Masking the past: the Second World War and the Balkan Historikerstreit

A very considerable part of the Croatian political elite, supported by the Catholic hierarchy and Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac himself, supported this national and religious intolerance, and strongly supported policies of clericalism and racism, marked by mass killings, forced conversions and the deportation of the Serbian Orthodox population as well the slaughter of the Jews and Gypsies. (Dušan Bataković, 'The National Integration of the Serbs and Croats')

An intriguing part of the propaganda campaign has been an attempt to equate the supposed victimization of present-day Serbs with that of the Holocaust Jews. In promoting the image of Serbian spiritual kinship with the Jews as fellow victims, Belgrade has concealed Serb willingness to collaborate with the Nazis in the extermination of Serbia’s Jews. (Philip Cohen, Serbia’s Secret War)

Throughout the Serbian–Croatian conflict, the comparative genocide debate was of particular importance. For both countries, the success of nationalist regimes depended on their ability to present national history as one of righteous struggle against persecution. For both Serbs and Croats, the revision of the history of the Second World War provided a wealth of myths of heroism and persecution. Continual portrayals of enemies as either Četniks or Ustaša, as well as constant references to Second World War atrocities as precursors of events in the 1990s, demonstrated the centrality of German and Italian occupation to contemporary conceptions of national identity. The preceding two chapters examined how pre-twentieth-century history was important for nationalists in both countries. Nevertheless, the national expansion and genocide, bloodshed and mayhem of these earlier times would pale in comparison with those of the Second World War. This was to be the apogee of the Serbian–Croatian conflict, four years when each side supposedly unleashed full-scale genocidal terror against the other.

Thus descriptions of perpetrators and victims in the Second World War became incredibly important. Links would be drawn between atrocities...
during the 1940s and those after 1990. David Campbell’s theory of the ‘deconstruction of historical teleologies’ provides a useful method of understanding how certain narratives, or views of history, have been created. Campbell’s ‘deconstruction’, in the context of Yugoslavia, allows us to analyse how hatred of the other has been the product of current generations of academics and politicians, working to create the illusion of an inevitable conflict, what Campbell terms ‘historical fatalism’. For Campbell, a ‘deconstructive reading’ allows for the proposition that, ‘the conflict is constituted in the present, and that “history” is a resource in the contemporary struggle’. Peter Novick has also identified this process in his understanding of ‘collective memory’, arguing that present concerns, and not just the ‘past working its will on the present’, determine what aspects of history will be used by historians and when. In other words, history responds to present needs – there are no eternal immutable laws that govern how the process operates.

Contrary to Anthony Smith’s position, however, history as a resource was not used as a means to relive a Golden Age, but rather to revise and exaggerate the horrors of the past (in this case the Second World War). History could then be placed within a teleological framework, similar to that described by Frye, Tudor, and others. Every negative aspect of the War was re-examined, revised and re-presented to the people, and a clear dichotomy was created between the righteous and suffering self, who resisted Nazism and saved Jews, and the genocidal Nazi-like enemy nation. Such a view of the Second World War made Tito’s SFRY appear as a historical anomaly, with the 1991 war figuring as the normal state of affairs between Serbs and Croats. Milica Bakic´Hayden, in her analysis of ‘nesting orientalisms’, took issue with the idea that Serbian and Croatian antagonisms were primordial and deeply rooted in history. As she explained:

The explanatory slogan ‘ancient hatreds’ of the South Slavic peoples . . . is but a rhetorical screen obscuring the modernity of conflict based on contested notions of state, nation, national identity, and sovereignty . . . all Serbs are identified with Chetniks, all Croats with Ustashas and all Muslims with Islamic fundamentalists, or fascist collaborators. By evoking one of the lowest aspects of their historical association and ignoring the significance of their other interactions and integrations (most notably 45 years of post World War II experience), each group perpetuates not only disparaging rhetoric but destructive modes of association.

Such a view was advanced by both sides, who argued that the contemporary conflict was merely the latest instalment in an ongoing story of genocide and terror, of which the Second World War was one of the most violent episodes. Michael Ignatieff’s use of Sigmund Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor differences’ is thus an accurate description of how each side magnified the evils of the others in an attempt to whitewash their own crimes. As he put it: ‘Nationalist politicians on both sides have used the narcissism of minor differ-
ences and turned it into a monstrous fable according to which their own side appears as blameless victims, the other side as genocidal killers. All Croats become Ustashe assassins, all Serbs become Chetnik beasts.⁴

A short overview of the Second World War

The Second World War was an era of devastation for both Serbs and Croats. The Germans invaded on 5 April 1941, supported by Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian forces.⁵ The Germans and Italians and their allies took control of the country within two weeks, soon establishing puppet states in both Serbia and Croatia. In Serbia, the Germans launched Operation Punishment, which razed Belgrade to the ground and resulted in 17,000 civilian deaths. Soon after the Yugoslav government fled, General Milan Nedić, Yugoslavia’s former minister of war, formed a ‘Government of National Salvation’.⁶ In Croatia, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was formed under Ante Pavelić, the leader of an Italian-trained insurgency group, the Ustaša. While Serbs generally remained loyal to King Aleksander and the Yugoslav government in exile, many Croats saw the NDH as their liberation from over two decades of Serbian control. This initial support soon dampened, as Croatia was forced to cede most of Dalmatia to Italy, and northern Slovenia to Germany under the Treaty of Rome. While Bosnia-Hercegovina was joined to the NDH in compensation, many nationalists felt betrayed by a reduction in their territory.⁷ As well, many Ustaša officers and soldiers were poorly trained, and Pavelić’s distinct lack of charisma and inability to hold mass rallies reduced his exposure among the population. Nevertheless, the lack of credible resistance was also noticeable. Both the Croatian Peasants Party and the Catholic Church remained largely passive.⁸

At the same time, a degree of support for the regime existed, and large numbers of Croats did join the Ustaša and the more popular Domobran. While Croat writers have downplayed Ustaša crimes, the scale of the atrocities was immense. Large numbers of Serbs, Jews, Gypsies, Communists, and Croats hostile to the regime were interned in concentration camps, while countless others were massacred in towns and villages. In contrast with the German camps in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Serbia, in Croatian camps the Ustaša were directly involved in the administration and in the orchestration of the killings. In addition, some 200,000 Serbs were forcibly converted to Catholicism.⁹

In Serbia, the Nedić regime enjoyed some support. By 1942, Nedić’s Serbian State Guard numbered 13,400 men, who worked closely with the 3,600 men in Dimitrije Ljotic’s fascist Zbor movement.¹⁰ More famous however were the Četniks – Serbian royalist irregulars who pledged to restore the monarchy. While the Četniks of General Draža Mihailović were committed
to ousting the Germans, the smaller Četnik group of Kosta Pečanac broke early with Mihailović, and openly collaborated with the Germans. If the Četniks were officially supported by the Allies at the beginning of the war, their reluctance to engage the Germans, for fear of reprisals, and their violent conflicts with Communist forces eventually lost them Allied favour. Hampered by indiscipline and acts of cruelty, which included rapes and looting, they were eventually reviled by most non-Serbs. Alienating potential support among Croats and Moslems, they committed massacres in Bosnia-Hercegovina and Croatia, making them as hated as the Ustaša. Mihailović’s anti-Communism, coupled with massacres carried out in his name, eventually led to his capture, show trial, and execution in 1946.

In short, the wartime records of some groups of Serbs and Croats were dubious, which allowed later historians to cast doubt on the conduct of each nation during the Second World War. Some groups had collaborated with the occupiers, some had committed massacres of civilian populations. At the same time, each side did participate in the Communist Partisan resistance movement, which greatly increased in popularity as German defeat became certain. Nevertheless, there were clear qualitative differences between the Allied-backed Četnik monarchists and their small-scale massacres, and the Nazi-backed Ustaša with their Croatian-run concentration camps. The work of Serbian and Croatian propagandists involved rehabilitating the role of one’s own side, while demonising the wartime activities of the other. Thus the other was described as an enthusiastic and active collaborator with the Nazis, an instigator of genocidal aggression against other nations, and a keen supporter of the Holocaust against the Jews. Here, active Nazi collaborators were seen to be as bad as the Nazis themselves, while being a victim of these two groups made one morally equal to the Jews.

Rehabilitating the NDH: conflicting perceptions among the Croats

One of the earliest aspects of Croatian nationalism revolved around rehabilitating the NDH. Croatian Diaspora accounts tended to be pro-Ustaša, while maintaining an ambiguous view of the German occupation. More official accounts in the 1990s, by contrast, downplayed the importance of the NDH and its crimes, and sought to reduce the importance of its support during the war. It was portrayed simply as a reaction against Serbian genocidal ambitions. Earlier writings, such as those of the Croatian Liberation Movement in Argentina, exonerated the Ustaša regime by stressing the resistance nature of the movement. Pavelić became merely the ‘founder and representative of the revolutionary Liberation Movement of the Croatian people.’ Such writings favourably compared the Ustaša to earlier French and American revolutionary movements, with their main goals consisting of defending Croatia against...
Serbian aggression and against international Communism. There was no doubt in the minds of early Croatian writers that the NDH represented the outcome of a long historical process, and was warmly welcomed by Croats, ‘with unprecedented enthusiasm, spontaneously and unanimously’, as one account had it.14

These early accounts also vindicated the persecution of Serbs and the Orthodox Church, claiming that its influence had to be curbed, since it was ‘a centre of propaganda and activity of Serbian chauvinism, Serbian imperialism, and hostility against the Croatian people.’15 Ustaša actions emerged as ‘self-defensive’, protecting Croats and their property, even if massacres of Serbs were the inevitable result. While this type of thinking was largely confined to earlier accounts, among later writers Vladimir Mrkoci would also proclaim the self-defensive nature of the Ustaša’s activities. He rejected the charge that Ustašism could be fascistic, since ‘the fundamental requirement for fascism’, the state, did not exist during the Ustaša’s formation. That Pavelić and his cohorts were sponsored and equipped by Fascist Italy seemed irrelevant to this analysis. As with earlier writers, Mrkoci operated from the perspective that the Ustaša was fundamentally a defensive organisation, ‘created as a reaction to Serb terror, to fascism implemented by Serbs through fascist organizations of Chetniks’.16

It fell to other émigré writers, such as Ivo Omerčanin, to highlight the differences between the Ustaša and the Nazis – and there were supposedly many of these. Omerčanin maintained that, while Croats approved of their independent state, which gave them more autonomy and freed them from Serbian domination, they still chafed under Nazi rule.17 Thus the author drew a sharp distinction between support for an independent state, and support for Nazism, two institutions that were fundamentally different. In support of this, Omerčanin traced the origins of a pro-Allied Croatian ‘putsch’, which was supposed to have begun in early 1943, featuring such notable Ustaša officials as Interior Minister Mladen Lorković, and Ante Vokić, Minister for Home Defence.18

The reason it failed, Omerčanin revealed, was because of American politicking, and a reluctance to land Allied troops in Dalmatia to support an indigenous Croatian rebellion. However, he noted that the putsch did succeed internally, since civil and military authorities were ready to depose the government and work with the Allies for a democratic independent Croatia.19 Omerčanin was clearly trying to vindicate the Ustaša position, using anecdotal evidence to prove that the leading lights of the movement were also anti-fascist. For Omerčanin, the former Ustaša chargé d’affaires in Berlin, this putsch may have been a useful means of legitimating his role in the government. The putsch argument was also advanced by Ante Beljo, although it is clear from a reading of his description (although he does’t specifically claim
this) that any putsch would have been largely opportunist, since the Italians had just surrendered, and the Ustaša were expecting ‘the landing of Allied troops on the Croatian Adriatic coast’.\(^{20}\)

Generally, early Diaspora accounts promoted the Ustaša as a genuine nationalist and revolutionary movement, one that was pro-independence and anti-Nazi. Such views became rife after 1990, when many revisionists moved back to Croatia. The existence of émigré magazines such as *NDH*, edited by a former Ustaša official and the son-in-law of Ante Pavelić, was in part a result of Tudjman’s reliance on Diaspora Croats and their financial contributions.\(^{21}\) *NDH* was notable for its continuation of Croatian Liberation Movement themes – the ‘truth’ about the Second World War, as well as poems and articles eulogising Ante Pavelić and the Ustaša. The Partisans were often the subject of attack, and were denounced as ‘Yugoslav criminals’ and ‘Serb and Croat scum’.\(^{22}\)

Such magazines accompanied a spate of revisionist books, which sought to clear the Ustaša’s bad name, giving a human face to those who were integrally involved in the regime. One troubling manifestation was the publication of the memoirs of Ivo Rojnica, the former Ustaša administrator for Dubrovnik, later decorated by Tudjman. Rojnica’s own skewed understanding of history was obvious. He argued that 250,000 Serbs were expelled to Serbia from Ustaša-controlled Croatia, and were therefore not killed, while claiming that only 420 Serbs were forcibly converted to Catholicism.\(^{23}\) Another troubling memoir, by Eugen Dido Kvaternik, was reprinted in 1995 with financial support from the Croatian Ministry for Science and Technology. Kvaternik, a founder of the Croatian death-camp system, produced a work notable only for its descriptions of ‘courtly life’ in Pavelić’s inner circle, while omitting any reference to the atrocities committed by the regime.\(^{24}\) The main thrust of these Diaspora accounts was that the NDH was both a revolutionary and a popular nationalist movement that was suppressed by the Communists. The atrocities committed by the regime were rarely discussed, while many of the worst war criminals were whitewashed as heroes who only wanted to create an independent homeland.

The political climate in Croatia clearly provided for the emergence of such militant and revisionist views. Tudjman did little to discourage them, nor could he. Most of his campaign contributions, and the money needed to finance the war, came from Diaspora Croats, among whom such views were not uncommon. Nevertheless, Tudjman also had Western support to consider, and for this reason government propaganda dealing with the NDH was markedly different from that of the CLM or *NDH* magazine. Officially, support for the NDH was seen to be largely a reaction to Serbian atrocities in royalist Yugoslavia, ‘the prison-house of nations’. As was indicated in the last chapter, the first Yugoslavia was condemned as an instrument of Serbian domination.
Croatian support for the NDH was therefore anti-Serbian, rather than pro-
German or pro-Italian. Such writings supported the self-defensive nature of
the NDH, but denied that the Ustaša were either revolutionary or popular.
Tudjman’s own writings, for example, advance Vladko Maček’s Croatian
Peasants Party as the prime focus of Croatian loyalty. This ‘middle of the road’
party, Tudjman maintained, had the advantage of being ‘[p]olitically equidis-
tant from both Pavelić’s Ustašism and Tito’s revolutionary movement’.

A similar view was taken by Philip J. Cohen in his controversial pro-
Croatian revision of Serbian history, Serbia’s Secret War. Cohen described a
level of support as low as 2 per cent for the Ustaša regime, which he credited
to a general dislike of their ‘notorious brutality’. He dismissed claims that
the Croats supported the regime positing that the 312,000-strong Croatian
Home Guard were ‘notoriously unreliable as collaborators’, possessing ‘poor
morale’ and an unwillingness to fight that eventually led them to defect to the
Partisans.

In reviewing Croatian interpretations of the NDH, we find two conflicting
forms of propaganda. One is overtly pro-Ustaša, while the other is cautiously
against it, but puts more effort into minimising its importance than into
condemning it. This paradoxical strategy is best explained by the division of
loyalties under which the Tudjman regime laboured. First, it had financial
and moral obligations to the Diaspora Croats, and thus a vindication of
wartime Croatia and a denial of Ustaša atrocities were integral to external
support for the war effort. At the same time, Tudjman faced heavy criticism
from the international community for his revisionism. The solution lay in
downplaying the Croats’ support for the NDH, while making a clear distinc-
tion between wanting independence and being pro-Nazi. The NDH as a haven
from Serbian genocide was another popular argument. To maintain power,
Tudjman pursued a complicated balancing act, trying to please both the
Croatian people and also highly critical Western governments.

Serbian views of the Ustaša and Četniks

Serbian historians were also preoccupied with the Second World War. While
the demonisation of Croatians and Moslems was essential, so too was the
vindication of Četnik history. Any ambiguous alliances with the Germans or
Italians were excised from history books, leaving a picture of the Četniks as
righteous freedom fighters, engaged in a liberation struggle against the Nazis.
Novels were often a favourite means of reinterpreting history. They could be
emotive, convincing, and non-threatening at the same time. Momir
Krsmanović’s The Blood-Stained Hands of Islam was designed to promote a
Serbian view of the Second World War to an English-speaking audience. The
author, an eastern Bosnian, was heralded as one of the new breed of Serbian
writers, and his previous work, *The Drina Runs Red with Blood*, was a bestseller. This book promised an insider’s account of the Četniks and their national struggle, motivated by ‘the desire to save the Serbian nation and wage an honourable struggle for justice, truth and the right of that nation to a place under the sun’. This was set against the ‘vengeful and blood-thirsty Turks and Catholics of Croatia and Bosnia’.29

Much of this book was set predictably in the Krajina, the scene of countless battles between Ustaša and Četnik forces. Krmanović arguably aimed to vindicate Serbia’s position in the 1990s by demonstrating how the Croatian Serbs had spent most of the twentieth century defending themselves from the threat of genocide. Important also was nostalgia for Royalist Yugoslavia. Books such as this featured graphic descriptions of Ustaša ethnic cleansing operations, as well as torture, rape, and other atrocities. One description of an Ustaša rape of two Serbian women, followed by the cutting off of their breasts and the slitting of their throats, was typical.31 Curiously, the Ustaša commanders were given names such as Stipe and Franjo, obvious references to contemporary Croatian politicians. Others, presumably Moslem Ustaša, were called Alija and Ibrahim. Novels such as this advanced a series of pro-Serbian myths, similar to Schöpflin’s ‘myths of redemption and suffering’, and ‘myths of powerlessness and compensation for the powerless’, where the Serbs were primarily the victims of the Second World War, and had thus earned their right to an autonomous republic in Bosnia.32

Novelists like Krmanović inflated the level of Croatian collaboration, describing how 80 per cent of the Croatian and Moslem male population joined the Ustaša against the Serbs – a statistic that is historically untenable.33 This new generation of novelists also attempted to rehabilitate Milan Nedić, casting him as a martyr for Serbia, who collaborated with the Nazis in order to minimise German atrocities against the Serbs. Thus his collaboration was dismissed as ‘efforts to preserve his people during the harsh enemy occupation’.34

Similar views were to be found in Slobodan Selenić’s 1989 *Timor mortis*, dealing with the Ustaša massacres of Serbs during the Second World War. This author repeated a common pattern in Serbian writing – that Croatian aggression stretched far back into the remote past. Like those of Krmanović, his descriptions of Croatian atrocities were extremely graphic.35 Similarly, Marjorie Radulović’s *Rage of the Serbs*, historically situated in the Second World War, attempted to vindicate Serbian history. She praised the heroism and righteousness of the Četniks, their love of justice, their universal support amongst the Serbian people, and their single-minded devotion to freeing their country from Nazism. At the same time, Tito’s Partisans were condemned as Ustaša collaborators, while the Ustaša were dehumanised as genocidal beasts.36

Vuk Drasković’s *Noz* also dwelt on similar themes, namely the genocide of
Serbs by Ustaša, which he placed at well over one million people. His work described the legacy of the death-camps in Croatia, how two-thirds of all Serbian families had lost relatives to the Ustaša, and how many more were sentenced to lengthy prison terms under the Communists for trying to keep the memory of their tragedy alive. Second World War massacres become a ‘Calvary’ for the Serbian people. Drasković also attacked the Croats for their revisionism, arguing generally: ‘those who hide a crime have the intention to commit it anew’.37

Of course, with this renewed interest in the Ćetniks came a glorification and ‘performance’ of their actions as well. Ćetnik hats, uniforms, and flags became popular fashion accessories, especially among paramilitary units fighting in Croatia and Bosnia. Arkan caused a sensation when he attired himself in full Ćetnik regalia during his 1995 wedding. His wife, the well-known turbofolk singer Čeka, was dressed as the ‘Maid of Kosovo’ (Kosovka djevojka), the Mary Magdalen-esque figure who nursed Serbian soldiers as they lay dying on the battlefield.38 As with Kosovo fever, Ćetnik kitsch was to be found everywhere. Various journals, including Duga, Pogledi, and Srpska Rec, worked actively to rehabilitate the Ćetniks. Warlords like Vojislav Šešelj encouraged their followers to destroy anything bearing Tito’s name, while calling for the re-establishment of the monarchy.39 As in Croatia, wartime collaborators were rehabilitated. Dimitrije Ljotic was exonerated in a series of articles published in Pogledi, while the Partisans and the Ćetniks were condemned for inciting German wrath against the population.40 Such writings performed a similar function to those in Croatia – they stressed the self-defensive nature of Serbian actions in the war, even presenting obvious collaborators as protectors of the Serbs against the Germans. The Second World War’s participants were glorified as either great heroes, liberators, or defenders.

Croatian views of the Ćetniks

For Croatian historians, the ambiguous nature of Ćetnik history had been a worrying phenomenon. Presented equally in historical accounts as heroes and collaborators, the Ćetniks still enjoyed a better reputation than the Ustaša. An important objective of Croatian propaganda was portraying the Ćetniks as genocidal aggressors, who were every bit as evil, if not worse, than Croatia’s Fascists.41 The basic argument was as follows: the Ćetniks had little interest in liberating the country from the Germans and Italians. Rather, the Second World War was merely a backdrop for the continuing expansion of Greater Serbia, which was to include almost 90 per cent of NDH territory. For this reason, Ćetnik goals were obvious: ‘the destruction of the NDH and cleansing of the Croatian and Muslim population from these
territories in order to annex them to Greater Serbia'.

Philip Cohen’s analysis was little different, seeing ‘terror and genocide’ as the Četniks’ main instruments in their quest for ‘the expansion of Serbia and the assimilation or elimination of non-Serb populations’. As he further elaborated: ‘Like the Nazis, who believed that all Germans must live within one large, ethnically pure, German state, the Chetniks believed that all Serbs must live in one large, ethnically pure, Serbian state.’ That the Četniks might be seeking revenge for atrocities committed in the NDH was simply not discussed. Rather, the Četniks were presented as genocidal fanatics, who were trying to exterminate the Croats in order to build their super-state. For them, the war and the occupation of their country did nothing to change their expansionist strategies, which were timeless, and infinitely flexible, since the Četniks could seemingly side with both the Germans and the Allies at the same time, Nedić ‘manoeuvr[ing] politically with Berlin to secure the creation of Greater Serbia under German patronage’, while the Četniks were preparing for the day when they would ‘seize power after the Germans were ousted . . . by the Allies’.

The Četniks were also accused of formulating a plan for genocide before the establishment of the Ustaša death-camp system. The Četnik commander Stevan Mlojević’s ‘Homogeneous Serbia’, yet another essay on Greater Serbia, was frequently cited to balance out atrocity accusations levelled at the Croats. Draža Mihailović’s ‘Instructions’ of December 1941 were also advanced as proof that the Četniks were using the war as a means of creating an ‘ethnically cleansed’ Greater Serbia. For Croatian writers, Mihailović was little more than a genocidal lunatic, and his sole ambition was to drive Croats, Moslems, and other non-Serbs from Bosnia-Hercegovina. The Četnik claim to be staging an uprising against the occupying powers was cited as the ‘formal reason’ for fighting. Of course, the true reason was bringing about an ethnically cleansed Greater Serbia, through ‘Četnik terror and genocidal crimes’. The descriptions of Četnik crimes were often extremely graphic, mirroring the Serbs’ use of such imagery:

Physical destruction took the form of massacres, hangings, decapitation, burning, throwing victims into pits and killing them with various objects. Victims were in most cases tortured before being killed . . . rape of Muslim and Croatian women and girls so as to nationally and religiously degrade them. There were two especially significant forms of indirect Četnik crimes. These were robbery and forced conversion of Catholics and Muslims into the Serbian Orthodox faith . . . The forced conversion to the Serbian Orthodox faith aimed at further degrading the victims and destroying that deepest of ties to the Croatian or Muslim nationality.

Croatian writers also stressed the enormous size of the Četnik movement. A large Četnik membership was often contrasted with a small Ustaša membership – the implication being that Serbs were more genocidal than Croats. One
Croatian historian claimed that some 300 Četnik organisations existed in Bosnia, with another 200 in Croatia by 1941. These organisations were supposedly famous for their terror and barbarity, as well as their penchant for murdering large numbers of Croats and Muslims. Croat historians also presented Mihailović as a dangerous manipulator with direct communication with all his units in the field. This was a highly contested assumption, since many Četnik groups operated in isolation, with a great deal of decentralisation of authority, and many were not even in radio communication with each other. However, what was important in the context of war was to prove that the Četniks were a unified cohesive force, all bent on the genocide of the Croats and the Moslems. Loosely co-ordinated bands of mercenaries did not present the same level of threat. At worst, such people could be likened to the Turks slaughtering the Armenians, but not the Nazis and their well-oiled apparatus.

Another popular argument held that the Četniks had openly collaborated with the Italians and Germans, in order to exterminate Croats on NDH territory. Supposedly, Italian and German forces supplied the Četniks with weapons, food, clothing, and even local currency when they agreed to exterminate Croatian and Moslems on behalf of the occupiers. Such claims seem to have been exaggerated by Croatian historians, who paradoxically argued that Četnik unofficial collaboration was somehow worse than the official highly publicised Ustaša variety. Tim Judah has argued that, by 1943, both the Četniks and the Partisans had commenced dialogue with the Germans, each seeking an alliance against the other. As was clear from wartime accounts, the Četniks were willing to side with the Germans if it could mean the destruction of the Partisans. While these negotiations ultimately failed, owing to a lack of German interest, the Četniks were willing to collaborate, to increase their strength against Partisan forces. It is also clear that in Montenegro they did accept help from the Italians during the Italian surrender in 1943. However, it is highly misleading to suggest that Četniks throughout the war collaborated with the Germans and Italians in order to carry out the genocide of Croats and Moslems.

For Croatian writers, the attempted genocide of Croats and Moslems justified their presence in Ustaša and Domobran units. These two groups were forced to defend themselves against ‘Četnik-Communist units’, which were formed in the forests in Bosnia-Hercegovina. In this way, they were not guilty of collaboration, since they were merely reacting to the Serbs, who, ‘following the example of their Vlach ancestors, began to exterminate the Croat and Muslim population of the Bihac region in horrible and merciless [sic] massacres’. Further, Pavelić’s crimes were excused on the basis that he was merely countering ‘Četnik terrorists with terror of their own’, which in any case was not as ruthless as that of the Serbs in Serbia, where ‘the persecution of Jews was even more thorough’.
In sum, what emerges from a reading of Croatian perceptions of the Second World War is the reactive nature of Croatian activities. For these writers, the Serbian Četniks seemingly had the upper hand throughout Bosnia-Hercegovina, and were busy instigating a genocide of Croats and Moslems. The problem, of course, was that it was the Ustaša who were (officially, at the very least) in control of Bosnia-Hercegovina, not the Četniks. It was the Ustaša who had the power of the state behind them, as well as Italian and German support. Nevertheless, this view of the Četniks as unrestrained genocidal killers seemingly rang true for the Croatian public.

Tudjman himself used the concept of a genocidal Četnik movement to generalise Serbian guilt. He suggested that ‘Maček’s middle-of-the-road Croatian Peasant party was to remain the chief political force opposed to the revolutionary NOP on Croatian soil, just as Mihailovic’s Četnik movement was in Serbia.’ While these two movements were likened in terms of support, morally they were far apart, according to Tudjman, who placed the Četniks on a par morally and philosophically with the Ustaša, not the CPP. Tudjman’s later development of this argument made his position more obvious:

Both the Ustaša and Četnik movements were equally the expression of mutually opposing ideas concerning nation and state and of the programs for their implementation, both stemming from the judgement that coexistence in a common state was impossible. This means that Dr. A. Pavelić and General D. Mihailović, in the circumstances of the Second World War, found themselves as the forefront of nationally exclusive and irreconcilable movements, which sought equally to exploit those circumstances for the realization of their respective national programs.

Thus Četnik and Ustaša were paralleled, in terms of their level of atrocities, their ideology, their modus operandi, and their aims during the war. Croatian writers ignored the fact that one was a Nazi-backed, Italian-trained terrorist group, and the other, a Royalist, Allied-backed, anti-German and anti-Communist resistance movement. Tudjman implied that, because most Serbs supported a genocidal movement with an expansionist political project, all Serbs were tarred with the Četnik legacy, and, by implication, with a legacy of genocide. At the same time, since Croats were mainly CCP supporters, their culpability was significantly reduced.

Anti-Semitism in Croatia: Stepinac and the people

How Jews were treated in Yugoslavia during the Second World War became another subject of heated debate. If each side was legitimately to claim to be the victims of genocide, of the type experienced by the Jews, then their own relationship with the Jews was crucial. For both Serbs and Croats, Jewish history during the war needed to be carefully revised, to highlight only the
positive aspects of their historical relationship. Similarly, the other had to be presented as anti-Semitic collaborators who had participated actively in the Final Solution. Both sides eagerly embarked on this exercise, and were not ashamed to manipulate Jewish leaders in the process.

Croatian writers pursued a dual strategy of touting their own love of Jews, while condemning the Serbs for their complicity in the Holocaust. One aspect of Croatian revisionism was the wholesale rehabilitation of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, head of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia during the war. Croats devoted a great deal of energy to proving that Stepinac was a great friend of the Jews, and inspired most Croats to help them during the war. Of course, Stepinac, like most of the cast of characters in the region, had some rather dubious credentials. As Archbishop of Zagreb, Stepinac officiated at the Te Deum that gave thanks for the foundation of the Ustaša state. At first, Stepinac appeared to have been no different from the many Croats who had had great expectations of the regime. However, his enthusiasm soured greatly as the war dragged on and the atrocities of the Ustaša came to light. He is generally painted as a naive and idealistic man, who, while hating the horrors of war, saw Pavelić as a hero and saviour of his people.

While he refused to denounce the regime officially, there is evidence that Stepinac did help some Jews – aiding children to escape to Palestine, and donating food and money to Jews in hiding. What emerged was the portrait of a man sitting on the fence, symbolically supporting the NDH, and condemning Ustaša crimes as far as he could without incurring danger to his person, while secretly easing his conscience with private acts of piety and kindness. Nevertheless, while he seemingly helped some of the Jews, he expressed little remorse over the forced conversions of an estimated 200,000 Serbs, often at gunpoint. Accused of collaboration by the Partisans, Stepinac stood trial in September 1946. He was subsequently sentenced to 16 years imprisonment, served five years, and then returned to his native village, where he died in 1960.

Stepinac, despite his wartime record, was completely rehabilitated by Croatian historians. His supposed love of the Jews was cited as proof of Croatian philosemitism during the Second World War. One writer noted how 70 Croats received ‘The Certificate of Honour’ and ‘The Medal of the Righteous’ from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, as proof of Croatian goodwill during the war, similarly noting how, as early as 1936, Stepinac supported Austrian and German Jews by founding ‘Action to help refugees’ and ‘Croatian Caritas’ (1938). Stepinac was also credited with saving 60 inmates of the Jewish Old People’s Home in Zagreb, preserving the private library of the Zagreb Chief Rabbi Miroslav Shalom Freiberger at his request, and publicly condemning the destruction of Zagreb’s main synagogue in 1941.
Stepinac’s usefulness as a symbol of Croatian tolerance was not lost on Franjo Tudjman. In one lengthy defence of Stepinac, Tudjman dismissed the accusations against him as having ‘even less of a foundation than does the Jasenovac distortion’. He later emphasised that Pope John Paul II’s visit to Croatia, and Stepinac’s beatification by the Vatican, completely exonerated Croatia of any wrongdoing during the Second World War. Stepinac, it seemed, had become the symbol of Croatia’s wartime relationship with the Jews. As Tudjman’s logic impelled him to explain:

With the beatification, the Holy Father and the Vatican sided with this Croatia and Croatian people against attempts to accuse the whole Croatian people of genocide and fascism. The Holy Father, the Vatican, and the Catholicism, all said that Stepinac was not a criminal, as was not the Croatian people. That is a contribution to the truth about the Croatian people in WW II and the truth about the contemporary Croatia.

The Vatican’s support for Stepinac was extremely important, further proving that he was a friend of the Jews, as well as a Croatian martyr against both Nazism and Communism, and Tudjman cleverly manipulated Stepinac’s rehabilitation to clean the Croatian wartime record. However, his portrayal of Stepinac’s beatification is not entirely in keeping with the facts, and seems to be more wishful thinking than anything else. Stepinac was appointed Cardinal primarily for his resistance to Communism, and for his condemnation of Partisan attacks on Catholic clergy after the war. By the end of 1945, an estimated 273 priests had been killed by the Partisans, while countless more had been arrested, or had gone ‘missing’. Stepinac was targeted by the Communist authorities only after his condemnation, and he stood trial a year later for collaboration with the NDH regime. Tudjman’s claim of ‘innocence’ is thus highly misleading. Generally, Croats described Stepinac as an outspoken critic of the Nazis and a ‘friend of the Jews’, because of his wartime efforts to save them. The tarring of Stepinac, one writer posited, was done solely to deflect attention from the dishonourable conduct of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Stepinac became useful as a leader who constantly stood up to the Ustaša, offering passive spiritual resistance. In Croatian writings, such resistance was often contrasted to the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was described as bent on persecuting Jews and promoting Greater Serbia, which was condemned as a ‘racist ideology’. So too was Serbian literary culture condemned. Ljubica Stefan’s *From Fairy Tale to Holocaust* was a typical example of this type of thinking, tracing the ancient roots of Serbian anti-Semitism. A large section of her work was devoted to reviewing various anti-Semitic folk tales, assembled by Vuk Karadžić in 1853. One featured work was the ‘The Yids’ (*Civuti*), the story of Hansel and Gretel, notable for the
fact that the ‘wicked witch’ was a Jewish woman. In Stefan’s account of them, these folk tales encouraged Serbs to see the Jewish people as those who ‘chased after the gentile children with knives and forks to eat them, which presents the Jews as cannibals.’69 Certainly as interesting as the tales themselves is Stefan’s belief that Serbian anti-Semitism could be traced from nineteenth-century fairy tales to the political traditions of Greater Serbia, and then into the twentieth century, where Serbia was ‘the most trustworthy ally of the Third Reich’.70

While the Serbs were under direct military occupation, with strict curfews and a particularly brutal police force, Stefan argued that the Serbs had an independent, autonomous state, complete with ‘a government, organised ministries, independent governments in cities and villages, its own army equipped by the Germans.’71 The Serbs were able to gain such autonomy, asserted Stefan, because of their long tradition of anti-Semitism, and their eagerness to participate in the Final Solution. She also argued that the Orthodox Church was instrumental in the genocide of the Jews, since they functioned as ‘a sort of a political party and even racist’, while they ‘totally neglected pastoral and spiritual work’.72

This form of ‘counteridentification’ was crucial during the 1990s, as it showed the continuation, once again, of an age-old Serbian hatred of all things non-Serb, and a desire to expand the Serbian state – and destroy everything in its path. Thus, for Stefan, and for many others, the Jews and the Croats were fellow victims of Serbian aggression during the Second World War. More often than not, Croatian claims of Serbian anti-Semitism were exaggerated. While it was clear that the Serbian puppet government and certain Orthodox officials such as Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović maintained anti-Semitic views (in Velimirović’s case from the Second World War well into the 1990s),73 there is little to support the idea that the Serbs actively and enthusiastically aided in the Holocaust. Serbs had little autonomy within Serbia during the war; this was a country occupied by German troops. Even Philip Cohen, after his lengthy attack on the Serbs, was forced to admit that ‘it is indisputable that the executioners of Serbia’s Jews were German army personnel or regular police. However, the role of the Serbs as active collaborators in the destruction of the Jews has remained under-explored in Holocaust literature.’74 While their role may perhaps underexplored, Cohen was unable to argue convincingly that anti-Semitism was an important aspect of Serbian nationalism during the Second World War – important enough at least to have inspired an active role in the Holocaust.

That a large number of Serbs joined the Partisans and the Četniks does indicate that there was little support for the Nedić regime. Furthermore, it seems that there was little love lost between Germans and Serbs. Germans considered the Serbs to be treacherous and dangerous, remembering the
heavy losses they sustained at Serbian hands during the First World War. Theissen "A country man of the historian's type."
Christopher Browning’s analysis of the German occupation of Serbia suggests that support for the Nedić regime was much lower than the level alleged by the Croats. While the Serbian Orthodox Church promoted anti-Semitism to some extent, this did not translate into overt support for the genocide of Yugoslavia’s Jews.

Serbian views of collaboration and anti-Semitism

For the Serbs, connections between the suffering of Serbs and Jews during the Second World War were extremely important – anti-Semitism and Serbophobia were continually compared, as proof that the Serbs were also the victims of genocide. For many Serbs, the Second World War was a time when Serbia was close to being wiped out, as Germans 'committed wide scale murders, burning of entire villages, raided and bombed cities'. Jews and Serbs would be symbolically linked, as one writer revealed, for espousing the same values: 'The Jewish-Serbian-Capitalist-Democratic front had to disappear forever from the world . . . Jews and Serbs were struck with the same dagger.' Dobrica Ćosić went so far as to assert that the genocide of the Serbs was worse than that of the Jews, in terms of its methods and bestiality. Exaggeration aside, the Serbs did indeed suffer heavy losses during the Second World War, although it was never on the level suggested by contemporary historians.

As with the Croats, the myth of philosemitism was extremely important for the Serbs, who saw themselves, along with the Jews, as fellow victims of Nazi aggression. Laza Kostić’s The Serbs and the Jews (1988) advanced the view that Serbia was one of the few countries that was free of anti-Semitism during the war. Describing himself as 'a fanatical friend of the Jews in general and of the Serbian ones in particular', Kostić claimed that Serbs were always the best friends of the Jews throughout history:

The Serbs are one of the rare peoples in the world who have lived with the Jews in peace and love throughout the whole history of their settlement in our lands . . . The Serbs never persecuted the Jews, never carried out any demonstrations against them. Not one anti-Semitic text has ever appeared in the press, and hatred against them was not spread orally either . . . There was no more tolerant country towards the Jews. Considerably later, many other countries copied the so-called 'emancipation of the Jews' from the Serbs.

This general view was important in vindicating the Serbian role in the Second World War. Kostić even made the suggestion that Nedić had in no way collaborated with the Nazis in the Holocaust of the Jews. While the Nedić regime worked under the Nazis, they refused to 'contemplate participation in
[any] aspect of the extermination of the Jews by the Germans’ – so Kostić claimed.81

Of course, with daily accusations from the Croatian side that the Serbs were the worst anti-Semites the world had ever seen, the Serbs countered with invective of their own. Mirroring Croatian arguments, Serbian writers alleged that Croatia was neck-deep in anti-Semitism. In Serbian eyes, one of the worst offenders was Alojzije Stepinac, who was presented as an active collaborator and figurehead for Catholic complicity in the genocide of the Serbs and the Jews. Certainly the most vocal critic of Stepinac’s rehabilitation was Milan Bulajić, who denounced Stepinac as an enthusiastic NDH supporter.82 His voluntary loyalty oath to Ante Pavelić and his position as Ustaša army chaplain made him ‘the spiritual father of the Ustaši Independent State of Croatia’ – a crucial moral prop for the regime.83 His support of the NDH and denouncing of Yugoslavia also proved that he was a ‘fanatical opponent’ of the ‘Masonic-Jewish state’ – a rather strange moniker for Serbia.84

Many of Bulajić’s efforts were directed towards debunking the myth of Stepinac’s philosemitism. He argued that while Stepinac saved individual Jews, these were Jews in mixed marriages with Catholics, or those who had converted to Catholicism to escape death. He argued that Stepinac was only against the racialisation of anti-Semitism. Those Jews who converted to Catholicism could be saved, whereas those who did not could still be condemned to death.85 The claim that Stepinac saved 200 Jewish orphans was rebutted by the fact that as soon as Stepinac petitioned the Vatican to save them, the Ustaša rounded them up and sent them to Jasenovac. ‘This’, Bulajić argued, was ‘the historical truth of this “humanitarian action”’.86 The case of Miroslav Shalom Freiberger’s library was also seen as cancelled out by the fact that Freiberger was later captured by the Ustaša secret police and sent to a German death-camp.

At the same time, Bulajić denounced Stepinac for exercising a double standard: if converting Jews were saved, converting Gypsies were not. ‘The Catholic Church in Croatia didn’t care too much about them’, was his conclusion.87 Bulajić argued generally that while Stepinac made a show of his philosemitism after the war, his wartime actions came to nothing, since most of the people he supposedly tried to save were eventually killed, implying that these demonstrations of philosemitism were merely for show, concealing the ugly truth of his own anti-Semitism.

Alongside Stepinac, the Catholic Church was often portrayed as a genocidal collaborator with the Nazis. Historians such as Dušan Bataković derided the Church for ‘their own brand of religious exclusionism, intolerance, and a militant proselytizing’, which formed part of a Church-driven policy to bring about a religiously and racially pure Croatia.88 ‘A very considerable part of
the Croatian political elite,’ Bataković concluded, ‘supported by the Catholic hierarchy and Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac himself, supported this national and religious intolerance, and strongly supported policies of clericalism and racism, marked by mass killings, forced conversions and the deportation of the Serbian Orthodox population as well the slaughter of the Jews and Gypsies.’

For Bataković, Church leaders were queuing up to commit genocide against the Serbian and Jewish populations in Croatia.

Other historians would use similar imagery, describing how the Ustaša state was ‘soundly and joyously received by the majority of the Croatian people’, and how the Catholic Church, and Stepinac in particular, were ‘the most loyal [of] Hitler’s collaborator[s]’. Other writers were in no doubt that the Vatican had been a keen advocate of genocide, with Church officials inciting Croats from their pulpits to wage ‘“holy” war for the cause of a pure and independent Croatia’. Serbs commonly portrayed Stepinac as the spiritual leader of an enthusiastic gang of genocidal clergy, only too eager to swear allegiance to Pavelić’s regime, in order to begin killing Serbs, Jews, and Communists. If Stepinac’s goodness allowed Tudjman to portray the Croatian nation as righteous and good, Stepinac’s collaboration tarred all Croats as genocidal killers. Nevertheless, while there was evidence that some priests had participated in atrocities, Stepinac’s record seems clear, in so far as he never sanctioned violence or racial hatred. Those Catholic priests who actually helped the Serbs were never mentioned, nor were the many Serbian Orthodox priests who lent their support to the Četnik massacres during the Second World War.

Serbian sources maintained that over 80 per cent of Croatia’s Jews were killed during the Ustaša period, only a few surviving by ‘sheer accident’. The killing of Jews was ascribed to a uniquely Ustaši approach, spearheaded by Andrija Artuković, the NDH Minister of the Interior, who devastated the 14,000-strong Jewish community in Bosnia-Hercegovina, leaving only 2,000 survivors. Artuković’s hatred of the Jews was often linked with a fear of International Communism and capitalism, both of which threatened to swamp Croatia, and the Croatian nation. According to other Serbian sources, the Ustaša regime killed 30,000 of Croatia’s Jews during the war, as well as a majority of the Gypsy community, estimated before the war to have comprised between 40,000 and 100,000 people. The divergence between these figures is striking. It seems that no one was certain exactly how many Jews there were in Croatia – either before the war, or after.

Throughout the 1990s, the use of graphic, lugubrious imagery was an important prerequisite of Serbian propaganda. The more graphic the details, the more horrific the crimes of the Croats would appear to be, and by extension, the more important it would be to stop another Croatian genocide. Among the favoured themes was the slaughter of innocent children, proof
that the Croats were truly depraved. One description from Never Again was typical of Serbian fare:

Infants were shot in their cribs, babies were foisted on bayonettes, slaughtered with knives, razors and axes, burned in their homes, in brickyards and in the Jasenovac crematorium, boiled in soap melting cauldrons, bound together and thrown into rivers and wells, thrown alive into caves and grottoes, asphyxiated in cyanide and poisoned with caustic soda, killed through hunger, thirst and exposure...94

This typical account conveyed the savagery of the Ustasˇa, trying to destroy the future of the Serbian nation. ‘The foundations of the Ustasˇi state,’ the authors of this work concluded, ‘were laid on the slaughter of children.’95 Graphic portrayals of a war on children highlighted the depravity of the Ustasˇa, but also demonstrated the extreme suffering of the Serbs, who had been robbed of the future of their nation.

Constantly mentioned in Serbian literature was the famous encounter between the journalist Curzio Malaparte and Ante Pavelić, during which Malaparte was proudly shown a basket containing what he believed to be Dalmatian oysters, only to be told by a triumphant Pavelić that these were forty pounds of Serbian eyeballs – a gift from ‘loyal Ustasˇas’. This account, described in Malaparte’s Kaputt (1946), was one of the favourite pieces of imagism used by the Serbs to describe the irrationality and brutality of the NDH. The only intrinsic value possessed by a Serb, it seemed, was his eyes.96

Such descriptions of Ustasˇa terror aimed at completely dehumanising the Croats, imparting the idea that they were nothing more than sadistic, blood-thirsty killers. While a certain percentage of Serbs and Croats did run wild during four years of war, these few psychopaths did not reflect the motivations and actions of the vast majority of the population. At the same time, it was curious that the Serbs sought to invent a variety of anti-Vatican, anti-Stepinac, anti-Ustasˇa stories, when there were many documented facts about the Second World War that were far more damning. Take for example Mark Aarons and John Loftus’s Ratlines, which factually analysed the role of the Vatican in helping escaping Nazi war criminals. Through the Intermarium, the Vatican controlled the largest Nazi-smuggling organisation of its kind in Europe after the war, run in part by the Croatian priest Krunoslav Stefano Draganovic.97 The Intermarium even helped Pavelić to escape to Italy, where the Vatican allowed him to live in one of the Pope’s summer homes, safe from the British and the Yugoslavs.98 While this in no way validates the Serbian position, it is curious that Serbs chose to invent and distort history, when using well-established facts would have served their cause more effectively.
The myth of Partisan participation

Another important aspect of Second World War revisionism was the myth of Partisan membership. Each side tried to prove that their nation initiated anti-fascist resistance, and was therefore on the winning side. This was of central importance, because it proved that no one actually collaborated with the Nazis and their puppet states. Each side now became an innocent victim of fascism, instead of collaborators with it. Each side could also claim to have created and founded Tito’s Yugoslavia, only to be later betrayed for their national sacrifices – becoming martyrs when they were ‘discriminated’ against in the SFRY.

The Serbs certainly took Partisan membership seriously. The historian Velimir Ivetić’s lengthy monograph examined the annual ratio of Serbs and Croats in each Partisan detachment in Croatia, arguing that the Serbs were the most important resistance force in the region. A summary of his findings included the following: ‘that the participation of the Serbs from Croatia in the common struggle against the occupier and his lackeys was enormous’; ‘that the Serbs had the “role of initiator” of the uprising’; and, ‘that the Serbs helped the rising up of the Croatian people against the occupier’.99 The Croats only constituted a majority, Ivetić claimed, when defeat was certain. While the Croats were represented as cynical opportunists, Serbs were credited with extending a hand of brotherly friendship to their erstwhile enemies at the war’s end. Ever able to forgive and forget, the Serbs supposedly helped their killers join the Partisans.100

Similar arguments have been raised by other Serbian writers, one arguing that: ‘persecuted Serbs swelled the ranks of Draža Mihailović’s Četniks but even more so of Tito’s Partisans’.101 Others concluded: ‘The Serbian and Montenegrin people are today among those freedom-loving peoples which share the feeling of pride with the world because of their undeniable contribution to the defeat of the greatest evil of this century.’102 The Ministry of Information similarly claimed that the Serbs were ‘freedom loving, democratic and antifascist . . . [by their struggles against] the Croatian genocidal government and the Nazi disintegration of Yugoslavia’.103 Still others described how Tito was forced to move his headquarters to Belgrade from Zagreb, after the ‘enthusiasm with which the German occupiers were greeted in Zagreb in 1941’. Here, the ‘rebellious energies’ of the Serbs in Serbia, Montenegro and in other Serbian areas were not only ‘a primary source of the anti-Fascist struggle, but also a condition for CPY survival’.104

It was crucially important to present Serbs as the liberators of Yugoslavia, and the greatest opponents of Fascism. While Partisan participation in the Second World War enhanced Serbian claims to be anti-genocidal in the contemporary conflict, a high Partisan membership also tied in with the Serbian theme of sacrifice. Serbs had supposedly given their all to create
Yugoslavia, and had a legitimate claim to be the inheritors of what remained of the country – rump-Yugoslavia. Such claims also countered Tudjman’s assertions that every Serb had been a Četnik. While few Serbs were willing to admit that the Četniks had committed any atrocities during the war, it was a much better strategy to focus on membership of the Partisans – a less morally ambiguous movement.

The Croats advanced similar arguments, positing that they were both the first and the largest ethnic group in the Partisan resistance. While this ran counter to Tudjman’s thesis that most Croats supported the CPP, it accomplished the same objective – proving that Croats were not wholesale collaborators. Croatian writers argued that the majority of the Croatian population both ‘supported and actively participated’ in Tito’s Partisan movement. Others described how the ‘the first rebellion in Europe against the [N]azi and fascist occupation’ was led by the Croats, who formed the first Partisan unit near Sisak in June 1941. Included in one account was a list of Croatian notables such as the poet Vladimir Nazor and ‘the democratically oriented’ Communist leader Andrija Hebrang, as well as descriptions of how the Croatian-based Partisans (ZAVNOH) held more liberated territory than Tito’s pan-Yugoslav council (AVNOJ).

Others, while admitting that Serbs at some points formed the majority in the Partisans, dismissed their commitment to the cause, since ‘the Serbs were primarily escaping from persecution, while the Croats chose the antifascist side because of their personal beliefs and with the idea of preserving the identity of their state through a war of liberation’. Ironical;y, while some Serbs may have been opportunistic in trying to save their lives, they were certainly morally superior to those Croats who were killing them. Cohen (in an interview with a Croatian newspaper) similarly posited that the Serbs were the main collaborators in the Second World War, claiming that 70 per cent of Croats but only 11 per cent of Serbs were antifascist. Further, any Četniks who converted to the Partisan cause supposedly did so only to transform the Communists into a ‘new tool for “Greater Serbia”’.

Relatively unbiased historians have described the predominance of Serbs among the members of the NDH who joined the Partisans, largely in reaction to the Ustaša atrocities; and thus there is some truth to the Serbian claim of numerical dominance. This does not, however, negate the strong participation of Croats in the Partisans, nor does it detract from the massacres committed by Serbian Četniks during this time. For both sides, it became clear that high Partisan numbers were but one more aspect of a growing revisionist conflict, with each side arguing the opposite of the other. Both sides claimed to have been the key to the anti-fascist liberation of the country, allowing both similarly to claim that their people had been against the Četniks and Ustaša all along.

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Conclusions

In general, Serb and Croat arguments apropos the Second World War were almost identical. Each argued in favour of their own philosemitism, victimisation, and heroism, while denouncing the others for their treachery, anti-Semitism, collaboration, and genocide. The recent revisions of history from both sides suggest uneasiness about the legacies of the past. They also suggest a need to vindicate one’s own history, excising any negative historical patterns that one might find, while at the same time continuing to identify a coherent pattern of genocidal hatred and destruction on the part of one’s perceived enemy.

What emerged was a blurring of the lines between acting and being, as well as a blurring of the concepts of self and other. In both cases, each side could rightly claim victims who were killed in the style of the Ćetniks or Ustaša, but each side was also guilty of having adopted the symbols and trappings of this earlier period. Resurrected Ćetnik and Ustaša units battled each other once again, proving for many that the war was very much cast as a continuation of an earlier conflict. Why Arkan wore full Ćetnik regalia to marry his ‘maid of Kosovo’ was as difficult to understand as why Dobroslav Paraga’s renewed Party of Rights and the HOS regiments in Bosnia-Hercegovina sported Ustaša insignia and used the old Nazi salute. In the cities, Serbs in Belgrade could easily purchase Ćetnik hats and T-shirts, while in Zagreb, the Poglavnik’s portrait was prominently displayed over swimming pools and in restaurants.

However, the complexity of events can be broken down fairly simply – each side attempted to revise and excuse the atrocities their side had committed, and part of that process involved donning their former nationalist dress, and adopting old symbols to prove that they were not ashamed of their past history. Demonisation of the other required the inflation of the other side’s atrocities, and a denunciation of the enemy side’s parallel process of rehabilitating their own past. Thus, the work of neither side should be studied in isolation, as has been done by both Serbs and Croats, but rather, events should be seen as a series of related actions in an escalating crisis.

The concept of ‘performativity’ is thus extremely important here. What began as groups ‘playing’ Ustaša and Ćetnik soon evolved into neo-Ustaša and neo-Ćetnik units, complete with traditional weaponry, uniforms, salutes, and styles of killing. What began as a vindication of one’s own national past became first a blurring, and then a desecration of it. Paradoxically, each side, in the name of historical revisionism, set out to burn, loot, shell, and commit the same barbarous acts, acts that they refused to admit their predecessors had done. By re-enacting the past crimes of which their grandfathers stood accused, they ironically tarnished their own national past. Curiously, while each side blamed the other, there is no doubt that the escalation could not
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have begun if only one side had chosen to adopt a historic role. Each side advanced almost identical arguments, countering each other fact by fact, point by point. Without the participation of historians, politicians and journalists from both sides, no debate would have been possible.

NOTES

1 David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice In Bosnia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 84. (Italics his.)


14 Croats against the regime were also to be few and far between, or, as Hefer puts it: ‘The Croatian people unanimously chose the way which led to the re-establishment of national freedom and state . . .’ (*ibid*. pp. 129–30). Such comparisons between the Ustaša and other liberation movements are also found in more contemporary analysis. Vladimir Mrkoci argues that the Ustaša were little different from other supposed freedom fighters of the world. For him, the ‘Ustase were a national revolutionary organization similar to Young Europe from the past century, as a belated echo of romanticism. They are similar to all other national revolutionary movements such as the Irish IRA, ETA in Spain and others. They are most similar to the Jewish Irgun Zwi Leumi’: Vladimir Mrkoci, ‘Historical Guilt of Alain Finkelkraut’. *Hrvatski Obzor* (17 August 1996 [translated on 5 October 2001]) http://free.freespeech.org/ex-yu/press/hrobzor/hrobzor12.html (accessed 10 January 2002). This article is in essence a defence of the Ustaša after Alain Finkielkraut’s earlier denunciation of the regime in the French media.


16 See Mrkoci, ‘Historical Guilt of Alain Finkelkraut’.


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19 Ibid. p. 36.
20 Ante Beljo also argues that the government tried to negotiate changing sides in 1943. after Italian surrender, and quotes a memorandum sent to Field Marshal Harold Alexander in May 1945. He also states that Lorković and Vokić were executed for their plans after being arrested in August, 1944, and that they had a ‘large number of generals and officers’ planning the disarming of the German army and the shift to the side of the Allies’. The issue of the memorandum is quite interesting for Beljo, as the ‘last significant document of the Croatian government during the war’. Beljo seems to impute a conspiracy to the fact that the Allies never acknowledged its receipt, leading to a false impression about the Croats’ intentions. One also gets the impression that such a memorandum should have been taken seriously, even though it was issued so late in the game as to be obviously opportunistic. Such a memorandum in 1943, by contrast, might actually have achieved some result: Ante Beljo, Genocide in Yugoslavia: A Documentary Analysis (Sudbury, ON: Northern Tribune Publishing, 1985) pp. 83–5.
23 ‘Review of Ivo Rojnica, Meetings and Experiences (Zagreb: DoNeHa, 1994)’, Feral Tribune (29 December 1997).
28 Ibid. p. 99.
30 Ibid. p. 16.
33 Ibid. p. 35.
34 Ibid. pp. 125.
40 Ibid. pp. 60–1.
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42 Ibid.


44 Ibid. p. 32.

45 Ibid. p. 32.

46 Dizdar, ‘Chetnik Genocidal Crimes Against Croatsians and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Against Croatsians in Croatia During World War II’.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid. Beljo made the same argument. He accused the Italians of wanted to ‘exterminate’ the Croats, but since they ‘could not resort to such primitive and beastly crimes, therefore they left it up to the Chetniks’. See Beljo, Genocide in Yugoslavia, p. 51.

50 This complicated situation is discussed in Judah, The Serbs, pp. 118–19. I consider his account to be factually accurate, and relatively free of bias.


53 Tudjman, Horrors of War, p. 349.

54 Ibid. p. 394.


56 Ridley, Tito, p. 165.

57 Tanner, Croatia, pp. 155–6.

58 Ibid. p. 156.


60 Ridley, Tito, pp. 277–8.

61 Hall, The Impossible Country, p. 43.


63 Ibid. pp. 4–5.

64 Tudjman, Horrors of War, pp. 292–4.

65 Quoted in: Darko Duretak, and Mladenka Sarić, ‘HDZ Will Regain Support of Voters
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with Clear Policies, not Cheap Tricks: Dr. Franjo Tudman’s Speech: We Must not Allow Sheep and Geese to Lead Us into Fog!


66 The issue is well discussed in Tanner, Croatia, pp. 179–81.
68 Jelić, ‘Problems of Understanding XXth Century History of Croatia’.
69 Ljubica Stefan, From Fairy Tale to Holocaust: Serbia: Quisling Collaboration with the Occupier During the Period of the Third Reich with Reference to Genocide Against the Jewish People (Zagreb: Hrvatska Matica Iseljenika, 1993) p. 23.
70 Ibid. p. 15.
71 Ibid. p. 21.
73 Cohen, Serbia’s Secret War, pp. 130–2.
74 Ibid. p. 64.
75 Browning, Fateful Months, p. 46. Here, Browning quotes a speech by the German commander General Fritz Boehme, who describes the German mission in Serbia as one of mercilessly avenging German deaths in the First World War.
76 Ibid. p. 45. The Serbs later became more efficient and began to serve their authorities better.
77 Smilja Avramov, Genocide Against the Serbs (Belgrade: Museum of Modern Art, 1992) p. 32.
78 Ibid. p. 32.
80 Quoted in Cohen, Serbia’s Secret War, pp. 117–18.
81 Ibid. p. 118.
83 Ibid. p. 84.
84 Ibid. p. 67.
85 Ibid. pp. 130–1.
89 Ibid.
91 See Avramov, Genocide Against the Serbs, p. 197. Petar Makarov also writes of Stipanac, that he ‘approved and frequently inspired all the Ustašas’ deeds’ (p. 1). Makarov draws direct links between Starčević’s writings and the NDH persecution of Serbs. ‘Starčević’s statements that the Serbs were a race of slaves and that, for this reason, they should be axed was put into practice in the Independent State of Croatia from 1941 to 1945.’ See Petar Makarov, The Embodied Devils: Who Was Who in NDH?, http://cypress.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~eesrdan/ndh/ndh-kojeko.html (accessed 18 June 1998).
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1998). Makarov equally writes of how Stepinac was made Pavelić’s head military chaplain: ‘His Grace Stepinac not only showed his warlike attitude when he was with the military Ustaši in the barracks, but also when he was with the intellectuals taking charge of the mobilization of the Croats for the cause of the Fascist Croatian satellite state, where he helped to encourage and boost their drooping morale’ (p. 4). He also writes of how nearly half the 22 death camps in the NDH were run by Catholic clergy: Petar Makarov, ‘Croatian Cardinal Stepinac Was Pavelić’s Head Military Chaplain’, http://cypress.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~eesrdan/ndh/ndh-kojeko.html (accessed 18 June 1998). Others would write of the ‘aggressive, intolerant, non-democratic and non-Christian’ actions of the Catholic Church, as well as the ‘total demonization of our people’, which led to ‘pogroms over the Serbs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, [culminating] in the brutal Ustaši raids during World War II . . .’. See Iljić, ‘The Serbs in the Former SR of Croatia’, p. 328.


94 Ibid. p. 55.

95 Ibid. p. 63.

96 Ibid. p. 1; see also Petrović, The Extermination of Serbs on the Territory of the Independent State of Croatia, p. 43; Jean François Furnémont in his Le Vatican et l’ex Yougoslavie (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996) also throws this myth in at the beginning for no apparent reason.


100 Ibid.


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106 Jezić, ‘Problems of Understanding XXth Century History of Croatia’.
107 Bože Ćović, Roots of Serbian Aggression: Debates, Documents, Cartographic Reviews (Zagreb: Centar za Strane Jezike/AGM, 1993) p. 34.