SPECIAL SECTION: THE HOLOCAUST IN CROATIA

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Introduction

The Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH)

The general history of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH) has been told many times. It is broadly familiar to academic audiences engaged with the Second World War, mass violence, and the Holocaust especially. The NDH was established in April 1941. As late as March of that year, the German Reich was still negotiating with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia about the latter joining the Tripartite Pact. Just two weeks later, that country no longer existed. Following a coup in Belgrade – interpreted by Germany as evidence of political unreliability – the Wehrmacht launched an attack on 6 April 1941. Eleven days later, Yugoslavia capitulated. Germany and its Axis allies occupied and divided the territory. At the heart of the former kingdom, the NDH was proclaimed, a supposedly independent state that encompassed most of present-day Croatia (excluding Istria and Dalmatia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[1]

The proclamation of the NDH on 10 April 1941 followed intense behind-the-scenes negotiations. It was far from certain that the fascist Ustaša movement, whose leadership had been in exile in Italy since 1930, would be installed as the ruling power.[2] The German and Italian partners each pursued their own interests and, even within German institutions, there were differing views on what this new state should be.[3] When Croatia's largest political party – the Peasant Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka,* HSS) – and its leader Vladko Maček (1879–1964) refused to cooperate with the occupiers, the German authorities ultimately facilitated the rise of the Ustaša regime.

Roughly six million people found themselves within the borders of the new state; only about half of them were Catholic Croats. The remainder consisted of minorities, some large, such as the two million Serbs, and others smaller, like the 40,000 Jews. From the outset of Ustaša rule, systematic disenfranchisement, persecution, and ultimately the mass murder of Serbs and Jews began, alongside attacks on Roma and political opponents. The contours of the Holocaust in the NDH are well known to scholars: more than fifty camps were established beginning in the spring of 1941, and by August the largest complex, Jasenovac, was operational. It is estimated that around 80,000 people were murdered there by 1945. Most Croatian and Bosnian Jews perished in these camps, while around 5,000 others were deported to Auschwitz in 1942 and 1943.[4] Jewish businesses, homes, medical practices, and law offices were "Ary-

1 Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

2 Goran Miljan, *Croatia and the Rise of Fascism: The Youth Movement and the Ustasha During WW II* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018); Lovro Kralj, "Paving the Road to the Holocaust in the NDH: Antisemitism in the Ustaša Movement, 1930–1940" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2023); Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

3 Igor-Philip Matić, *Edmund Veesenmayer. Agent und Diplomat der nationalsozialistischen Expansionspolitik* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2002), 131–136.

4 Ivo Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2001); Ognjen Kraus, ed., *Zna li se 1941–1945: Antisemitizam, holokaust, antifašizam* (Zagreb: Židovska općina Zagreb, 1996); Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Krieges: Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013).

RUBRIK https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0225 | www.vwi.ac.at

anised", which in practice meant that they plundered and sold off. Synagogues were burned and destroyed. Several thousand Jews managed to survive by fleeing, hiding, or joining the armed resistance. By war's end, 80 per cent of Croatia's and Bosnia's Jewish populations had been murdered. Alongside them, a significant portion of their culture and history was destroyed. These communities were stripped not only of their heritage but also of their future.

Scholarly engagement with the Holocaust in the NDH has seen several waves of interest since 1945. In a 2017 article for *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, I reviewed these shifts, tracing the development of research, highlighting key findings, and identifying major gaps. I explored regional (Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav), Central European, and international perspectives on the Holocaust in the NDH.[5] While the past two decades have seen numerous significant individual studies, both in Croatian and international contexts,[6] the overall state of knowledge has shifted only gradually. Macro-level, totalising narratives continue to dominate. The NDH and the genocide of its Jewish population are still often viewed from above, summarised, repeated, and debated at a distance. There are many reasons for this: presumed expertise, a lack of interest in difficult archival work, scarce research funding, and politically driven discourse. All of these obscure a troubling reality: even eight decades after the war, we still know and understand surprisingly little.

As I argued in that 2017 article, what is urgently needed are micro-level and detailed case studies – work that allows us to grasp the scale of the violence, identify perpetrators and their motives, understand local and social dynamics, and integrate victims into the culture of remembrance. With this goal in mind, several colleagues and I conceived a special issue of *S:I.M.O.N.* dedicated to the Holocaust in the NDH, aiming to bridge micro-, meso-, and macro-analytical levels. The full special issue did not materialise, but a section was realised. It now contains three contributions, each of which approaches the Holocaust in the NDH from different angles and methodologies. Yet, they share two essential features: first, each connects different levels of analysis to a specific event, group, or locality; and, second, all engage explicitly with the perpetrators.

Over the past three decades, international – particularly German – research has produced groundbreaking studies on perpetrators: from political leaders and planners, to male and female camp guards and "ordinary men".[7] But this work has largely focused on German perpetrators. Non-German perpetrators, whether independent actors or "just" willing collaborators, have received far less attention. This gap has increasingly been criticised, especially by non-German scholar.[8] In turn, these critiques have sparked counter-critiques.[9] Within both national and international scholarship, perpetrators in the NDH remain largely unexamined. There are no bi-

5 Marija Vulesica, "Holocaust Research in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. An Inventory", *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 65, no. 2 (2017): 260–283, https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2017-0018.

6 Exemplary studies include Rory Yeomans, ed., *The Utopia of Terror: Life and Death in Wartime Croatia* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015), and Jovan Byford, *Picturing Genocide in the Independen State of Croatia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

7 A comprehensive overview of the research landscape is presented in Frank Bajohr, "Täterforschung: Ertrag, Probleme und Perspektiven eines Forschungsansatzes", in *Der Holocaust. Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung*, eds. Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2015), 167–185.

8 Jan Grabowski, "Germany is Fueling a False History of the Holocaust", *Haaretz*, 22 June 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2020-06-22/ty-article-opinion/.premium/germany-is-fueling-a-false-history-of-the-holocaust-across-europe/0000017f-f497-d887-a7ff-fcf75b480000.

9 Christoph David Piorkowski, "Ein Recht auf einen Anteil an Schuld", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 30 June 2020, 22; Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, "Der schwierige Umgang mit Kollaboration", L.I.S.A., 17 September 2020, https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/der_schwierige_umgang_mit_kollaboration?nav_id=9364.

ographical studies of the Ustaša leadership, local decision-makers, or thousands of men and women who dragged Jews and Serbs from their homes, guarded transport trains, staffed administrative offices, or participated in killings.

Apart from a few well-known names – Pavelić, Artuković, Kvaternik, Luburić, or Babić – the Ustaša are still perceived as an undifferentiated mass, a unified actor. Already in 1995, Holm Sundhaussen noted the absence of a sociographic study of the Ustaša, one that could help identify the regime's "carrier layers" and thus the agents of violence.[10] Against this backdrop, Emil Kjerte's contribution to the collection of articles in this journal is particularly important. Based on his 2025 dissertation *Ustaša Killing Specialists: The Personnel of the Jasenovac Concentration and Death Camp Complex*, submitted at Clark University, Kjerte examines the brutality of the Jasenovac guards. He argues that this brutality was rooted in a "moral transformation". His analysis considers moral dimensions of crime, social interaction patterns, and gender norms. Kjerte points to the importance of ideology, agency, and the influence of personal networks, including family ties and local community structures.

Lavro Kralj, in his contribution to this collection, focuses on the destruction of Jewish life in Sarajevo. Through a localised lens, he shows that the NDH did not operate under a centrally coordinated plan for persecution. Nonetheless, individual actors and local networks, motivated and meticulous, drove arrests and deportations. Central to Kralj's study is the figure of Ivan Tolj, who, within a matter of weeks, succeeded in deporting nearly the entire Jewish population of Sarajevo.

My own contribution explores the concrete experience of imprisonment and its aftermath, as reflected in the accounts of Aleksandar Licht and Hinko Gottlieb, who were detained in Vienna and Graz in 1941. But the focus also extends to the Gestapo's role in the NDH. Like the Ustaša, the German perpetrators in the region remain under-researched. German occupation forces – including the Wehrmacht, SS, Gestapo, diplomatic missions, and the Reichsleiter Rosenberg Task Force (*Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*) – were all present in the NDH. They pursued their military and political aims and were deeply involved in looting Jewish property and implementing the Final Solution. Yet, their role has been barely examined.

Emphasising German responsibility in the NDH may seem politically sensitive. Some scholars find it more convenient to lay the blame solely on the Ustaša. Others might welcome a focus on German perpetrators because it seemingly lessens the burden of local accountability. Both positions are deeply problematic and must be addressed directly. My turn to the Gestapo aims not to minimise the Ustaša's role, but to highlight the broader ecosystem of perpetrators and the involvement of German actors in the Holocaust in the NDH.

Cultures of remembrance require facts and certainties. Facts and certainties require research. It may be that, by 2025, we are already too late to once again emphasise the value of meticulous, focused scholarship. Political cultures and public discourse are shifting rapidly. Long-held assumptions and conclusions are now challenged, often without adequate knowledge to support such revision. Perhaps those of us working on the history of the NDH and its Holocaust are indeed behind the curve. And yet: historical scholarship thrives on change, on debate, and on shifting currents of attention. The articles presented in this section will no doubt find their rightful place within those evolving currents.

10 Holm Sundhaussen, "Der Ustascha-Staat: Anatomie eines Herrschaftssystems", *Österreichische Osthefte* 37, no. 6 (1995): 497–533.

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Quotation: Marija Vulesica, Introduction. The Holocaust in Former Yugoslavia, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 12 (2025) 4, 46–49.

https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0425/cont_mvul01

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 12 (2025) 4| https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0425