternik, was directly answerable to the head of state himself, *Poglavnik* Ante Pavelić. What seems to follow as an inevitable conclusion is that the policy of extermination of the Serbs, Jews and Roma was shaped by the very top of the

⁷⁵ Miletić, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac*, vol. I, 30.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Lazić, “Organizacija”, 176–177; Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše*, 185; Miletić, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac*, vol. I, 17.

Croatian fascist state and pursued under its direct control. All mechanisms, from institutional to legal, necessary for carrying out that genocidal policy were set in place in the course of 1941, and the central role in it was assigned to extermination camps, at first at Gospić and then, from the autumn of 1941 until the end of the war and the Ustasha state, at Jasenovac.

The exact number of people murdered at Jasenovac has never been reliably established, nor has a serious effort ever been made to do that. Yet, the historians who rely on contemporary sources have no doubts that the number amounts to hundreds of thousands of victims. Even though the sources usually provide estimates for the total number of victims in the NDH, Serbian above all, there is no doubt that most victims were murdered at Jasenovac. As early as the end of summer 1941 German military and police authorities had estimates of about 200,000 murdered Serbs in the NDH.⁷⁸ In October 1942 the German Plenipotentiary General in the NDH Edmund Glaise von Horstenau described Jasenovac as the most horrible concentration camp in the NDH in which thousands and thousands of its citizens were being murdered.⁷⁹ In his memorandum of 27 February 1943 the Commander-in-Chief in the South-East Alexander Löhr quoted the Ustasha figure of about 400,000 murdered Orthodox Christians in the NDH.⁸⁰ In his report to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler of mid-March 1944, Waffen-SS Major-General Ernst Fick stated that the Croat party troops Ustaschas were known for having murdered in the most cruel way between 600,000 and 700,000 persons of different religious and political affiliations.⁸¹ Hermann Neubacher, Special Plenipotentiary envoy of the Reich's Foreign Ministry in the South-East, based on available reports, estimated the number of Serb civilians cruelly slaughtered in the NDH by 1944 at 750,000 people.⁸² According to an estimate recently put forth in historiography, in the Jasenovac camp were murdered about 300,000 Serbs, 30,000 Jews and most of the Roma population of the NDH.⁸³

*UDC 323.12:329.18](497.5)"1941/1945"
341.322.5:341.485*

⁷⁸ Miletić, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac*, vol. IV, 129.

⁷⁹ Glez fon Horstenau, *Izmedju Hitlera i Pavelića (Memoari kontroverznoj generala)* (Belgrade: Nolit, 2007), 527 (Serb. ed. of *Ein General im Zwielicht*, ed. P. Broucek (Böhlau Verlag, 1980–88).

⁸⁰ Ladislaus Hory and Martin Broszat, *Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1964), 146–147.

⁸¹ VA, Fonds Na, Microfilm NAW, T-175, roll 70, frames 888–890.

⁸² Hermann Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost. 1940–1945. Bericht eines fliegenden Diplomaten* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1956), 128.

⁸³ Evans, *The Third Reich*, 160.

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