

Ustaša Killing Specialists: The Personnel of the Jasenovac Concentration and Death Camp Complex

Emil Kjerte

Introduction

My dissertation focuses on the men and women stationed at the Jasenovac concentration and death camp complex. Located in Central Croatia along the Sava River, Jasenovac was the epicenter of state-organized destruction in the fascist Independent State of Croatia. Between August 1941 and April 1945, 90,000 to 100,000 people perished in the camp complex. The victims included Serbs, Jews, Roma as well as Croatian and Bosnian Muslims perceived as opponents of the regime. Most of them were murdered at killing sites in the immediate vicinity of the camp complex. The guards not only killed with firearms but used other murder weapons such as mallets, pickaxes, metal poles and daggers. Drawing on a broad array of primary sources, the dissertation explores the pre- and postwar trajectories of the Jasenovac perpetrators, their activities and the crimes they committed during their service as well as their intragroup relations and interactions with other state actors and civilians residing in the broader environs of the camp complex.

The dissertation hopes to contribute to two bodies of scholarship. First, it adds input to the study of non-German involvement in mass violence perpetrated against Jews and other minorities across East and Southeastern Europe during the Second World War. While the study of non-German Holocaust involvement has recently gained pace, the advancements remain dwarfed by the much more extensive historiography on German Holocaust perpetrators. Inquiries into non-German Holocaust participation have remain limited for different reasons. One obstacle that impeded early research was the inaccessibility of archival collections in the communist European states during the Cold War. The collapse of communist rule gave rise to new issues, however. The rise in nationalism was often accompanied by positive reassessments and rehabilitation of anti-Semitic and fascist wartime collaborators. In many of these countries, researching domestic involvement in the Holocaust remains controversial, but local scholars have also not studied perpetrator groups that participated directly in the violence due to the predominance of a political-historical approach that neglects actors at the lower end of the command chain or outside it. So

far, civilian participation in Poland and the Trawniki men can be considered the best explored aspects of non-German Holocaust involvement in Eastern Europe.

Second, the dissertation contributes to the literature that deals specifically with the Independent State of Croatia. Local historians have written elaborate institutional histories of the Ustaša armed forces and security apparatus, but within this body of literature little attention is paid to the actual violence. Scholars based outside the Balkans such as Tomislav Dulić, Mark Bergholz, Alexander Korb, and Mark Biondich have helped to fill the gap and contributed with innovative studies on the dynamics of Ustaša mass violence. Yet, these works approach the perpetrators through a broader set of research questions and not as the central subject of focus. Nevertheless, while a monograph on an Ustaša perpetrator collective has yet to emerge, the Jasenovac perpetrators have received some scholarly attention. In an article on the camp personnel, Martina Bitunjac has shown how social acceptance within the guard force was contingent on willingness to participate in killings of prisoners, and Ivo Goldstein has enumerated biographical details of some of the most senior and heinous perpetrators. Yet, despite their extensive involvement in the mass killings, scarcely any attention has been paid to the guards stationed outside the Jasenovac camps, who were far more numerous.

The dissertation's source foundation primarily consists of records from criminal investigations and war-crime trials in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Following the collapse of the Independent State of Croatia, hundreds of former Jasenovac guards were tracked down by the Yugoslav security police and interrogated. The interrogation statements that emerged from these proceedings offer a valuable information about the Jasenovac perpetrators. The statements contain, sometimes quite elaborate, biographical data about the accused as well as information about the treatment of the prisoners and relations between members of the camp personnel.

Basing a study about a paramilitary perpetrator formation on legal records is not without methodological issues. As Ian Rich has noted, a potential caveat is the risk of overamplifying the activities and influence of officers because they were more likely to be subjected to judicial proceedings. Yet, compared to its West-German counterpart, the judicial material from socialist Yugoslavia has an advantage in this context due to a markedly "democratic" distribution of sentences across ranks. A thornier issue concerns the interrogation statements' reliability. Perpetrator statements must be treated with caution because the legal environment surrounding their generation is liable to prompt distortions and obfuscations. In the proceedings against war

criminals in postwar Yugoslavia, the accused were literally fighting for their lives and had ample reason to avoid giving incriminating information and downplay their culpability. The opprobrium associated with employment at Jasenovac made individuals who had served at this site particularly likely to receive a harsh sentence.

Assessing the reliability of the interrogation statements, therefore, requires vigorous source criticism and comparison with other sources. The testimonies given by Jasenovac survivors and their memoirs offer an especially important corrective to the courtroom apologia that often characterizes this type of material. Yet, the utility of survivor accounts goes beyond a mere fact-checking function. They offer valuable insights into the behavioral patterns exhibited by the perpetrators, especially regarding the cruelty that often tends to be toned down in perpetrator statements.

The Historical Background: The Ustašas and the Jasenovac Camp Complex

The Ustaša organization was established in 1930 by the lawyer Ante Pavelić and grew out of opposition to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Most of its members were based in Italy, but the organization also had factions in Hungary, Germany and Belgium. While the Ustašas initially were rather conventional terrorist separatists whose prime aim was to establish an independent Croatian state, they gradually began to absorb the ideological currents of the extreme right during the 1930s, such as antisemitism as well as notions of racial superiority and ethnic purity. Following the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia on April 10, 1941, the Ustašas immediately sought to remould the ethnic composition of the state. Discriminatory legislation was quickly followed by mass killings and deportations to concentration and death camps. Of the around 40,000 Jews who resided in the Independent State of Croatia 18,000 to 19,000 were murdered at Jasenovac while 6000 perished at Auschwitz. At the same time, the regime carried out the physical destruction of the Roma completely without outside assistance. Out of the 30,000 Roma in the Independent State of Croatia, only 4000 to 6000 survived. In addition, the Ustašas murdered as many as 350,000 Serbs out of the 1.5 million who lived within the state.

While local militias carried out the first atrocities against Serbs, concentration and death camps quickly came to play a critical role in the realisation of the destructive policies. The first commander of the camps was Mijo Babić, who in June 1941 oversaw the establishment of a network of extermination camps in the Lika region. However, because of uprisings catalysed by the Ustašas violent policies towards the Serbian population, these camps had to be abandoned in August 1941 when the Italians announced their intention to take over the area in order to quell

the rebellion. Since Babić was killed while fighting the insurgents, his position was taken over by Vjekoslav Luburić, who in late August 1941 established the first camps of the Jasenovac complex, which was followed by the creation of the main camp, Jasenovac III, in October 1941.

Initially, the guard force stationed at the Jasenovac camp complex was comprised of a few companies of the Ustaša Army, which was essentially the Croatian counterpart to the Waffen-SS. However, in late 1941, the partisans' liberation of territories south of the Sava River heightened the strategic significance of the area around Jasenovac and led to the formation of the 1st Ustaša Defense Unit, which increased the size of the guard force from around 600 to 2500 men. While its servicemen wore the uniforms of the Ustaša army, they nevertheless maintained a separate command structure. Among the different elements of the 1st Ustaša Defense Unit, the 1st battalion played a particularly active role in carrying out mass killings. The battalion exclusively consisted of volunteers, who were stationed in the town of Jasenovac and the environs of the main camp, Jasenovac III. While the Jasenovac guard force was almost entirely made up of men, around 60 female guards also worked in the camp complex.

The Pathways to Jasenovac

A central aim of the dissertation is to provide insights into the guards' socialization and formative experiences before their arrival at Jasenovac. While Holocaust researchers mainly attribute weight to "situational" factors, such as the social pressure of conformity and obedience, when explaining participation in the crimes, there is a growing recognition that the way the situation is perceived interacts with the perpetrators' dispositions. In this regard, the term disposition does not merely denote the psychological traits of the perpetrators in a narrow sense, but also the broad gamut of accumulated formative experiences that constituted their biographies and shaped their outlook. By tracing patterns of socialization before the arrival to Jasenovac, the dissertation intends to shed light on the dispositions the members of the camp personnel acquired.

A fair share of the officers in Jasenovac were veteran Ustašas who had joined the organization during the 1930s and been socialized in the training camps in Italy. Like the *Alte Kämpfer* in Nazi Germany, their devotion gave them a special status. To separate them from the "latecomers" who had joined the Ustašas after the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia, they wore distinct uniforms. Compared to their Ustaša counterparts who chose to remain in Croatia during the 1930s, they also tended to espouse a more radical outlook. It was primarily emigre returnees who spearheaded the first wave of violent persecution of minorities, and they took up most of the senior position within the evolving concentration and death camp system. To a large extent, their

extremity derived from the specific environment of the Ustaša training camps in Italy, which was conducive to a process of ideological radicalization. The lack of counteracting influences from outside the camp and the distorted image of a mutilated homeland in bondage which they continuously was exposed to by propaganda worked to cultivate a self-image of the emigres as political warriors who in due time would return and violently cleanse the homeland of its enemies and invigorate a process of national regeneration. Gradually, they came to see themselves as carriers of a pristine Ustaša morality and as the ideological vanguard of the organization.

While not all of the Jasenovac commanders were emigre returnees, several had been active in the first death camps in the Lika region during the summer of 1941 while others had served in militias and participated in atrocities against Serbs prior to their arrival at Jasenovac. A common characteristic of these men's biographies was an affiliation with the Ustašas that predated the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia. One of the most infamous of the non-emigre Ustašas in Jasenovac was Miroslav Filipović; a Franciscan friar who was defrocked after his involvement in an atrocity in a village outside the town of Banja Luka. After arriving to the camp complex, he quickly rose to become the commander of the main camp.

Whereas many of the higher-ranking members of the Jasenovac guard force already were ideological zealous by the time they came to Jasenovac, the lower-ranking guards who volunteered for service in the 1st Ustaša Defense Unit had a markedly different profile. Most of them were agricultural laborers from the underdeveloped regions of Dalmatia and Hercegovina. Few had any prior affiliation with the Ustašas. I argue that three motivational patterns were significant in explaining their decision to volunteer. The first was promises of remuneration. When interrogated after the war, most of the former guards claimed that the prospect of a high salary and good food had prompted them to volunteer. Naturally, caution should be exercised when it comes to such retrospective claims as they might have been coloured by legal considerations. Yet, I would argue that the claims are in fact quite plausible. One reason is that the question whether a person had joined the Ustašas because of economic or political motives was in fact insignificant from a legal perspective in post-war Yugoslavia. What mattered was if they had volunteered or been forcibly mobilized. Since virtually all of the former guards in the 1st battalion explicitly told that they volunteered and not been forced to join, it adds to the credibility of their statements when it comes to this aspect. In this connection, it is significant that the Ustaša units had some key advantages when it came to attracting manpower compared to the Croatian army, the *Domobranstvo*. Not only did their servicemen receive a ten percent higher

salary than Domobranstvo soldiers, but after the end of their term of service, they were also prime candidates for state positions. Post-war interrogation material suggests that the Ustaša recruiters lost no opportunity to blazon these advantages. For example, a former guard recounted how the recruiters told him that the *Domobranstvo* was not a real army, and they cajoled him with promises of good food and a state position after the war.

The second motivational factor was social and familial relations. The historian Max Bergholz considers this aspect critical in explaining why some men joined the Ustašas in the Bosnian town of Kulen Vakuf. Among the Jasenovac guards, there were also several who had family members that sympathized with or were active Ustašas. However, although there were brothers who joined the guard force in Jasenovac together and fathers who pressured their sons to volunteer, there are also several examples of guards who had family members that supported the partisans. One guard even encountered one of his cousins among the victims his company escorted to a killing site.

The material I have gathered suggests that family and friend networks generally played a more important role for the female guards than for their male counterparts. Some of these women came to Jasenovac because they had male relatives who were stationed there. For example, the infamous female guard Nada Šakić was the half-sister of Vjekoslav Luburić. In other cases, acquaintances who sympathized with the Ustašas played an important role in encouraging the enlistment. For example, one woman testified after the war that she was persuaded to become a guard by a friend whom she shared an apartment with and whose family members all were active Ustašas. At the same time, some of these women had been involved in the Ustaša youth organization before they became guards.

The third motivational factor related to the devastation of large parts of the countryside as the insurgencies spread throughout the Independent State of Croatia during the summer and fall of 1941. Some of the Jasenovac guards had suffered the loss of their homes and family members as a consequence of the insurgency. Indications are that the desire for vengeance fuelled by these experiences coupled with their sudden uprooting made these men ideal targets for the Ustaša Defense recruiters. While the uprisings were a defensive reaction to the terror of the Ustaša regime, it is not apologetic to draw attention to the subjective impact that the events had on young men who in a climate of ethnic bifurcation most likely did not comprehend the objective cause and effect relationship that led to the insurgency.

The Social Dynamics of the Violence

Another of the dissertation's focal point revolves around the social dynamics of the mass killings perpetrated at killing sites in the vicinity of the camp complex. To organize the mass killings at Jasenovac, the camp leadership formed a group of dedicated killers whose exclusive function was to murder. Yet, the guard companies stationed outside the camp complex routinely assisted. Indications are that this procedure was not solely contingent on the need for additional manpower. Rather, it was part of a deliberate attempt to include as many guards as possible in the killings. The point is supported by post-war material. For example, when questioned after the war, one former guard stated that the reason why the Jasenovac commanders tasked his company with carrying out mass shootings of prisoners was to ensure their loyalty. As he put it, "I believe that the commanders of Jasenovac only made us shoot them [the victims] to soak us in blood so that we would be more loyal towards the NDH."

Like the Order Police reservists studied by Christopher Browning, some of the guards were appalled after their first involvement in a mass killing. Yet, complicity quickly fuelled the need for justifications. It even led to agreement. When interrogated, a former guard described his thought process during his initiation to mass murder, "I saw that this was wrong [...] but I was there, so I agreed with what was happening." The redefinition of right and wrong mirrored the aspirations of the camp leadership. By turning them into a collective of mass murderers, the Jasenovac commanders sought to inculcate the guards with a new morality and bind them to the regime. Participation at the killing sites functioned as an initiation rite that aimed at ensuring the guards' loyalty by dint of their collective involvement in a major moral transgression. While the Jasenovac perpetrators' proclivity for killing with knives and other "cold weapons" has often been explained with recourse to the language of pathological deviance, I argue that the choice of weapons intended to heighten the sense of transgression at the killing sites in order to sever the guards' ties to their preservice moral norms.

Outside the killing sites, the Jasenovac guards had more sustained contact with prisoners, especially when escorting them to forced labour outside the camp complex. Inured to violence by participation in mass killings, the treatment of the prisoners was generally callous as evidenced by the frequency of beatings and murder. Yet, more diverse forms of behaviours sometimes surfaced during the encounters. When not subjected to the prying eyes of superiors and peers, some guards acted less heinously. Restraint did not necessarily indicate private rejection of the violence. Drawing on Randall Collins' study on the micro dynamics of violence, I argue that the

presence of peers significantly increased the individual guard's inclination to mistreat the prisoners. In this regard, a survivor understood violent outburst by the guards as attempts to demonstrate power and impress peers.

The dissertation also examines the prisoners' possibilities for moderating the guards' behavior. Such options were highly circumscribed. Communicative interaction with the perpetrators was generally confined to prisoner functionaries who occupied in the prisoner administration or to certain groups of "privileged" prisoners. Ethnicity mattered too. In a hierarchical system, Croatian prisoners were generally treated less heinously than their Jewish and Serbian counterparts. Although there is at least one documented case of a friendship between a prisoner and a guard, recourse to violence, paradoxically, appears to have been one of the few effective means of moderating the perpetrators' own violent conduct. At least, this was the argument raised by a former prisoner functionary who was tasked with supervising one of the barracks in the Jasenovac main camp. When interrogated after the war, he candidly confessed to beating numerous prisoners. He insisted, however, that harsh comportment was necessary to keep order in the barrack and pre-empt interference from the guard force, which would have far worse consequences.

Relations Within the Guard Force and Interactions with the Outside Community

Besides exploring the social dynamics of the violence, the dissertation zeroes in on patterns of interaction within the guard force. Although the Jasenovac guard force constituted a community predicated on violence, it was also a community that was rife with tensions. To a large extent, conflicts stemmed from cultural differences and the guards' strong attachment to their home regions. For example, in a letter written to Ante Pavelić in August 1942, an officer from Dalmatia painted a picture of systematic discrimination against the Dalmatians by the Herzegovinians. Despite their disputes, these two factions were nevertheless united in their mistrust of guards from the region of Zagorje north of Zagreb. At the same time, the officers in the Ustaša Defense Unit struggled with containing desertions to Waffen-SS units, which peaked in the beginning of 1943. Regional cleavages and conflicts between the guards was one source that fuelled desertions. Yet, other reasons were more mundane. For example, one former guard explained the desertions with reference to the notion that the food was better and the salary higher in the SS units.

While the male and female Jasenovac guards were partners in crime, my research suggests that their interaction was not frictionless either. Despite the proliferation of romances, the female

guards remained in a subordinate position within the perpetrator hierarchy. For example, on several occasions, a female guard was thrown in a detention cell when she tried to assert herself against her male peers. Perpetration of violence was one way for these women to assert themselves in a male-dominated environment. In this regard, it is significant that a survivor explicitly recounted that the treatment of the female prisoners worsened when the male guards who guarded them were replaced by women in late 1942.

A different kind of interaction the dissertation explores is the guard force's relations with civilians residing in the vicinity of the camp complex and with other state actors. Departing from Wolfgang Sofsky's notion of the SS concentration-camp system as "a closed universe," recent scholarship has shown how the boundaries between the camps and local communities in Nazi Germany were far from nonporous. The same applies to Jasenovac. Its guard force not only inflicted violence on prisoners but also committed atrocities against Serbian peasants in the surrounding countryside. The massacres gave rise to sharp – but fruitless – protests from officials in the civil administration who feared that the brutalities would fuel further uprisings. The Jasenovac leadership not only adopted a cavalier towards the civil administration, but they also frequently flouted directives from the central police authorities in Zagreb. Survivors who held positions in the prisoner administration were able to observe how orders for the release of specific prisoners often resulted in their execution.

Relations with outside actors were not exclusively belligerent. Not only could the Jasenovac guard force rely on the support of local Ustaša activists when it came to tracking down escaped prisoners, but several guards cultivated romantic relations with Croatian female villagers. The interaction with Croatian civilians was not a one-way street. Villagers often used their connections with Jasenovac guards to settle private scores or to enrich themselves from the spoils of murdered Ser neighbours. Over time, however, the violence outside the camp became increasingly deethnicized. By 1944, indiscriminate killings and rape of Croatian civilians were relatively common occurrences. Indications are that the escalation reflected a general devaluation of life caused by the guards' participation in mass killings coupled with a siege mentality prompted by the increasing partisan activities in the area.

Postwar Trajectories

The dissertation's final part focuses on the postwar trajectories of the camp personnel. For some of those who escaped the collapsing Independent State of Croatia, their exile abroad marked a return to the clandestine activities of the Ustaša organization during the 1930s. For the officers

who joined the terrorist organization “the Crusaders,” this step marked a logical continuation of their service in Jasenovac. Many were captured and sentenced to death when they returned to Croatia to organize an armed rebellion. For lower-ranking guards, their inclusion in the terrorist network tended to be more haphazard, often prompted by a random meeting with an influential Ustaša or an encounter with stories about the supposed horrors of Communist rule. However, what is clear is that Croatian refugee camps in Italy offered a particularly fertile ground for “the Crusaders” to recruit.

The majority of the guards, however, went into hiding or returned to their prewar occupations. Since many were captured and tried, an examination of the camp personnel’s postwar trajectories marks a foray into the understudied subject of war-crime trials in socialist Yugoslavia. When prosecuted, some candidly confessed to their crimes while others engaged in mendacious evasions. Records from the archives of the Yugoslav security police suggest that many of the sentenced Jasenovac perpetrators continued to espouse a pro-Ustaša outlook during their imprisonment. Monitoring did not end after the prisoners’ release, and the surviving material shows that the released Jasenovac culprits were considered potential threats to the security of the Yugoslav state. As late as the 1970s, the security police compiled reports about their activities.

Conclusion

By providing the first comprehensive analysis of an Ustaša perpetrator collective, the dissertation both seeks to enrich the historiography of the Independent State of Croatia and to contribute to integrating the study of German and non-German Holocaust perpetrators. In line with the recent focus on interactions within perpetrator groups, the case of the Jasenovac guards affirms the role of violence as an instrument in solidifying intragroup ties and essentially establishing a perpetrator community born out of participation in bloodshed. Yet, the behaviour of the Jasenovac perpetrators was also characterized by idiosyncrasies. Unlike the German perpetrators, they murdered most of their victims with “cold weapons,” thereby rendering the violence more visceral and transgressive. At the same time, the dissertation will explore aspects such as post-war perpetrator trajectories and patterns of interactions with civilians; aspects that not only remain marginal within the historiography of the Independent State of Croatia but also to some extent within the broader field of Holocaust perpetrator research.