

## Jasenovac: The Unknown Camp of Croatia

Following the invasion of Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany and its Axis Allies, the Germans sponsored the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska*, or the NDH), which included the former Yugoslav provinces of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovnia. On April 10, 1941, as German forces occupied Zagreb and members of the Axis alliance dismembered the interwar Yugoslav state, the leaders of the Croat nationalist organization Ustaša (meaning Insurgents or Rebels) declared the NDH.

Looking to Germany as a model and with the leadership of Ante Pavelić, the fascist NDH became a secular yet fanatically Catholic, nationalist, totalitarian and xenophobic state. The Ustaša converted its fanatical and murderous xenophobia into state policy with the aim of purging the NDH of all “foreign” (i.e. non-Catholic) elements. To enable persecution and incarceration of “non-Croatian” peoples, Croatian authorities established a system of concentration camps in 1941 under the control of the NDH’s Directorate for Public Security. The Ustaša militia guarded the camps, in which Serbs, Jews, Roma and Croat political prisoners were incarcerated, brutally tortured and murdered. The Catholic Church played a dominant role in the NDH and sometimes within the camps, where priests actually served as Ustaša guards or camp commanders. For my thesis, I will focus on Miroslav Filipovic, a Franciscan monk who acted as Jasenovac camp commander. This member of the clergy not only wore the Ustaša uniform, but also carried out liquidations and individual murders within the camp.

The largest camp within the borders of the NDH was Jasenovac, a series of five detention facilities established over a period between August 1941 and February 1942. The string of camps was located along the Sava River, sixty-two miles southeast from Zagreb. Jasenovac’s sub-camps included Krapje (established August 1941), Bročica (established August 1941), Ciglana (established November 1941), Kožara (established February 1942) and Stara Gradiška (established as a holding center in the summer of 1941 and then a camp in winter 1942). The conditions in the camps were horrendous with minimal food, primitive shelter and sanitation, and brutal treatment and torture by camp guards. Jasenovac was one destination for Croatia’s Jews, Roma and Serbs where they were murdered by the Ustaša or died in the camp of starvation, exposure or disease. The deportation of thousands of Jews from Jasenovac to Auschwitz-Birkenau to be murdered can be documented through the study of German documents. Most Jews were murdered or deported from the camp prior to August 1942. The majority of prisoners in Jasenovac were Serbian and murdered by the tens of thousands. Unlike the death camp Auschwitz, Jasenovac did not have gas chambers. Instead, most liquidations were by execution-style shootings, poison or violent murders with hammers, knives, etc.

In April 1945 as Josef Tito's Partisan Army approached Jasenovac, hundreds of prisoners staged an unsuccessful revolt against the Ustaša guards. By May when the partisans overran Jasenovac, the camp had been dismantled and the remaining prisoners killed. Since liberation Jasenovac has become not only a symbol of the Holocaust, but also of Croatia's ethnic and political turmoil. Jasenovac is a concentration camp where the legacy of war crimes remains unresolved with tensions strong along ethnic, religious and political lines. I will address this issue by analyzing the conflict between scholars, political leaders and appointed commissions over the number of dead.

The number of victims at Jasenovac is a highly politicized question and one that does not have well documented or widely accepted answers. Victim statistics in concentration camps are highly problematic, but possibly even more so in the case of Jasenovac. I will discuss in my thesis the problems associated with the calculations of deaths in camps, focusing specifically on those aspects that are unique to Croatia. Fierce partisanship along ethnic lines has resulted in highly inflated or deflated numbers of dead in Jasenovac from 1941-1945. Along with ethnic hostility, ideological and religious conflict has undermined the credibility of most data given. Little wartime documentation has survived. The Jasenovac camp authorities burned their records on two occasions, in early 1943 and then prior to evacuation in April 1945. The statistics on Jewish victims are possibly the least contested and are derived mainly from census information, which shows a population loss of over 30,000. The number of Jewish dead in Jasenovac ranges from a low of 8,000 to 20,000, but thousands more were deported from Jasenovac on to Auschwitz- Birkenau. The number of Roma victims is harder to determine due to the unclear definition of Roma in pre-war Yugoslavia, but most scholars tend to give Roma statistics as 8,000 to 10,000 dead in Jasenovac. Statistical disagreements and partisan polemics are mainly centered on the number of Serb victims. Estimates for Serb victims range from 25,000 to over 700,000. These figures appear to be seriously flawed and cautious estimates place Serb deaths in Jasenovac between 25,000-52,000. The number of political and religious opponents of the Ustaša regime of Catholic and Muslim background who were murdered in Jasenovac is almost impossible to ascertain. The range of victims belonging to this category is between 5,000-12,000. In 1945, the Territorial Committee for Establishing the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Collaborators in Zagreb was organized to uncover war crimes and seek out their perpetrators. They established war loss statistics for Jasenovac at 49, 875 but these were never received well due to political tensions and corruption. Serb nationalist groups claimed over one million Serb deaths during the Ustaša regime. A federal commission of war losses in 1964 cited 49,875 victims by name, but this detailed list has always been viewed as inaccurate due to manipulation, numerical inaccuracies and registering people in wrong groups. The number of victims at Jasenovac from 1941-1945 is not only debated in circles of scholars, but also in modern Croatian politics. The most notable example of the politicization of Jasenovac occurred when Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman,

declared the number Serbian victims killed in Jasenovac to be exaggerated and that only 60,000 died in all of Croatia during the war.

Understanding the legacy of Jasenovac and the Holocaust is important not only to historians, but is also vital to understanding the conflict and turmoil which endures in Croatia today. It is an undeservedly unknown part of Eastern Europe's history during World War II and an understanding of it is necessary for humanity to be assured that Jasenovac will not fade from memory nor be overlooked in the study of the Holocaust or state organized murder.

Dr. Mark Cory, my mentor, directs our university's European studies program and specializes in the Holocaust. I have also requested the aid of Dr. Evan Bukey in the Department of History who specializes in World War II and 20<sup>th</sup> Century European history. My former employer at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Senior Historian Dr. Peter Black, will offer guidance in his special field, the Holocaust of Eastern Europe and aid me in my research while I am in Washington, DC. I will use my German skills to utilize the many German documents pertaining to Jasenovac, but those documents I find in Serbo-Croatian will require translation. The lack of scholarship available to me here in Arkansas will require numerous inter-library loans, Internet research and online purchases of international books and journals.

One of the few scholars who continues to write about Jasenovac, Damir Mirković, has written, "In the midst of civil war in Bosnia Herzegovina, it seems almost out of place to dwell on genocides of fifty years ago when Yugoslavia was dismembered in the course of the Second World War. Yet, the current atrocities and the so-called "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and in parts of Croatia, horrid and deserving as they are, do not absolve us from remembering and attempting to understand the truth and the past events which bear a striking resemblance to those of the present in the Balkans. The victims of the past terror deserve our objective analysis and knowledge of the past. This knowledge is also a *sine qua non* for comprehending the present." These statements outline the importance I believe this project holds and necessity of its completion in a professional, objective and well-documented manner. Jasenovac is a part of that knowledge which is *sin qua non*.

**Project Schedule:**

Preparation for this project includes university courses dealing with 20<sup>th</sup> century European history, Holocaust literature, World War II, and German language courses. I began work on this project the summer of 2001 when I researched Jasenovac as part of a special project I was involved in while an intern at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. However, from December 1, 2001 until my defense in April 2002, a significant amount of work will remain.

September 2001- During this time, I will expand my existing research base to meet the goals and purposes of this project. I will locate those sources available to me through the Mullins Library, interlibrary loans and the Internet. I will work with my mentor to prepare a comprehensive outline.

October 2001- The main objective for this month will be to study and begin a chapter of my thesis which will cover background information on the German invasion of Croatia, the creation of the Independent State of Croatia and the rise of the Ustaša regime. I will meet with Dr. Evan Bukey to discuss the German invasion and their sponsorship of the NDH. I will be utilizing those sources available to me through Mullins Library, interlibrary loan and the Internet.

November 2001- At this point I will begin writing chapter two, focusing on the creation of the camp, its physical and administrative structure. I will locate translators for documents in Serbo-Croatian, which require translation, but intend to be in contact with individuals at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum who are in the process of translating those documents in their possession. I hope that the process will be completed prior to my going to the Museum.

December 2001- I will also begin working on chapter three dealing with the Catholic Church's involvement in the activities of the camp. I will meet with my mentor to discuss the overall organization of my project. My work with those sources, which are available to me at Mullins Library, through interlibrary loans and the Internet, will be completed by month's end.

January 2002- I will travel to Washington, D.C. prior to January 20<sup>th</sup> to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, which has many German and Serbo-Croatian documents from Jasenovac and survivor testimonies. I will search for relevant material in the National Archives files of captured Nazi war documents as well as the Library of Congress, which has many Serbian and Croatian journals. The time in these archives and libraries will be focused on those questions that can only be addressed there and answered by the wealth of primary sources available.

Specifically, I will be looking for primary sources dealing with the activities of Franciscan priest Miroslav Filipovic. A visit to the Museum's collection of Jasenovac artifacts and documents, recently acquired from Croatia, will also be scheduled. I will work in D.C. with Dr. Peter Black, Senior Historian of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, for more insight into the Croatian role in the Holocaust of Eastern Europe. After returning to Fayetteville, I will meet with my mentor to discuss new ideas and receive guidance on the incorporation of the newly acquired information into my project. This month I will submit an abstract for presentation at the SILO/SURF conference and continue working with chapters one through three.

February 2002- During this period chapter four will be written dealing with the conflict and tension surrounding the number of Jasenovac victims. I will incorporate all the new material gathered in Washington, relating to past commissions and studies done on this subject. I intend to analyze the political and modern writings on Jasenovac. I intend to work with Dr. Donald Kelley for guidance in dealing with the modern political situation in Croatia and the influence of Jasenovac on Croatia's more recent conflicts. Using those primary sources found in Washington dealing with Miroslav Filipovic, I will finish work on chapter three. The rough drafts of chapters one through three will be completed before the month's end.

March 2002- All information gathered in Washington D.C. will be fully incorporated by the beginning of this month. I intend to have completed all chapters in my thesis by March 25th. I will work with my mentor to organize and understand the final results of my research. I will then write the thesis' conclusion. All sources will be verified. I will edit and refine my thesis to submit to members of the thesis committee for comment and make any subsequent revisions as needed.

April 2002- This month I will prepare the final copy of my thesis and submit it to the Honors Council. I will work with my mentor to prepare for the thesis defense. I intend to be prepared for my oral defense by April 15<sup>th</sup>. I will attend the SURF conference and present my paper.

**Budget Narrative:**

## Student Costs:

My work on this project began last summer when I participated in an on-going research project on Jasenovac as an intern at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. As my research continues, I expect to work at least 10 hours per week on this project for 20 weeks. Silo funding will allow me to devote time to researching and writing my thesis, which would otherwise, by necessity, be spent working at a part-time job. Silo funding will also allow me to purchase materials relevant to my thesis as well as copies of documents and other materials I find in Washington, D.C. If necessary, an amount not to exceed \$200 will be set aside for translation purposes, although it is my hope that this process will have been completed at the USHMM.

Travel funds will be used for overnight and travel expenses to the Silo conference and a trip to Washington D.C. where I will conduct most of my primary source work in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Library and Archives and the National Archives.

## Mentor Costs: