



BOSNIA REMEMBERED – PART I: THE LEGACY OF JASENOVAC

By David Danelo



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On a gray, cloudy October afternoon, I stood with a group of Serbian tourists at a World War II holocaust memorial. The former labor camps, execution sites, and mass graves comprise the Jasenovac complex, which straddles both sides of the Sava and Una Rivers, traversing what is now the border between Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina.¹ During World War II, the Jasenovac concentration camps were north of the rivers, in what is now Croatia. The actual killing fields I was visiting that rainy afternoon were in Donja Gradina, a town to the south in the Serbian-ruled region of Bosnia known locally as Republica Srpska. When Yugoslavia dissolved in 1991, the memorial to World War II atrocities split as well. Even now, each side remembers events differently.

“The Ustasha killed our people here,” said the Donja Gradina Memorial Zone curator, a Bosnian Serb with fierce views on the Croatian World War II genocide. From January 1942 until April 1945, the Croatian Ustasha regime and their Nazi collaborators interred, tortured and butchered thousands of men, women and children at the confluence of the Sava and Una Rivers. “Seven hundred thousand died,” said the Donja Gradina curator. “Sometimes the Ustasha had contests to see how many throats they could slit each day. Then they boiled the Serbian corpses and made brick mortar from our bone dust and shower soap from the fat of our flesh.”²

The Serbian tourists, who gasped as the Donja Gradina curator narrated, were surprised when I told them I was familiar with these stories. Two hours before, I had heard Maja Kucan, a Jasenovac Memorial Site curator, tell me she had no evidence beyond survivor testimonies supporting any of these claims. “We know of 82,000 the Ustasha killed,” Kucan said, emphasizing formal research that carefully cataloged the fascist death campaign’s diversity. “But we cannot find any evidence supporting death contests or other uses of human remains.” Croatia’s Catholic leadership during World War II, including Cardinal Aloysius Stepanic, also knew of the killings, although Jasenovac curators question if the Vatican’s involvement was as extensive as Serbian Orthodox leaders assert.³

1 For purposes of this article, the Jasenovac camp complex also includes Stara Gradiska, the seasonal labor camp north of the Sava and Una Rivers, where mostly women, children, and political prisoners were held. Fewer people died at Stara Gradiska, but those at the camp still suffered horribly.

2 Curator official presentation, Donja Gradina Memorial Zone, Bosnia & Herzegovina, October 12, 2012. Evidence for Ustasha corpse mutilations and 700,000 dead comes from selected survivor testimonies.

3 Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 16-20.



In October 2012, I traveled to Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina to analyze the Bosnian War's regional impact and assess the former Yugoslavia's future stability.⁴ In this article, the first in a three-part series covering Bosnia, I share observations on key factors leading up to the war not well understood by Americans. In the next piece, we will examine present-day Bosnia & Herzegovina through the voices of Sarajevo and Tuzla's "lost generation" of war veterans. And finally, we will look at the Bosnian War's relevance to future U.S.-Balkan policy and how the Bosnia lessons inform policy and ethics questions on U.S. military interventions worldwide.

REVIEWING BOSNIA'S BLOODSHED

Twenty years ago, from 1992 until 1995, southeastern Europe spiraled into what would later be described as inevitable sectarian bloodletting resulting from "ancient ethnic hatreds" rooted in centuries of Balkan apparitions.⁵ National, political, ethnic and religious identities violently asserted themselves, in large part because the messages Croatian and Serbian leaders Franco Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic sent through the media manipulated their constituents to believe their opponents were an imminent threat. An estimated 200,000 Croats, Serbs, and Bosnian Muslims died in massacres, murders, rapes, and reprisals. After deciding on an air campaign and ground force commitment, the war ended in November 1995 at a U.S. military base near Dayton, Ohio. Had the Americans not intervened militarily and diplomatically, no immediate end would have been in sight.

ANCIENT ETHNIC HATREDS?

The Bosnian War in which the United States decisively intervened was, ideologically, a war to settle scores accumulated during World War II between Josep Broz Tito's communist (and quasi-internationalist) Partisans, Ante Pavelic's fascist (and Croatian nationalist) Ustasha, and Draza Mihailovic's royalist (and Serbian nationalist)

⁴ In 958 A.D., the surviving papers of Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus mark the first mention of Bosnia as a national territory. Herzegovina, the territory's southern region, was first mentioned in the 11th century as a separate region.

⁵ *Balkan* is Turkish for mountain. The regional descriptor first appeared during Ottoman rule.

Chetniks.⁶ It was, in religious terms, a war between Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Sunni Muslim extremists. It was a war between Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian nationalists for power and control over the former Yugoslavia's military men and materiel. In some regions, it was a class war between landowning nobility from one culture and working-class peasantry from another. Geopolitically, the war was a skirmish between the United States, the former Soviet Union, Sunni Muslim *mujahideen* warriors who had just emerged victorious in Afghanistan, and the nascent European Union—especially newly united Germany—to exert post-Cold War influence. Finally, the Bosnia War was, ethnically, a war between Serbians, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims—although this dimension emerged within the context of other unresolved conflicts.

But examining the Bosnia War's ethnic violence without dissecting the role of outside forces is like discarding a patient's pre-existing condition when evaluating their health insurance. All too often, American narratives portray the war as the inevitable byproduct of "ancient ethnic hatreds" restrained for decades by Marshal Tito's heavy hand. Certainly there were, and are, ethnic and religious rivalries throughout Bosnia & Herzegovina. But violence was not unavoidable; indeed, peace was the normative condition for most of recent Bosnian history. "These [ethnic and religious] animosities were not permanently built into the psyches of the people who lived in Bosnia," writes historian Noel Malcolm. "The two major episodes of violence—in and just after the first world war, and during the four years of the second world war—were exceptions, induced and aggravated by causes outside Bosnia's borders."⁷

The same was true twenty years ago, when Croatian and Serbian nationalists inflamed the memory of World War II-era tensions to suit their own ends, making the second period of violence which Malcolm references significant as one of several catalysts for the Bosnian War. Throughout the 1980s, Serb extremists wielded propaganda reminding their compatriots of the Croatian Ustasha, whose cruelty and inhumanity during their short, fascist reign even offended their Nazi allies. This came full circle in December 1991, when newly unified Germany recognized Slovenia and Croatia's independence despite intense international opposition, thus strengthening Serbian arguments suggesting an imminent neo-fascist rise.⁸

For their part, Croatian nationalists stoked the memory of Serbian Chetniks, anti-communists who supported both Axis and Allies at different times during the war. The Croats warned of planned Serbian uprisings in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and subsequent targeting of Croats and Bosnian Muslims. Ultimately, both Serbian and Croatian nationalists positioned themselves as victims, reminding their people of abuse suffered—some real, some imagined—under Tito's communist Partisan rule. Although the Dayton Accords ended the violence these nationalist narratives fueled, many of the underlying tensions—witness Croatian General Ante Gotovina's November 2012 acquittal from war crimes at The Hague—remain unresolved today.

THE LEGACY OF JASENOVAC

The Jasenovac story provides a relevant example. Both Croatian and Bosnian Serb memorials testify to the Ustasha's indisputable carnage. After being ferried across the river, prisoners faced hanging, poisoning, burning, beating, starvation, or having their throats slit. Ustasha soldiers used knives, mallets, axes, and hammers to kill their victims; bullets were deemed too expensive. Men claimed to be mechanics or leatherworkers even when they did not know these skills, as the elderly or unfit were immediately killed. Serbs died in larger numbers than Jews and Roma (gypsies), who were killed under Nazi orders, as well as Croats, who were killed for resisting Ustasha authority. Political prisoners—both Partisans and Chetniks—were most likely to survive Jasenovac, as their lives could be bartered for captured Axis soldiers. Almost 20,000 Serbian, Jewish, and Roma women were separated from their children under 14; 18,000 of whom were murdered while held in the camp. Their mothers were forcibly deported to Auschwitz and few are known to have returned.⁹

But the answers to key questions—Who died? How many? Why were they killed?—depend on which side you believe, as the actual casualty numbers have been manipulated for decades by nationalists. Croats claim the

6 All factions switched sides multiple times between Axis and Allies during World War II. Ustasha and Chetniks both cooperated with Germans and Italians. Partisans and Chetniks both worked with Allied soldiers, including rescues of British and American pilots. The shifts appear to have occurred as Allied victories over Italy and German losses to the Soviet Union sealed the fascists' fate.

7 Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History* (London: Pan Books, 2002), p. xxi.

8 Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 93

9 Interview with Maja Kucan, curator, Jasenovac Memorial Site. Jasenovac, Croatia, October 12, 2012.

Ustasha purged Serbs to subjugate them, not to ethnically cleanse. “Serbs, Jews, and Roma were murdered with no verdict since they did not fit into the proclaimed Ustasha concept of racial and national purity,” states an official placard at the Jasenovac Memorial. “Croats and Bosnian Muslims were killed because they either belonged to the anti-fascist resistance or the regime considered them a threat.”¹⁰ As evidence, Jasenovac Memorial Site authorities point to the many Croats among the 82,000 confirmed victims, highlighting the indiscriminate nature of Ustasha violence. Although the Ustasha classified their prisoners by ethnicity and religion—Orthodox Serbs wore blue armbands; Catholic Croats, red; Jews, yellow—their brutality was not constrained to a specific clan. Indeed, the Nazi SS disapproved of Ustasha killing methods; they found the Croats undisciplined compared to their efficiency and believed the brutish processes risked psychologically damaging the soldiers, making them combat ineffective.¹¹

Bosnian Muslims did not wear armbands, but the few who were imprisoned at Jasenovac fared no better than others. In November 1942, Bosnian Muslims petitioned Hitler for autonomy, arguing their heritage as “Aryan” under dubious historical justification. The Germans rejected the petition, since Bosnian autonomy would anger their Croatian Ustasha allies, and raised a 21,000 soldier “Handzar Division” of Bosnian Muslims under Ustasha and Nazi command.¹² While “peacekeeping” under Ustasha orders, the Handzar committed an unknown number of atrocities, which they claimed were reprisals for Serbian Chetnik attacks. Just before World War II ended, Tito granted the Handzar amnesty for their actions after they pledged Partisan allegiance.¹³ Bosnians lost their bid for autonomy, and Serbs added the Handzar atrocities to a long and tragic list of World War II grievances.

These tragedies, as well as the nationalist and ethnic fervor emerging from Germany’s reunification and Croatia’s rise, framed Serbia’s *causus belli* during Yugoslavia’s 1991 collapse. Unquestionably, the Serbs suffered more than any other Balkan ethnicity during and after World War II. Unfortunately, nationalism often replaced historical accuracy when Serbians discussed their grudges and resentments. After Tito’s 1980 death, Serbian leaders spent much of the decade refining the Jasenovac narrative, emphasizing highly partisan conclusions. A presentation on Jasenovac shown to Yugoslav People’s Army soldiers—and to Jasenovac visitors—included a documentary on Ustasha fascism with footage of bulldozers carting piles of exterminated dead bodies. Although the footage was from a German concentration camp, viewers were led to believe it was film of dead Serbs from Jasenovac. This played heavily in a traveling exhibition shown to drafted soldiers, which Serbian nationalists often referenced when expressing how Serbians were discriminated against in Yugoslavia.¹⁴ This charged retelling of both the Ustasha character and nature of Serbian suffering left many Serbian Yugoslavs believing, inaccurately, that all Croats supported the Ustasha in their genocide.

THE GERMAN CONNECTION

In the summer of 1991, newly reunified Germany started a campaign to recognize Yugoslav republics Slovenia and Croatia as independent nations. Fearing perceptions of German dominion over the Balkans would fan Serbian nationalist fire, the international community urged caution. Fascism was not an ancient horror; every adult over 50 carried traumatic memories from World War II’s terrors. Croats did not help matters by adding the Ustasha crest to their national flag, or naming their currency unit the “kuna,” a name last used under fascist rule.

In December 1991, when Germany recognized Croatia’s independence, neither the breakup of Yugoslavia nor the war that followed was inevitable. Although Croatian fears of Serbian aggression turned out to be true, Serb action was not a foregone conclusion. Absent an equal commitment towards Serbian and Bosnian self-determination, and considering their previous involvement in regional genocide, the German decision was flawed and irresponsible. Yugoslavia was not destined to disintegrate in 1991, but German recognition of Croatia increased Serb paranoia and ensured the country’s final demise.

The exact number who died at Jasenovac has been lost to history, but most non-partisan scholarship suggests it was

10 Jasenovac Memorial Site; Jasenovac, Croatia. Transcribed from public display, October 12, 2012.

11 Interview with Maja Kucan, curator, Jasenovac Memorial Site. Jasenovac, Croatia, October 12, 2012.

12 Ustasha leaders claimed Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of Croatia, just as Chetniks claimed the territory as part of Serbia. Partisans sought to impose political communism, which most Bosnian Muslims also rejected.

13 Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, pp. 189-191. *Handzar* refers to the traditional Turkish knife.

14 Interview with Maja Kucan, curator, Jasenovac Memorial Site. Jasenovac, Croatia, October 12, 2012. The footage likely came from Bergen-Belsen, where, in April 1945, Allied soldiers discovered over 13,000 unburied corpses littered throughout the camp.

close to 100,000.¹⁵ “All the sides saw themselves as victims in the 1990s,” says Maja Kucan, who as a teenage girl rallied for Croatian independence in Zagreb’s public square. Her years working at Jasenovac and her friendships with Bosnian Serb researchers across the border at Donja Gradina have broadened her perspective. “I see where they are coming from,” says Kucan, referring to the Serbs who mourn their dead. “Politicians make propaganda and myth on both sides.”

“Before, Yugoslavia had united our culture and brought us together,” Kucan continues. “Today there is nationalism, but also more pluralism of opinion. We all have nostalgia for a simpler time.” I found that nostalgia tangible during my travels, where a generation who endured the war as children are trying to move forward, despite the restraints imposed upon them by both the prejudices of their parents and the uncertainty of their economic future.

Coming in Part 2: Sarajevo’s “lost generation”

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¹⁵ *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 11, 2012. The reference places the upper limit of dead at 99,000. Keeping it below six figures suggests more of a rebuke to Serbian scholarship than an actual investigation, and is probably neither fair nor accurate. That said, hard scientific evidence supporting Serbian claims of 700,000 killed does not currently exist.