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Guards at the Jasenovac Camp Complex

Violence, Morality, and Interaction

Abstract

This article focuses on the guard personnel stationed at the Jasenovac camp complex. Breaking with stereotypes of the guards as being driven by fanatical Catholicism or pathological sadism, it argues that the guards' brutality derived from a moral transformation, from moral universalism to particularism. Spurred by ideologised officers, guards gradually began to believe in the righteousness of the mass killings. But although the camp leadership sanctioned and encouraged violence against prisoners, violent acts at external labour sites and inside compounds were usually not entirely arbitrary but derived from patterns of interactions, in which prisoners' identities were often central. Gender norms could likewise shape violence and mistreatment, which often aimed to emasculate male prisoners or strip women of femininity. The article also zeroes in on the guards' interactions with their families and local civilians, who were often not mere bystanders but complicit to different degrees.

The guards at the Jasenovac camp complex, the largest concentration camp facility in the Nazi-allied Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH), count as one of the most virulent groups of perpetrators in Second World War Europe but retain an obscurity, reflecting the relatively limited research on non-German perpetrators in the broader, international Holocaust historiography. The image of knife-wielding Ustašas standing at the edge of a mass grave may be familiar to many, particularly in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, but more as a soul-stirring symbol of unspeakable brutality, shaped by what psychologist Jovan Byford terms a "visual culture of atrocity",[1] than as historical actors with discernible motivations and specific ideological convictions.

The scholarship has not always contributed to nuanced portrayals of the Jasenovac guards. Although recent research on the guard force by scholars such as Tomislav Dulić, Ivo Goldstein, and Martina Bitunjac stand as sound and objective,[2] persistent tropes continue to colour certain accounts of the guards and the Ustašas more broadly. To an extent, these tropes have made their way beyond the former Yugoslavia, forming how the broader Holocaust scholarship tends to depict the Ustašas. One trope is the lingering tendency to label the Ustašas as "clerical fascists".[3] Emerging

1 Jovan Byford, *Picturing Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia: Atrocity Images and the Contested Memory of the Second World War in the Balkans* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

2 Tomislav Dulić, *Utopias of Nation: Local Mass Killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1941–42* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2005), 268–273; Martina Bitunjac, *Verwicklung. Beteiligung. Unrecht: Frauen und die Ustaša-Bewegung* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2018), 207–224; Ivo Goldstein, Jasenovac (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2018), 385–490.

3 For scholars who posit a Catholic ideological foundation of the Ustaša organisation, see Viktor Novak, *Magnum Crimen: Pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj*, (1946; reprint, Belgrade: RO "Nova Knjiga", 1986), 230, 573, 755; Milan Buljaić, *Ustaški zločini genocida i suđenje Andriji Artukoviću 1986. godine, prva knjiga* (Belgrade: Rad, 1988), 64; Vladimir Dedijer, *The Yugoslav Auschwitz and the Vatican: The Croatian Massacre of the Serbs*

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against the backdrop of the post-war Yugoslav authorities' efforts to discredit the Roman Catholic Church, the clerical-fascist label overplays both the clergy's influence on the Ustaša regime and connections between the two. Much emphasis has been placed on the presence of Franciscan friars at Jasenovac, which overlooks the fact that these men had been defrocked before arriving at the camp complex.[4]

An equally entrenched discourse casts the guards at Jasenovac as pathological sadists.[5] This discourse is partly rooted in the Yugoslav authorities' efforts to stigmatise the Ustašas as "degenerate" and "beastly" individuals, who acted on sordid impulses and criminal instincts, not a coherent ideology.[6] To be sure, the pathological depiction is animated by numerous descriptions of gratuitous forms of cruelty contained in survivor accounts. Yet, however depraved these crimes may seem, by reducing the violence to a matter of individual dispositions, explanations centred on pathology offer little insight into the social context and group dynamics fuelling the brutality of the guards.

The pathology explanation is also problematic in that it reinforces a notion of Ustaša *exceptionalism*, as if the Ustašas were fundamentally different from the presumably more detached and rational Nazi perpetrators. By contrasting their own supposed rational application of violence with the Ustašas' supposed chaotic bloodthirstiness, Wehrmacht and SS commanders stationed in the NDH helped shape this perception.[7] Especially in post-war Germany, their portrayals were uncritically carried over in the literature about the Second World War in Croatia, oiling the wheels of the pathology narrative.[8]

In examining the Jasenovac guards, this article takes a holistic approach – one that breaks decisively with simplistic dispositional explanations centred on clerical-fascism and pathological depravity and instead integrates a broad range of aspects, including the backgrounds and prior experiences of officers and guards, their internal and external relations, and the dynamics of the violence they perpetrated. The article approaches these aspects though the lens of the moral dimension of their crimes, patterns of social interaction, and gender norms. While retaining a focus on perpetrator motives for their crimes – a focus which has occupied a prominent place in Holocaust perpetrator studies since Christopher Browning's trailblazing study of Order Police Reserve Battalion 101[9] – the article also draws on recent research im-

during World War II, trans. Harvey L. Kendall (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992; originally published in Serbian in 1987), 70; Jonathan Gumz, "German Counterinsurgency Policy in Independent Croatia, 1941–1944", The Historian 61, no. 1 (1998): 35.

4 Novak, *Magnum Crimen*, 646–651, 681; Dedijer, *The Yugoslav Auschwitz, 268–281; Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 66; Lazar Lukajic, *Fratri i ustaše kolju: Zločini i svedoci: Pokolj Srba u selima kod Banja Luke – Drakuliću, Šargovcu i Motikama 7. februara i Piskavici i Ivanjskoj 5. i 12. februara 1942. godine* (Belgrade: Fond za istraživanje genocida, 2005), 658–659; Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 229.

5 For two studies that are percolated by the pathological discourse, see Savo Delibasić, "Varieties of Psychopathological Behavior among the Ustashe at Jasenovac", in *Jasenovac and the Holocaust in Yugoslavia : Analyses and Survivor Testimonies*, ed. Barry M. Lituchy (New York: Jasenovac Research Institute, 2006), 230–237; Raphael Israeli, *The Death Camps of Croatia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 2013); Goldstein, Jasenovac, 336–337, 409.

6 Tomislav Dulić, "Forging Brotherhood and Unity – War Propaganda and Transitional Justice in Yugoslavia, 1941–48", in *The Utopia of Terror: Life and Death in Wartime Croatia*, ed. Rory Yeomans (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 246.

7 See Jonathan E. Gumz, "Wehrmacht Perceptions of Mass Violence in Croatia, 1941–1942", *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 4 (December 2001): 1015–1038.

8 See Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs – Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013), 22–26.

9 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

pulses that situate acts of violence in a constellation of everyday social relations, performative expectations, and altered moral norms.[10]

A key argument is that the Jasenovac camp complex was not only a site of destruction but also a place to inculcate the guard force with a new radical morality rooted in the regime's moral particularism. Guard brutality was, however, also shaped and amplified by more immediate interpersonal dynamics, both among guards and, at times, between guards and prisoners, as well as by gendered norms. Finally, the article brings the guard force's interaction with the surrounding society into focus. In addressing these themes, it seeks to contribute to illuminating perpetrators on "the periphery", shedding light on a group of non-German perpetrators extensively involved in crimes.

Sources

After liberation, the Yugoslav security police tracked down and arrested hundreds of former guards with a record of service at the Jasenovac camp complex. Due to the lack of ego-documents, the interrogation statements and records of the main hearings generated in the context of these judicial proceedings offer the most comprehensive source group for elucidating the perspectives of the Jasenovac guards themselves. The statements, however, differ significantly in content and character. Whereas statements from the immediate post-war years tend to be quite schematic, those recorded from the late 1940s and the 1950s exhibit greater descriptive depth. In this period, the judicial handling of Second World War crimes became more thorough and less severe, arguably reflecting a political swing toward reintegrating wartime offenders.[11] Yet, as with other legal material, a significant potential for distortion resides in the interrogation records, regardless of the time of their recording, as suspects often gave evasive answers and sought to downplay their culpability. But in other cases, the candour in the statements is striking, with some former guards confessing to having beaten, even killed, prisoners.[12]

A different issue is the possibility of false confessions elicited under torture. Scrutiny suggests that some security police officials applied coercion when interrogating Ustašas who had served at Jasenovac.[13] Yet, such measures were confined to the immediate post-war years and were not sanctioned from above. When suspects later retracted confessions, claiming they were coerced, prosecutors sometimes pressured

10 For some studies on Holocaust perpetrators that go beyond a focus on perpetrator motives, see Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2014); Christopher Dillon, *Dachau and the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015); Tomasz Frydel, "Judenjagd: Reassessing the Role of Ordinary Poles as Perpetrators in the Holocaust", in *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations and Dynamics*, ed. Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (London: Routledge, 2020), 187–203.

11 See Sabina Ferhadbegović, "Vor Gericht: Die Soldaten der Handschar-Division im Nachkriegsjugoslawien", *Südost Forschungen*. 69 (2010): 228–251.

12 For a noteworthy example, see the various interrogation statements of Josip Kranjčec in Hrvatski državni arhiv u Zagrebu/Croatian State Archive in Zagreb, collection 1216: *Okružni sud za grad Zagrebu 1945–49*/District Court of the City of Zagreb 1945–49 (HR-DAZG-1216), K 217/48, 1–15.

13 For a case in which this pattern is evident, see the records in the case against Mile Sertić, in Hrvatski državni arhiv u Karlovcu/Croatian State Archive in Karlovac, collection 197: *Okružni sud u Karlovcu 1945–59*/District Court in Karlovac 1945–59 (HR-DAK-197), Kz 183/46.

the security police to launch internal investigations.[14] Equally important, verdicts were not always grounded in extremely incriminating confessions obtained by the security police, arguably because the judiciary suspected foul play.[15] Whatever their flaws, the proceedings against former Jasenovac guards in socialist Yugoslavia should not be regarded as "Stalinistic" show trials,[16] but as legitimate efforts to assess the guilt of the defendants.

Beyond the former guards' own statements, survivor testimonies – in the form of statements to war-crime commissions, published source collections, memoirs, and audiovisual interviews – offer vital insights into guard behaviour, especially the cruelty that tends to be omitted in perpetrator accounts.[17] But although indispensable, the survivor testimonies also need to be approached with a critical eye; many exhibit narrative embellishment and the infusion of tropes prevalent in the political climate of the time, especially the tendency to pathologise Ustaša perpetrators. On the other hand, some survivors recounted behavioural variations among individual guards, presenting a more nuanced picture of Jasenovac camp personnel than the caricature of the pathological sadist or the clerical fascist.

The Jasenovac Camp Complex and its Guard Force

The Jasenovac camp complex did not comprise just one camp, but a cluster of compounds with the numerals I–V as well as external labour sites spread across the Slavonia region in Croatia. The first compound was established in August 1941, while construction of the main compound, Jasenovac III, located a few kilometres east of the town of Jasenovac, began in October 1942. Combining the exploitative use of prisoners for forced labour and mass killings, the complex embodied a hybrid character – a concentration and extermination camp in the vein of the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek camps, but one operated entirely by the fascist Ustaša regime, not the SS.[18] Jasenovac III remained in existence until late April 1945, with the last guard detachment withdrawing on 1 May 1945.[19]

Although there were no gas chambers at the Jasenovac camp complex, the guard force carried out mass killings systematically at designated killing fields near the compounds. The perpetrators initially shot most of the victims but gradually resorted to murder methods such as cudgels and iron bars.[20] The victims included Jews, Roma, and Serbs, but also Croats and Bosnian Muslims whom the Ustaša regime saw as "undesirable" because of their real or suspected opposition to the regime.

14 See the interrogation statement of Nikola Dejanović, 5 October 1945, in Hrvatski državni arhiv u Sisku/Croatian State Archive in Sisak, collection 737: *Okružni sud Sisak 1945–1955*/District Court of Sisak 1945–1955 (HR-DASK-737), Kzp 66/45, doc. 7.

15 For a conspicuous case, see the judgement in the case against Valent Topolovac, 1 July 1946, in Hrvatski državni arhiv u Bjelovaru/Croatian State Archive in Bjelovar, collection 91: *Okružni sud Bjelovar 1945–90*/District Court of Bjelovar, 1945–90 (HR-DABJ-91), Stup 130/46, n.p.

16 In my view, Alexander Korb, for instance, is too critical of the investigation material. See Korb, *Im Schatten*, 40–41.

17 See Mark Roseman, "Holocaust Perpetrators in Victims' Eyes", in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination; Saul Friedlander and the Future of Holocaust Studies*., ed. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 94.

18 For the concept of a hybrid camp, see Waitman Wade Beorn, "Last Stop in Lwów: Janowska as a Hybrid Camp", *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 3 (2018): 445–471.

19 Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941–1945: logor smrti i radni logor* (Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk, 2003), 81–82.

20 For forensic analyses of the mass graves, see Veljko Đurić Mišina, *Iskopavanja u Jasenovcu 1964. godine: Studija slučaja svedočenja dr Sloljuba Živanovića* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2021).

The number of people who perished at the Jasenovac camp complex was for a long time a subject of controversy. The post-war Yugoslav government adopted inflated figures of 500,000 to 600,000 victims,[21] which may have been part of a deliberate effort to magnify wartime losses for reparation purposes.[22] So far, the Jasenovac Memorial Museum in Croatia has identified 83,145 victims by name but acknowledges that this figure is incomplete.[23] Although some historians still make unsustainable claims,[24] current objective estimates, in my opinion, range from 90,000 to 130,000.[25]

The camp complex was administrated by the Ustaša Defence (*Ustaška obrana*), which was subordinated to the Ustaša Supervisory Service (*Ustaška nadzorna služba*), an amalgam of police organs, whose assignments included processing deportation requests to concentration camps and identifying perceived enemies of the regime.[26] The guard force stationed at the camp complex initially comprised three regular companies from the Ustaša Army (*Ustaška vojnica*), the NDH counterpart to the *Waffen-SS*.[27] Gradually, however, the first commander of the Ustaša Defence, Vjekoslav Luburić, started to build up a guard force more firmly under his control, which culminated with the formal creation of the 1st Ustaša Defence Brigade (*Prvi ustaški obrambeni zdrug)* on 1 May 1942.[28] Numbering around 2,500 men organised into three battalions,[29] the unit had a distinctive hybrid character, blending elements of police and military forces. It not only guarded the compounds but also controlled the wider area surrounding the complex: the "Security Belt" (*Sigurnosni pojas*), in Ustaša jargon. Combining the role of a camp guard force with that of a mobile military formation, the unit launched operations against the People's Liberation Army (the Partisans), which was the main resistance force in Yugoslavia against the Axis. More often, however, campaigns took the form of deportations and massacres of the local civilian Serb population. The 1st Ustaša Defence Brigade was, as historian Milan Radanović puts it, "the most extreme armed Ustaša formation".[30]

In terms of the backgrounds of its personnel, clear differences emerge within the Ustaša Defence between officers and rank-and-file guards. Well-versed in Ustaša ideology, many officers had belonged to the organisation since the 1930s, having been schooled in the Ustaša training camp in Italy.[31] These men formed part of the nucleus later venerated in NDH propaganda as the trailblazers and backbone of the

21 Tea Sindbæk, *Usable History? Representations of Yugoslavia's Difficult Past from 1945 to 2002* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013), 45.

22 Heike Karge, *Steinerne Erinnerung – Versteinerte Erinnerung? Kriegsgedenken in Jugoslawien (1947–1970)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 202–203.

23 "Poimenični Popis Žrtava", Javna Ustanova Spomen-područje Jasenovac, accessed 9 October 2025, https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/default.aspx?sid=6284.

24 See, for example, Israeli, *The Death Camps*, 142–144; Gideon Greif, *Auschwitz of the Balkans: Ustaša Empire of Cruelty* (Belgrade: Knjiga komerc, 2018), 352.

25 Compare Dulić, *Utopias, 281; Goldstein, Jasenovac*, 597; and Dragan Cvetković, "Holokaust u NDH – numeričko određenje", *Istorija 20. veka*, no. 1 (2011): 169.

26 For more information about the Ustaša Supervisory Service, see Davor Kovačić, *Redarstveno-obavještajni sustav Nezavisne Države Hrvatske od 1941. do 1945. godine* (Zagreb: Hrvatski Institut za povijest, 2009).

27 Amir Obhođaš et al., *Ustaška vojnica: Oružana sila ustaškog pokreta u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj 1941.–1945. Knjiga* 2. (Zagreb: Despot Infinitus, 2013), 92.

28 Circular by Vjekoslav Luburić, 1 May 1942, Hrvatski državni arhiv/Croatian State Archive, collection 254: *Velika župa Posavje – Slavonski Brod*/the Grand Prefecture of Posavje—Slavonski Brod (HR-HDA-254), box. 4, doc. 1363/1942.

29 Obhođaš, *Ustaška vojnica* 2, 93.

30 Milan Radanović, "'Vaša pobjeda, naša osveta': Stradanje stanovništva općine Crkveni Bok 1943. i 1944.", *Tragovi: časopis za srpske i hrvatske teme* 3, no. 2 (23 November 2020): 74.

31 See the list of Ustašas in Italy, in Bogdan Krizman, *Ante Pavelić i ustaše* (Zagreb: Globus, 1978), 564–574.

Ustaša revolution, much like the figure of the "old fighter" in Nazi Germany.[32] Other officers had joined the Ustaša organisation as high-school or university students in the late 1930s, progressively radicalising.[33] After the establishment of the NDH, many of the officers became deeply involved in the mass killings of Serbs during the summer of 1941, either as local Ustaša officials or as personnel in the first major concentration camp complex in the NDH, centred around the town of Gospić and including compounds on the Adriatic Island of Pag.[34] Their radicalism often brought them into conflict with other state actors who urged a less virulent line against Serbs, giving rise to tense confrontations.[35] Prior involvement in mass killings and repression connected the officers' trajectories, pulling them towards Jasenovac.

For the rank and file, a different picture emerges: their backgrounds and trajectories show far fewer signs of ideological extremism. Although the 1st Ustaša Defence Brigade was exclusively comprised of volunteers until around the turn of the years 1943 and 1944, recruitment for the unit was fairly indiscriminate. Most volunteers were peasants from the affluent regions of Herzegovina and northwestern Bosnia, with no prior affiliation with the Ustaša organisation and its militias. Despite the Partisans' relatively lacklustre support among Croats in these regions,[36] the Ustaša Defence recruitment pitch was heavily couched in terms of material benefits rather than ideological incentives. Recruiters' promises of better food and higher salary than in the regular Croat army especially resonated among those who volunteered.[37] As the Ustaša Defence Brigade turned from a volunteer force to one largely composed of conscripts toward the end of the war, ideological motivation become even less salient, with the unit increasingly consisting of a mixture of forcibly drafted middle-aged peasants, teenagers, and soldiers from the regular NDH army press-ganged into serving at Jasenovac.[38]

The roughly thirty female guards, by contrast, appear to have been generally more ideologically committed.[39] Many had been socialised within the Ustaša Youth organisation, held positions as clerks in the NDH police apparatus, or had familial connections to senior officers.[40] But, like most of the male rank-and-file guards, none

32 See Davor Kovačić, *Kriminal u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj: zločin, korupcija, moral, politika* (Zagreb: Hrvatski Institut za povijest, 2017), 19.

33 The generally high education level of officers is clear from Ustaša Defence decoration letters. See HR-HDA, Collection 1549: *Zbirka zapisa upravnih i vojnih vlasti Nezavisne Države Hrvatske i Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta*/Record Collection of the Administrative and Military Authorities of the Independent State of Croatia and the People's Liberation Movement (HR-HDA-1549), II-90, II-91.

34 See, for instance, the interrogation statement of Josip Matijević, 25 November 1945, in Hrvatski državni arhiv u Slavonskom Brodu/Croatian State Archive in Slavonski Brod, collection 78: *Okružni sud Slavonski Brod*/District Court of Slavonski Brod (HR-DASB-78), Stup 40/46, 2 (1a), and the interrogation statement of Ivan Brkljačić, 24 May 1945, in *Hrvatski državni arhiv*/Croatian State Archives, collection 306: *Zemaljska komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača Hrvatske*/Croatian Commission for Determining the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Collaborators (HR-HDA-306), Zh 13821–22.

35 See, for example, the report by Vladimir Laxa, n.d., copy accessed in Arhiv Spomen-područja Jasenovac/Archive of the Jasenovac Memorial Site (A-SPJ), doc. 3894.

36 Dragan Cvetković, "Gubici pripadnika partizanskog pokreta sa teritorije Jugoslavije: 1941–1945" (PhD diss., Belgrade, University of Belgrade, 2016), 448.

37 For some examples, see the interrogation statement of Nikola Marić, 9 August 1946, Croatian State Archive in Šibenik, 232 *Okružni sud u Šibeniku 1945–90*/District court in Šibenik 1945–90 (HR-DAŠI-232), Stup 64/46; interrogation statement of Jure Zovko, 31 July 1961, HR-DAZG-1007, K 590/62, 29.

38 For some examples of drafting for the Ustaša Defence in this period, see the statement of Stjepan Kolundžić during the main hearing, 31 October 1945, HR-DASK-737, KZP 17/46, doc. 6, the interrogation statement of Josip Kranjčec, 10 April 1948, HR-DAZG, K 217/48, 2, and the interrogation statement of Antun Medaković, 13 June 1948", HR-DASB, K 240/48, 3.

39 For the number of female guards, see Bitunjac, *Verwicklung*, 208.

40 For some of the trajectories of female guards, see the interrogation statement of Milka Bencetić (Pribanić), 24 September 1945, HR-DAZG-1216, Kz 428/45, doc. 2, and the interrogation statement of Marija Kuzmek,14 August 1945, HR-HDA, collection 1561: *Služba državne sigurnosti Republičkog sekretarijata za unu-*

of them appear to have been previously involved hands on in the regime's destructive policies. Upon arriving at Jasenovac, inflicting violence was for them, by all accounts, a new experience.

Moral Particularism and the Crimes at Jasenovac

For the Ustaša Defence officers, the recruitment of guards was not merely about scraping together personnel to carry out routine work; it was also about moulding a new generation of dedicated Ustašas, imbued with the "Ustaša spirit".[41] The "Ustaša spirit" denoted an anti-universalist project aimed at nixing the moral framework rooted in Judeo-Christian ethics and liberal ideas like individual freedom, and replacing them with a radical moral particularism. Like the Nazis, the Ustaša regime strove for an "ethical revolution" that restricted values such as compassion and sympathy to those deemed part of the "national community".[42] During a speech in November 1941, the leader of the NDH, Ante Pavelić, explained the logic unequivocally; "[i]ndividuals – individual persons, individual groups – cease to have value, unless they belong to the national community".[43]

At Jasenovac, imbuing guards with the "Ustaša spirit" involved compensating for their lack of prior ideological exposure by inducing their participation in violence. Officers spurred guards to brutalise the prisoners, using a mixture of encouragement and deliberate goading.[44] The compounds and external labour sites functioned as training grounds where guard recruits were systematically remoulded. At Jasenovac, participation in violence anchored the fulcrum of the "Ustaša spirit".

Participation in mass killings climaxed the transgression. What officers called "passing the exam at Gradina"[45] – named after the main killing site at Jasenovac – marked the initiation rite to a perpetrator community predicated on the transgression of traditional morality. By employing them to kill, officers aimed to bind guards to the Ustaša regime, immersing them in moral particularism and cementing their loyalty. "The Ustaša camp leadership", a survivor stated, "insisted that the one who does not kill, cannot be an Ustaša. By bringing them [the guards] to Gradina and making them participate in mass executions, they moulded them into Ustaša butchers" who "later killed wherever they went".[46] When interrogated after the war, a former guard had a similar impression, stating that the camp leadership assigned his company for duty at the Gradina site solely "to soak us in blood so that we would be more loyal to the NDH".[47]

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trašnje poslove Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske/The State Security Service of the Republic Internal Affairs Secretariat of the Socialist Republic of Croatia (HR-HDA-1561), dossier 209415, 5.

41 See the interrogation statement of Juraj Paršić, 19 June 1945, A-SPJ, doc. 13371. For other Ustaša officials' use of the "Ustaša spirit" term, see Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941–1945*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 43–45, 181, 204, 245, 336, and Danijel Matijević, "Ustašism as Ideology and Practice: Mass Violence and Genocide in Vukovar District, Croatia, 1939–1945" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2024), 156–158.

42 For the argument of the Nazi project as an ethical revolution, see Kühne, *Belonging*, 83.

43 Quoted in Sanja Gladanac, "Nepoželjni na području Bosne i Hercegovine za vrijeme uprave Nezavisne države Hrvatske" (PhD diss., University of Sarajevo, 2019), 126n.

44 For some suggestive descriptions, see the witness statement of Jakob Danon, 26 May 1945, HR-HDA-306, Zh 9947-10126, 3, the interrogation statement of Josip Kranjčec, 13 April 1948, HR-DAZG-1216, K 217/48, 4, and the account by Ljubomir Miloš, n.d., Croatian State Archives, HR-HDA-1561, case 013.2.30, 77.

45 Witness statement of Josip Riboli, 12 September 1945, HR-DAZG-1216, Kz 6/46.

46 Witness statement of Ljubo Šarić, 2 April 1956, HR-HDA, collection 421: *Javno tužilaštvo Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske*/Office of the Public Prosecutor of the Socialist Republic of Croatia (HR-HDA-421), box 123, 3 (112).

47 Interrogation statement of Ante Anić-Matić, 7 March 1953, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 96226, 11c (30).

Although many guards were reluctant at first, they gradually became inured. Post-war interrogation material suggests some guards sought to reduce mental strain by shifting their attitude to the killings, coming to believe in their righteousness.[48] Cognitive dissonance theory holds that when individuals are compelled to act against their moral values, they often start to evaluate the act more positively.[49] Similarly, at Jasenovac, some guards went as far as volunteering to serve at the killing sites. Their continuous and voluntarily involvement affirmed the supposed righteousness of the killings, which may be why participation, for some guards, turned into something bordering on obsession.[50]

Moral transformation, however, was not seamless. Vestiges of traditional universalist moral tenets persisted, burdening even some of the most hardened perpetrators. Some searched for relief at the bottom of the bottle;[51] some sought to exorcise moral discomfort through sacrilegious ravage, such as target-practicing on an image of Jesus Christ during a drunken stupor;[52] and some took their own lives.[53]

Other guards interspersed their routine brutality with occasional benign acts toward individual prisoners.[54] Even though such acts may have indicated a glimmer of unease with the murderous enterprise, it is possible that they also held an important function in enabling continuous participation in violence. As philosopher Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisic emphasises, reactions of revulsion when killing can show perpetrators "that they are still morally intact", functioning "as a form of shield against a complete and totalizing brutalization, a preservation of their humanity" that allows them to continue killing.[55] Similarly, some Ustaša Defence guards may have acted less inimically on occasion in order to demonstrate to themselves that they remained "decent", furthering them with an illusion of a conserved humanity. More commonly, though, the standard reaction to moral pangs among Ustaša Defence personnel was to doggedly suppress them: the guards marched on, grimly carrying out their "duties".

Social Interaction and Everyday Violence at the Camp Complex

Although shaped by the guards' altered moral framework, violence was often rooted in the immediate dynamics of social interaction as well. Inside the compounds and at external labour sites, the climate of permissibility dovetailed with different situational stimuli of micro-level encounters to fuel brutality.

In situations of violence, ingroup spectators were often crucial. Both the rank and file and officers were conscious of their audience, regardless of whether it comprised

48 Interrogation statement of Filip Madžar, 5 December 1952, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 200498, 17.

49 Leonard S. Newman, "What Is a 'Social-Psychological' Account of Perpetrator Behavior? The Person Versus the Situation in Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners", in *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53–55.

50 Witness statement of Adolf Fridrih during main hearing, 27 October 1946, HR-DAZG-1216, Stup 118/46, 40; interrogation statement of Ante Bačić, 21 January 1953, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 94491, 12.

51 Nikola Nikolić, *Jasenovački logor* (Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Hrvatske, 1948), 401; Đorde Miliša, *U Mucilištu-paklu Jasenovac* (Zagreb: Naklada Pavičić, 2011), 128; Dulić, *Utopias*, 271.

52 Egon Berger, *44 Months in Jasenovac: An Eyewitness Account of Life in a Concentration Camp During World War II in Croatia*, Kindle (Lakeway, TX: Sentia), 46.

53 Account by Milivoj Vlaho, n.d., A-SPJ, doc. 337, 382–383.

54 For one illustrative example of a perpetrator whose treatment of prisoners morphed significantly, see the records in the case against Franjo Berentin, in HR-DAZG-1216, Kz 532/45.

55 Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisic, *Perpetrator Disgust: The Moral Limits of Gut Feelings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 124.

peers, subordinates, or superiors. Loosing face in front of spectators fuelled extreme venom. Sudden resistance by prisoners often triggered moments of embarrassment as the guard or officer lost his cool, stunned by the abrupt turn of events. In one case, officer Hinko Pičili completely disfigured a prisoner with a truncheon after regaining his composure following an unexpected retaliation from the prisoner when he first struck him.[56]

Pičili's vicious outburst was fuelled by the presence of ingroup spectators while also involving a prisoner as an interactive element. The inclusion of prisoners in the analytical purview is not meant to propose some dubious notion of parity between them and their tormentors. The relations between prisoners and guards were profoundly asymmetrical, with prisoners having limited agency to influence outcomes. Violence against prisoners, however, was not always entirely indiscriminate, but often contingent on specific stimuli, which frequently included the prisoners.

In inflicting violence, guards often reacted to specific visual and social cues. Eager to label any accident as an "infraction", guards struck down hard on mistakes made by prisoners, however unintentional, as when a guard whipped a prisoner for having scratched a vehicle with a work cart.[57] Garments were another frequent source of danger. Since prisoners did not wear uniforms, but either kept the clothes they came in or were given worn-out rags instead,[58] certain attire stirred the attention of the guards – especially if they had a conspicuous colour.[59] Whereas the striped prisoner uniforms in the SS concentration camps are commonly regarded as integral to a process of dehumanisation that enabled the perpetrators to abuse and murder their victims, the absence of such attire at the Jasenovac camp complex raised the risk of individual prisoners becoming targets of guard brutality.

In shaping a guard's decisions about whether to have recourse to violence, ethnicity could be another factor. In a highly stratified prisoner hierarchy, Croat and Bosnian Muslim prisoners as a rule tended to fare somewhat better than Serb, Roma, and Jewish prisoners. Prisoners' own attempts to manipulate these categories were, in themselves, suggestive of their salience. Some Serb inmates sought to conceal their ethnicity during everyday encounters with guards by claiming to be Croat or a Muslim from Bosnia.[60] Conversely, Croat and Bosnian Muslim inmates sometimes strategically amplified theirs. Too conspicuous displays were likely to be noted – and could have grave consequences. New Bosnian Muslim prisoners often made the miscalculation of entering the compound wearing their fez, a readily identifiable symbol of their Muslim identity. Through this overt marker, they stood out, drawing the attention of guards.[61]

The dynamics of violence were often inseparable from micro-level interactions; yet, some acts of violence reflected a broader pattern of interaction between the

56 Milko Riffer, *Grad mrtvih. Jasenovac 1943.* (Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Hrvatske, 1946), 64–65; Cadik Braco Danon, *The Smell of Human Flesh: A Witness of the Holocaust: Memories of Jasenovac*, trans. Nadeža Obradović (Belgrade: S. Mašić, 2002), 59–60.

57 Interrogation statement of Josip Kranjčec, 16 April 1948, HR-DAZG-1216, K 217/48, 7.

58 Witness statement of Oto Breyer, 25 April 1945, Arhiv Jugoslavije/Archives of Yugoslavia, collection 110: *Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača*/State Commission for Determining the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Collaborators (AJ-110), box 291, 547.

59 Interrogation statement of Antun Medaković, 13 June1948, HR-DASB-78, K 240/48, 4; Sibel Roller, *The Rooster: Discovering My Father's Memories from the Jasenovac Concentration Camp* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 72.

60 Transposed oral testimony of Mihaljo Marić, 9 June 1997, in Jaša Almuli, ed., *Jevreji i Srbi u Jasenovcu* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2009), 404–405.

61 Drago H. Čolaković, *Kronika iz pakla* (Jasenovac: Spomen-područje Jasenovac, 1971), 60; testimony of Mustafa Begić, in Ana Požar, ed., *Riječi koje nisu zaklane IV: svjedočanstva preživjelih zatočenika logora Jasenovac* (Jasenovac: Spomen područje Jasenovac, 1983), 61.

guard force and the collective the prisoners were seen to represent. Evidence suggests that the camp personnel treated captured Partisans particularly cruelly, often starving them to death in isolation cells.[62] Reflecting the Ustaša Defence Brigade's lacklustre military performance against the Partisan forces in the environs of the camp complex and the unit's high casualty rate, many guards harboured a seething hatred of the Partisans, which in some cases even came to light during post-war interrogations.[63] Studies on torture highlight its capacity to imbue its practitioners with a "fiction of invincibility" or a "power surge" that temporarily surmounts anxiety, frustration, and feelings of emasculation.[64] A similar dynamic likely animated the punishment of Partisans, as guards relished in their power, enacting the triumph that eluded them on the battlefield by starving the victims to death in isolation cells.

Gender and Interaction

The demonstration of power embedded in the torture of Partisans was inseparable from notions of masculinity in the Ustaša Defence. To a large extent, these norms reflected the Ustaša regime's ideal of the "new man" – a political warrior who blended the revolutionary fervour of fascism with a martial ethos of old. In the fantasising of Ustaša ideologues, the "new man" would invigorate the nation and counteract the supposedly effeminising effects of decades of pacifistic and democratic ideals espoused by left-wing intellectuals during the interwar period.[65]

While retaining key characteristics of the Ustaša "new man", masculine norms in the Ustaša Defence also exhibited some distinctive features. A central role model for Ustaša Defence officers were the Hajduks: brigands who once roamed the Dinaric mountains, fighting against the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian authorities. Reflecting that many of the officers at Jasenovac hailed from Herzegovina – a mountainous region with a tradition of epic poetry that romanticised the Hajduks – the officers were infatuated with these mythologised figures.[66] Other Ustaša officials, by contrast, were sceptical of this role model, seeing the Hajduks as primitive rebels – ill-suited ideals for a modern, regimented state. Worse still was the pan-Slavism of Hajduk mythology and especially the centrality of the Hajduk ideal in the traditions of the Serb nationalist Chetnik organisation.[67] Instead, the sceptics promoted an

62 See, for instance, the report by the communist prisoner cell in the Stara Gradiška camp, April 1944, HR-HDA, collection 1220: *Savez komunista Hrvatske centralni komitet*/Central Committee of the League of Communists in Croatia (HR-HDA-1220), KP-34/2296.

63 Interrogation statement of Ilija Bunčić, 21 July 1945, HR-DASK-737, VKR 2984/50; interrogation statement of Marko Jelić, 23 July 1945, HR-DASK-737, KZP 26/46; interrogation statement of Marija Kuzmek, 14 August 1945, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 209415, 7. For the relation between Ustašas' torturing and their fear of the victims, see Dulić, *Utopias*, 358; Korb, *Im Schatten*, 312.

64 Werner Binder, "Ritual Dynamics of Torture: The Performance of Violence and Humiliation at the Abu Ghraib Prison", in *State, Power, and Violence*, ed. Margo Kitts et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 95; Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (London: Vintage, 2010), 140–141.

65 Nevenko Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia: Origins and Theory* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2014), 160–162; Rory Yeomans, "Of 'Yugoslav Barbarians' and Croatian Gentlemen Scholars: Nationalist Ideology and Racial Anthropology in Interwar Yugoslavia", in *"Blood and Homeland": Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940*, ed. Marius Turda and Paul Weindling (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 83–122.

66 See the interrogation statement of Ljudevit Medjurečan, 29 March 1949, HR-DAZG-1007, K 119/49; Iija Jakovljevic, *Konc-logor na Savi* (Zagreb: Konzor, 1999), 64.

67 Višeslav Aralica, *Kmet, Fiskal, Hajduk: Konstrukcija identiteta Hrvata 1935.–1945.* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2016), 437–440.

ideal of a stoic "Aryan" warrior.[68] For Vjekoslav Luburić and other Ustaša Defence officers, however, the idealised savagery associated with the Hajduks rendered them a powerful model for masculinity.

Within the Ustaša Defence, the enactment of masculinity intertwined with the degradation of prisoners. Conforming to a pattern Christopher Dillon has observed in relation to guards at the Dachau concentration camp,[69] the guards strove to magnify their own sense of masculinity through infantilising rituals aimed at stripping prisoners of their masculinity. The practice of forcing male prisoners to work naked seems suggestive of this dynamic, with coerced nudity functioning both as a source of entertainment and as a tool of emasculation.[70] By the same token, guards at Jasenovac vigorously resolved to prevent contact between male and female prisoners in an effort to curb expressions of prisoner sexuality.[71]

To a considerable extent, the Ustaša Defence personnel's efforts to deny masculinity to prisoners reflected their own niggling sense of emasculation, specifically in the face of the Partisans. In cases in which the Ustaša Defence personnel succeed in killing a Partisan or another enemy soldier in combat, the sources suggest scenes of exaltation – celebrations of restored manhood, commemorated by the taking of trophies, including the cap of a fallen fighter and the parachute of a crashed Allied pilot.[72]

Rape exhibited the same logic as trophy taking: a demonstration of power and a symbolic victory over the enemy.[73] It is plausible that Ustaša Defence guards raped female prisoners not only to violate them as individuals but also to symbolically degrade and dishonour the Partisan forces, exposing their failure to protect "their" women. In some cases, however, the intention to dominate the victims and symbolically mock the collective they were perceived as belonging to intertwined with the perpetrators' desire to transgress traditional communal boundaries, which limited interethnic sexual relations outside the camp complex.[74] However searingly despicable, many guards embraced rape as an "attractive activity",[75] showing how fluid the dividing line between abuse and leisure could be.

The actions of female guards also sometimes exhibited distinct efforts to deny female prisoners of their sexuality. Even though they were aware that pregnancies were more likely the result of rape by guards than of contact with male prisoners, female guards still routinely executed pregnant women, blaming the latter for alleged sexual frivolousness.[76] An equally potent target of the female guards' anger were women deported to Jasenovac as alleged "prostitutes". Regarding them as the embodiment of

68 Bartulin, *The Racial Idea*, 92.

69 Dillon, *Dachau and the SS*, 208–209.

70 Erwin Miller, *Izabran za umiranje* (Zagreb: Durieux, 2004), 101–102.

71 Interrogation statement of Marija Kuzmek, 14 August 1945, dossier 209415, 5; interrogation statement of Zdravko Belan, 27 January 1954, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 63056, 22–23.

72 Report by the communist prisoner cell in the Stara Gradiška camp, November 1944, HR-HDA-1220, KP-42/2296, 8; witness statement of Paulina Imenjak, 4 November 1952, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 200498, 58–59.

73 See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981), 31; Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Los Angeles, CA.: University of California Press, 2007), 24–25, 38.

74 Witness statement of Zilha Čaušević, 21 May 1945, HR-HDA-306, Zh 8320–24.

75 For the concept of "attractive activities" in the context of the Order Police in Nazi Germany, see Stefan Kühl, *Ordinary Organizations: Why Normal Men Carried Out the Holocaust*, trans. Jessica Spengler (Oxford: Polity Press, 2016; originally published in German in 2014).

76 Witness statement of Mihelina Čović, 19 May 1945, HR-HDA-306, GUZ 2882/45; transposed oral testimony of Mara Vejnović, 17 July 1997 in Almuli, *Jevreji i Srbi*, 265; transposed oral testimony of Ljiljana Ivanišević, 19 July 1997 in Almuli, 289; Bitunjac, *Verwicklung*, 222; Nataša Mataušić, *Žene u logorima Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Savez antifašističkih boraca i antifašista Republike Hrvatske, 2013), 67.

sexual transgression, the female guards targeted these women with added venom, often starving them to death.[77]

The cutting of prisoners' hair – not a standard practice at Jasenovac – was likewise reserved for select prisoners such as captured women Partisans, thereby robbing them of a traditional symbol of femininity and sexuality.[78] Rather than functioning like a dehumanising initiation ritual as in the SS concentration camps, the dynamics of this form of mistreatment appear closer to those underpinning the hair shavings that took place across Europe towards the end of the Second World War and in the aftermath of liberation. These public punishments, fuelled by accusations such as denunciations, employment for the occupiers, or sexual relations with German soldiers, emerged against the backdrop of a societal push to symbolically relegate women to the private sphere and restore patriarchal power relations.[79] Similarly, in the eyes of the female guards stationed at the Jasenovac camp complex, captured Partisan women had, by fighting as soldiers, overstepped the boundaries of domesticity and entered the political realm. Just as with violence by male guards, violence by female guards likewise often carried a gendered meaning.

Interactions Between the Guard Force and the Local Society

Guards at Jasenovac did not act in a hermetically shut-off universe, where only they and the prisoners were present. The borders separating the camp complex from local society were fluid.[80] This was not least because the 1st Ustaša Defence Brigade acted as a de-facto police unit in the "Security Belt". Extending the violence outside the compounds, guard personnel carried out deportations and perpetrated massacres against local civilians.

The Ustaša Defence personnel's attitude to civilians largely depended on their ethnicity. For Serbs, the guards' ubiquitous presence in the area was calamitous, crushing centuries of coexistence with their Croat neighbours. The 1st Ustaša Defence Brigade deported thousands of Serbs to the camp complex or murdered them where they lived.[81] If Jasenovac officers suspected them of collaborating with the Partisans, Croats and Bosnian Muslims were in grave danger as well. As Partisan defections surged from 1943, the Ustaša Defence launched brutal campaigns of repression, hanging hundreds of civilians in front of their neighbours after having tortured

77 Witness statement of Desa Zdenkova Devčić, 31 October 1944, HR-HDA-306, GUZ 176/44, 2; witness statement of Margarita Pifčević, 3 May 1945, in *Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovina* (ABiH)/Archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina, collection *Zemaljska komisija za Bosnu i Hercegovinu za utvrđivanje ratnih zločina okupatora i njihovih pomogača*/Commission for Determining the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Collaborators for Bosnia and Herzegovina (ABiH-ZKUZ), box 33, inv. nr. 47987, 3.

78 Witness statement of Jelka Cihaber, 13 April 1945, AJ-110, box 687, 22; witness statement of Gabrijel Badovinac, 1 November 1944, AJ-110, box 581, 156; report by the communist prisoner cell in the Stara Gradiška camp, 1944 November, HR-HDA-1220, KP-42/2296, 2.

79 Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, trans. John Flower (Oxford: Berg, 2002; originally published in French in 2000), 11–21, 236–242.

80 For this argument in relation to concentration camps in Nazi Germany, see Karola Fings, "The Public Face of the Camps", in *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, ed. Nikolaus Wachsmann and Jane Caplan (London: Routledge, 2010), 120.

81 For detailed studies of some of these atrocities, see Radanović, "Zločini 3. bojne 1. ustaškog obrambenog zdruga na području Stare Gradiške i Bosanske Gradiške krajem 1943. i početkom 1944.", *Tragovi: časopis za srpske i hrvatske teme* 2, no. 1 (24 June 2019): 123–196; Milan Radanović, *Općina Crkveni Bok u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu* (Zagreb: Srpsko narodno vijeće; Jesenski i Turk, 2024).

them within the compounds.[82] The grim fate of these victims illustrates just how intertwined mass violence inside and outside the camp complex could be.

The Ustaša Defence, however, also interacted with Croat and Bosnian Muslim civilians in other ways than victimising them. With deceitful magnanimity, guard personnel distributed spoils from the plunder of Serb settlements in the aftermath of deportations.[83] By turning locals into accomplices, Ustaša Defence personnel sought to enmesh them in complicitly and guilt, thereby deterring them from defecting to the Partisans.

But civilians were not exclusively passive beneficiaries of loot; some actively contributed to the mass violence in the "Security Belt". Expecting to capitalise materially on their demise, some Croats denunciated Serb neighbours to the guard personnel, baselessly accusing them of offences.[84] Others reported local Partisan sympathisers to the Ustaša Defence, turning against their Croat neighbours whether because of a private grievance or warped political conviction.[85] Complicity and economic transactions went hand in hand. Companies – far and wide – purchased products from the compounds while local peasants petitioned for using prisoners to renovate their houses or guarding their livestock.[86] The ubiquity of such micro-level interactions between locals and the guard force reveals that the camp complex and local society were not separate worlds but firmly integrated.

Civilians' behaviour and attitudes, nevertheless, ran a broad gamut, especially when directly encountering prisoners. As prisoners were escorted by guards through towns and villages en route to the compounds or toiled at external labour sites, some locals hurled insults or spat at them, but there were also others who looked on in pity. And then there were those who acted pro-socially, providing food to the prisoners despite the risk of draconian punishment.[87] Arguably, a fair share of local civilians clung to universalist moral principles, rejecting the notion that prisoners were located outside what sociologist Helen Fein calls the "universe of obligation".[88] Although some locals tried to go about their daily business, sitting on the fence, a static concept like "bystander" is inadequate to capture the close ways many interacted with the camp complex and the diversity of their actions.

The "bystander" concept misses the mark even further when it comes to family members of Ustaša Defence personnel. Whereas earlier scholarship saw perpetrator's domestic life as a discrete sphere for him to recuperate among family members blissfully oblivious to the atrocities,[89] newer research has revealed the deep entanglement of complicity and domesticity.[90] At Jasenovac, family members of commis-

82 Witness statement of Bara Dejanović, 15 July 1948, HR-HDA-1561, case 015.7/11, 76 (198); Dušan D. Samardžija, *Bosanskodubičko područje u NOR-u i socijalističkoj revoluciji 1941–1945: monografija* (Bosanska Dubica: Društveno-političke organizacije i skupština opštine, 1984), 255.

83 Ivanović, *Svjedok*, 16; Radanović, "Vaša pobjeda", 81; Filip Škiljan, "Stradanje Srba u Jasenovcu u Drugom svjetskom ratu", *Pro tempore*, no. 4 (13 October 2007): 44.

84 Account by Ljubomir Miloš, n.d., HR-HDA-1561, case 013.2.30, 62.

85 See, for instance, the records in the case against Ivan Perhač, HR-DASK-737, Kzp 120/46.

86 Interrogation statement of Miroslav Filipović, n.d., HR-HDA-1561, case 013.2.86, 25; testimony of Vikalo Ostaja, in Radovan Trivunčić, ed., *Riječi koje nisu zaklane II: svjedočanstva preživjelih zatočenika logora Jasenovac*, Biblioteka Poruke (Jasenovac: Spomen područje Jasenovac, 1975), 58–59.

87 For some cases of civilian mistreatment of prisoners see, "Oral History Interview with Dragoljub Vukić", 16 October 2007, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM), RG-50.586.0057, 09:30–10:45; "Oral History Interview with Ranko Toroman", 17 October 2007, part 1, USHMM, RG-50.586.0061, 37:00–40.00. For civilians who assisted with food, see Berger, *44 Months*, 47; Vladimir Carin, *Smrt je hodala četvoronoške.* (Zagreb: Mladost, 1961), 68–69; "Testimony of Albert Maestro" in Dušan Sindik, ed., *Sećanja Jevreja na logor Jasenovac* (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opstina, 1972), 118.

88 Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 4.

89 Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Routledge, 1987), 420.

90 Lower, *Hitler's Furies.*

sioned and non-commissioned officers often resided near the camp complex, accommodated in houses seized from local Serbs.[91] For families who preferred the pulsing city life rather than the humdrum of the rural surroundings of Jasenovac, the Ustaša Defence secured apartments in Zagreb's affluent Lower Town, expropriated from Jewish citizens.[92] Families of rank-and-file guards benefited as well from organised robbery. When on leave, guards returned home carrying sewing machines and other items in short supply in regions like Herzegovina and Dalmatia, giving rise to a veritable looting economy sustained by remittances of stolen goods.[93]

Yet, just as with local civilians, some family members fell victim to the personnel violence. One non-commissioned officer in the Ustaša Defence had a Serb girlfriend who was incarcerated in the camp complex.[94] Similarly, even though she had converted from the Orthodox to the Catholic faith, the fiancée of an officer at Jasenovac was murdered by Ustaša Defence personnel.[95] One guard even encountered one of his cousins among the victims his unit escorted to a killing site.[96] In these cases, the Ustašas regime's mass violence encroached not only on the social fabric of local society but also into the family life of its executioners.

Conclusion

Still often framed through stereotypes of "clerical fascism" and pathological sadism, the Jasenovac guard force remains a largely unexplored group of perpetrators, rarely approached through objective analytical frameworks. Rather than focusing solely on the guards and their internal motives – as filtered through post-war interrogations coloured by retrospection – this article argues that their brutality is better understood through patterns of interaction and norms, both moral and gendered.

Despite showing little evidence of predispositions for violence in terms of prior experiences and backgrounds, guard recruits quickly imbibed the "Ustaša spirit". Deriving from the Ustašas' radical moral particularism – their project to annihilate those branded outside the "national community" – the "Ustaša spirit" was at Jasenovac indelibly tied together with violence against prisoners, forging a legitimising framework for brutality. Its most radical manifestation was the killing sites. Although often initially unenthusiastic, many guards eventually turned into killers of conviction; some even volunteered for killing duty.

Whereas the mass killings followed a premediated pattern, centrally organised by Ustaša Defence officers, guards stationed inside the compounds and at external labour sites exercised considerable agency in how they enacted violence. Their brutality could be spontaneous, triggered by certain garments and perceived "infractions" by prisoners. But it could also be more systemic as when guard personnel, reflecting their own underlying fear and hatred, starved captured Partisans to death or sought to emasculate prisoners through infantilising rituals. In either case, violence was rarely entirely arbitrary but embedded in patterns of social interaction.

91 Interrogation statement of Darinka Miloš, 5 September 1945, HR-DAZG-1216, K 131/47; interrogation statement of Veseljko Lončarević, 3 August 1953, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 145380, 11.
92 Interrogation statement of Tatjana Šentjurc, 11 July 1945, HR-DAZG-1216, Kz 128/45.
93 See the interrogation statement of Ante Anić-Matić, 7 March 1953, HR-HDA-1561, dossier 96226, 34–35, and the interrogation statement of Mirko Modrić, 18 March 1947, HR-DAZG-1216, Kz 128/45, 7.
94 Interrogation statement of Ante Vrban, 18 August 1948, HR-HDA-1561, case 015.7/11, 48 (182).
95 Interrogation statement of Juraj Paršić, 19 June 1945, A-SPJ, doc. 13371, 2.
96 Interrogation statement of Adam Miličević, 30 May 1948, HR-HDA-1561, 015.7/11, case 25.

Examining the Jasenovac guards through a prism of interaction also throws light on their ties to external actors. The boundaries between local society and the camp were far from static, with both locals and the family members of guards profiting from the plunder of prisoners. Patterns of interaction bound these civilians to the guard force, ensnaring them in a community predicated on the transgression of universalist morality.

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