

**CROATIA AND SLOVENIA
AT THE END AND AFTER
THE SECOND WORLD
WAR (1944–1945)**

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**Mass Crimes and Human Rights
Violations Committed by the
Communist Regime**

Blanka Matkovich



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*Croatia and Slovenia at the End and After the Second World War (1944–1945):
Mass Crimes and Human Rights Violations Committed by the Communist Regime*

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This book was originally written as a thesis submitted for a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree at the Department of History at the University of Warwick in October 2015. For the majority of MPhil/PhD students in history, writing a thesis is a long and lonely journey into the past. Mine was just the opposite, and it started as a journey into the future. I was not meant to be a historian and in a way this thesis is a result of unfortunate personal circumstances. In my childhood, I was drawn to distant worlds and seeing the Earth from space, so blissful, peaceful and perfect. While my classmates were going to history competitions, I was going to ones in mathematics. I liked tools and fixing stuff. I was preparing myself to study astronomy and one day to fly into space. But fate had a different plan. Because of my disability, it became clear I would never be the one thing I wanted to be. Strangely, but approximately at the same time when my dream died, another one was born. I was lucky to have a dad with a variety of interests, but his greatest love was history. I was 14 years old when he bought me my first history book. It was Nikolai Tolstoy's *The Minister and the Massacres*. That was the day when my new journey began because that book taught me that declaring a topic 'controversial' is usually done when someone has something to hide, meaning that the right questions have been asked. It also taught me that, as James McPherson stated, revision is the lifeblood of historical scholarship and there is no single, eternal, and immutable 'truth' about past events and their meaning. Thanks to Nikolai Tolstoy and my dad, I overcame my

sadness for not being able to do what I loved the most, and I realised that the path to the better future could be hidden in the past, instead of space. The year was 1991, when the war in Croatia broke out and hardly anyone had time to think about Tolstoy's discoveries. In the following years, my dad kept feeding my newly discovered hunger for history, filling our family library with more and more books, and investing everything he ever owned in my research. This is why all my published works, including this book, are more his achievement than mine.

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ABSTRACT

Since the October Revolution, when for the first time in history a Marxist party seized state power, communist regimes have influenced the lives of more than a billion people, caused millions of deaths and violated the human rights of countless people. However, in the Soviet sphere of influence and in Yugoslavia, investigating war and post-war crimes committed by communist regimes was not possible until 1990, after the democratic changes in Eastern Europe. Resolution 1481/2006 of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly strongly condemned human rights violations committed by totalitarian communist regimes and the 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism stated that these crimes were comparable with Nazi crimes but, very few people have been tried for committing such crimes. Nevertheless, 25 years later, in former Yugoslav republics this topic is still a matter of political and scientific debates.

The Communist Party in the former Yugoslavia was an organization which used all available means to seize and keep power, including terror and mass murder. The intensity of violence was strongest between autumn 1944 and summer 1945 when mass killings occurred across the country, but repressions were endemic to the very end of Yugoslavia.

This book has a combined chronological and thematic approach. It focuses on the events that took place in late 1944 and 1945. At that time, the KPJ (Communist Party of Yugoslavia), assisted by the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Army, the Department for the

Protection of the People (OZNA) and the Corps of People's Defence of Yugoslavia (KNOJ) conducted organized terror not only by intimidation, persecution, torture and imprisonment, but also by the execution of a large number of citizens perceived by the KPJ as disloyal, passive, ideological enemies or class enemies. The aim is to provide an overview of the mass crimes committed in that period revealing previously unknown details about the most significant ones and trying to answer questions about the victims and the perpetrators, including the most significant one: was the violence systematically organized and carried out under the command of the Yugoslav Army and the KPJ?

This book is based on documents kept in the archives of Croatia, Slovenia, the UK, and Serbia. Other sources are published collections of documents and testimonies. Documents from OZNA, KNOJ, the Communist party and the Yugoslav Army kept in the Croatian State Archives, the State Archives in Split and the State Archives in Zagreb will be the backbone of this research. They provide information on the units which participated in war crimes and the geographical scope of their military operations. The archival documents will be correlated with testimonies of both the survivors and Yugoslav soldiers.

The project will not only cover new ground in the research into communist war crimes at the end of and after the Second World War but will also contribute to coming to terms with the past in the successor states of Yugoslavia by studying one of the most controversial episodes in the contemporary history of the Balkans.

ABBREVIATIONS

AVNOJ	Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije
DAGS	Državni arhiv u Gospiću
DAKA	Državni arhiv u Karlovcu
DAS	Državni arhiv u Splitu
DAST	Državni arhiv u Sisku
DAZG	Državni arhiv u Zagrebu
(G)HQ	(General) Headquarters
GOC	Glavni obavještajni centar
HDA	Hrvatski državni arhiv
HOS	Hrvatske oružane snage
JA	Jugoslavenska armija
JVUO	Jugoslavenska vojska u otadžbini
KNOJ	Korpus narodne obrane Jugoslavije
KOS	Kontraobavještajna služba
KPJ	Komunistička partija Jugoslavije
MUP	Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova
NDH	Nezavisna Država Hrvatska
NKOJ	Nacionalni komitet oslobođenja Jugoslavije
NKVD	Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del
NM	Narodna milicija
NOB	Narodnooslobodilačka borba
NOP	Narodnooslobodilački pokret
NOPOJ	Narodnooslobodilački partizanski odredi Jugoslavije

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NOV	Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije
NOV i POJ	Narodnooslobodilačka vojska i partizanski odredi Jugoslavije
OZNA	Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda
POC	Pomoćni obavještajni centar
ROC	Rejonski obavještajni centar
SID	Služba za istraživanje i dokumentaciju
SKOJ	Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije
UDBA	Uprava državne bezbednosti
VDS	Vojska državne varnosti
VOS	Vojnoobavještajna služba

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INTRODUCTION: EUROPE'S MOST BRUTAL CENTURY

History is intertwined with wars accompanied by mass crimes and other forms of violence. However, the twentieth century, or 'age of extremes', as it was called by Eric Hobsbawm, was marked by two world wars and the so-called Cold War which affected the entire world. Their outcomes shaped the world as we know it today.

Hobsbawm claimed that 'the First World War marked the breakdown of (western) civilisation of the nineteenth century' and was followed by the Age of Catastrophe when the world was shaken by a world economic crisis, revolutions and the Second World War.¹ 'Its losses are literally incalculable, and even approximate estimates are impossible, since the war (unlike the First World War) killed civilians as readily as people in uniform.'²

Stathis Kalyvas stated that any study of violence must consider the thorny problem of data: most available indicators of political violence tend to be unreliable and inconsistent across nations and over time, and the available data are overly aggregate. Therefore, data on violence can be wildly distorted; meaning victim numbers could be overestimated or underestimated. Many distortions result from the political process, and they do not only affect the information on the total number of fatalities

¹Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of extremes: the short twentieth century, 1914–1991* (First edition, London, 1994), pp. 6–7.

²Ibid., p. 43.

but also each side’s share.³ Timothy Snyder argues that by repeating exaggerated numbers, Europeans release into their culture ‘millions of ghosts of people who never lived’. That means that once history is removed, the numbers go upward and memories go inward.⁴ These authors highlight the problem of demographic losses in circumstances when they can be manipulated. This should be especially taken into account when researching demographic losses and war crimes in those countries where totalitarian regimes took power when the war ended.

War Losses In 1945: Western Europe Between War And Peace

Despite the fact that war crimes in post-war Europe were not restricted to the areas controlled by the Soviets and other Communist regimes, the worst atrocities were indeed committed in Eastern Europe.

Western regimes were not immune to human rights violations (see Table 1). After the liberation of France, almost 40,000 people were imprisoned for collaboration. In the following years the majority of those, who had been sentenced, were released and by December 1948 only 13,800 remained in prisons. In 1951, on the eve of the first amnesty, 4,000 were still in custody. The first amnesty law reduced the number of collaborators in jail to 1,570, and the second amnesty law (1956) decreased that number further to 62.

The debate over the punishment of collaborators began before the war ended. At the start of the so-called purge trials in October 1944, Albert Camus and Francois Mauriac argued it out, Camus writing in *Combat* and Mauriac in *Le Figaro*. Mauriac, expressing de Gaulle’s concern for

Table 1 Legal purge in France.

Acquitted, released, or their sentences lifted	37,413
Condemned to death, of whom 791 were executed	7,037
Condemned to forced labour or imprisonment	39,200
Condemned to a loss of civic rights	49,178
Total	132,828

Source: Henry Rousso, ‘The Purge in France: An Incomplete Story’, in Jon Elster (ed.), *Retribution and Reparation in the Transition to Democracy* (Cambridge, 2006), p.105.

³Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 48–49.

⁴Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands, Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2011), p. 406.

moderation and conciliation, desired that the sentences should not be harsh. Camus argued that forgiving collaborators meant sacrificing the ideals for which resistance fighters had died, as well as betraying the dead by allowing their executioners to go free.⁵

At the same time, the most difficult phase of the purges was taking place. According to some, mostly right-wing authors, these uncontrolled and extra-legal purges caused more than 100,000 deaths in a few weeks.⁶ In 1948, and then in 1952, the government published two inquiries based on sources from the prefectures and both of them gave statistics in the range of 10,000 executions, more than half of which had taken place before liberation. In the 1950s, the Institute for Contemporary History conducted more research and concluded that the number of victims was approximately 8,100.⁷ Rousso concluded that 'if we sum up the essential data currently known and more or less reliable, we have 8,000 to 9,000 extra-legal executions, 1,000 to 2,000 of which at a time when the legal purge was under way' and '1,500 to 1,600 death sentences that were carried out'.⁸

The numbers, presented by Peter Novick, are slightly different, but still in the range between 9,500 and 11,000. According to his calculations 5,234 executions took place before and 4,439 after liberation. 5,134 persons were executed without a trial, while 2,378 persons had fallen victim to executions or murder but the motive could not be established.⁹

Lottman believes that the best estimate for summary executions is similar to the figure which de Gaulle had published in 1959, when it was concluded that there had been 10,842 summary executions, 6,675 of which had occurred during the fighting leading up to liberation.¹⁰

In total, the purge in France took the lives of approximately 10,000 people. Rousso emphasized that, compared to other countries, the case of France is atypical and the purge was among the most severe. With respect to the populations of other Western European countries, these data place France

⁵Sarah Farmer, 'Postwar Justice in France: Bordeaux 1953', in István Deák, Jan T. Gross, Tony Judt (eds), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, 2000), p. 195.

⁶Rousso, 'The Purge in France', p. 93.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁹Peter Novick, *The Resistance Versus Vichy, The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France* (London, 1968), p. 204.

¹⁰Herbert L. Lottman, *The Purge, The Purification of French Collaborators After World War II* (New York, 1986), pp. 273–274.

at the head of the list with nearly 239 deaths per million inhabitants, followed by Belgium (29), Holland (17), Denmark (13) and Norway (10).¹¹

Compared to Eastern Europe in general and to the Yugoslav republics in particular, these numbers are extremely small. Researching mass killings, Benjamin Valentino highlighted that ‘the most deadly mass killings in history have resulted from the effort to transform society according to communist doctrine’ because ‘the changes they have sought to bring about have resulted in the nearly complete material dispossession of vast numbers of people.’¹² He concluded that the total number of people killed by these regimes range as high as 110 million.¹³

The Polish example shows that the number of those who stood trials and were executed afterwards is similar to the one in France. The Polish Army courts handed down 900 death sentences in 1944–1945, although not all of them were carried out. In 1945–46, over 1,700 persons were sentenced to death, while between 1944 and 1948, the total was 2,500. Jerzy Poksiński estimated that slightly over 3,000 death sentences were handed down between September 1944 and December 1946. However, another document from 1989 lists by name 2,800 persons actually executed in Polish jails between 1944 and 1956.¹⁴ These numbers are apparently slightly larger than those in France, but it is also important to keep in mind that at the same time total population of Poland was significantly smaller than the one in France.¹⁵

Unlawful killings in Poland were far more widespread than in France. Research by the Polish historians Wojciech Materski and Tomasz Szarota for the Polish Institute of National Remembrance showed that between 1939 and 1941 and 1944 and 1946 at least 150,000 Polish citizens were killed as a result of communist/Soviet repression. The actual number was probably much higher as 100,000 people are unaccounted for.¹⁶ The situation in other Eastern European countries was similar (see Table 2).

¹¹Rouso, ‘The Purge in France’, p. 120.

¹²Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final solutions: mass killing and genocide in the twentieth century* (Ithaca, 2004), p. 73.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴John Micgiel, ‘Bandits and Reactionaries’: The Suppression of the Opposition in Poland, 1944–1946’, in Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii (eds), *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1949* (Boulder – Oxford, 1997), p. 103.

¹⁵In France during 1945 there were approximately 40 million inhabitants, however, the Polish population was significantly reduced from approximately 35 million who lived there in 1939. According to the population census in 1950 there was only 25 million total in population.

¹⁶Wojciech Materski and Tomasz Szarota, *Polska 1939–1945. Straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami* (Warsaw, 2009), p. 9.

Table 2 Communist Mass Killings in the Twentieth Century.

Location-Dates	Description	Deaths
Bulgaria (1944–?)	Agricultural collectivisation and political repression	50,000–100,000
East Germany (1945–?)	Political repression by Soviet Union	80,000–100,000
Romania (1945–?)	Agricultural collectivisation and political repression	60,000–300,000

Source: Valentino, *Final solutions: mass killing and genocide in the twentieth century*, p. 75.

Although ‘The Black Book of Communism’ by Stephen Courtois and his co-authors was the most known attempt to record communist crimes after 1989, they were criticised as not all numbers were reliable. In the Yugoslav case, the authors quoted the number from previous research done by demographers Vladimir Žerjavić and Bogoljub Kočović, stating that ‘rarely in the course of history had the arrival of a new regime been preceded by a bloodbath on the scale of the one seen in Yugoslavia, where out of a population of 15.5 million, 1 million died.’¹⁷ However, they did not discuss separately a number of the victims of communist purges neither did they try to estimate it.

According to the latest available data, in Slovenia, which had a population at that time of between 1,200,000 and 1,300,000, over 14,000 were executed after the war.¹⁸ This means that in Slovenia at least 10,769 people per 1 million inhabitants died as a result of post-war purges.

This shows that repression in Yugoslavia was far more brutal than in Western European countries and was of the same or even higher scale than repressions in countries which were occupied by Soviet troops.

In this book, I will discuss why this was the case. I will argue that one of the main reasons for the enormous scale of the war and post-war purges in Eastern Europe was due to the fact that Communist parties used the opportunity – the chaos caused by the war – to ‘purge’ society from their political and ideological enemies. It was part of their strategy to seize or preserve power. I will, however, begin with a discussion of the question

¹⁷Karel Bartošek, ‘Central and SouthEastern Europe’, in Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartošek and Jean-Louis Margolin (eds), *Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge – London, 1999), p. 397.

¹⁸At least 83,500 Slovenes lost their lives during the Second World War. Ana Svenšek, *V povojnem nasilju je umrlo 6,5 % Slovencev*, MMC RTV SLO, 10 June 2012. Available online at <http://www.rtvsl.si/slovenija/prvi-pravi-popis-v-vojnem-in-povojnem-nasilju-je-umrlo-6-5-slovencev/284939> (1 December 2013). Newspaper article was based on the data provided by the Slovenian Institute for Contemporary History (Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, Ljubljana).

why for many years not much was known about these communist crimes, or at least, the scale of these crimes.

Behind The Iron Curtain

Since the October Revolution, when for the first time in history a Marxist party seized state power, communism has influenced the lives of almost two billion people, causing millions of deaths and violating the human rights of many more. During and after the Second World War, communist parties seized and then consolidated power in Central and Eastern Europe.

After the end of the Second World War, historiography focused on the victims of Nazism and Fascism, while communist crimes mostly remained hidden. How could it be that hardly anybody took notice of these crimes? To answer that question we must look at the post-war order of Europe. In Eastern Europe communist crimes could not be researched or publicly discussed as long as communist parties were in power. Historians in the 'Free World' did not have access to Eastern European archives and could not confirm their assumptions with archival evidence.¹⁹ This changed after the end of communism in Eastern Europe when the institutions for collecting material and studying communist crimes were established in Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Slovenia, Romania, but also Sweden and the USA. This was followed by lustration laws which regulated the participation of former communists in politics and the civil service: in the Czech Republic (1993), Slovakia (1996), Hungary (1994 and 1996), Albania (1993 and 1995), Bulgaria (1992), Lithuania (1991), Latvia (1995 and 1996), Estonia (1992 and 1995) and Poland (1997).²⁰ It was a Polish 'case' that drew more attention to Communist war crimes.

A massacre of 4,400 Polish prisoners of war, executed by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (abbreviated NKVD – Narodnyy

¹⁹Many documents, especially those related to the Communist party and the secret police, in Croatia are still not available to researchers. The explanation I was given on many occasions was that these documents contain personal information and therefore two conditions have to be met before they are available to the public: 70 years since they were written and 100 years since a person was born. My experience in Slovenian archives was quite different. All documents created before 1990, besides personal ones such as medical documentation, are available.

²⁰For further reading, see Mark S. Ellis, 'Purging the Past: The Current State of Lustration Laws in the Former Communist Bloc', *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 59 (1996), pp. 181–196.

Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del) in the Katyn Forest in Smolensk was one of the first Soviet war crimes perpetrated against the citizens of another state. Katyn was only one killing site. All in all, the NKVD executed about 22,000 Polish officers, policemen and members of the pre-war elite. Before Katyn, the Stalinist Soviet Union was more occupied with killing its own citizens. I will discuss Katyn in more detail as it established a pattern not only how such executions were organized but also how communist regimes tried to cover them up.

The remains of the Polish officers, policemen and members of the old Polish elite were discovered by German troops in early 1943. On the 13 April 1943, the Berlin Broadcasting Station informed the world that 'it is reported from Smolensk that the local population has indicated to the German authorities a place in which the Bolsheviks had secretly perpetrated mass executions and where the GPU had murdered 10,000 Polish officers'.²¹ Two days later, the Soviet official news agency TASS stated that

the Polish prisoners in question were interned in the vicinity of Smolensk in special camps and were employed in road construction. It was impossible to evacuate them at the time of the approach of the German troops, and as a result they fell into their hands. If, therefore, they have been found murdered, it means that they have been murdered by the Germans, who, for the reasons of provocation, claim now that the crime has been committed by Soviet authorities.²²

The Polish government-in-exile instructed their representative in Switzerland to request the International Red Cross to send a delegation and investigate the case. The Soviet government rejected the idea and accused the Polish government of collaborating with Hitler. Instead, the Soviet Government set up its 'Special Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating the Circumstances of the Shooting of the Polish Officer Prisoners by the German-Fascist Invaders in the Katyn Forest' to investigate the incident which confirmed the existence of the mass graves in which the Polish war prisoners 'shot by German occupiers were buried'.²³ This was an attempt to prevent the truth from coming to light.

²¹Quoted in: Joseph Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders* (London, 1951), p. 88.

²²Quoted in: Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders*, p. 92.

²³Ibid., p. 206.

After the war, an official Soviet document, dated on 3 March 1959, confirmed that ‘since 1940, records and other materials regarding prisoners and interned officers, policemen, gendarmes, [military] settlers, landlords and so on, and persons from former bourgeois Poland who were shot in that same year have been kept in the Committee of State Security of the Council of Ministers, USSR.’ In the same document, it is also stated that on the basis of the decision by the special Troika of the NKVD USSR, a total of 21,857 persons were shot: of these, 4,421 were shot in the Katyn Forest (Smolensk Oblast), 3,820 in the camp of Starobelsk, close to Khar-kov, 6,311 in the camp of Ostashkov (Kalinin Oblast), and 7,305 persons were shot in other camps and prisons of western Ukraine and western Belorussia. The execution of the above-mentioned persons was carried out on the basis of the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) of 5 March 1940. All victims were sentenced to the highest order of punishment according to the files opened for them as POWs and internees in 1939. According to this document, no information has been released to anybody relating to the case, and all 21,857 files have been sealed and stored. It is concluded that ‘all these files are of no operational or historical value to Soviet organs. It is also highly doubtful whether they could be of any real value to our Polish friends... On the basis of the above statements, it seems expedient to destroy all the records of the persons shot in 1940 in the above-mentioned operation’.²⁴

At the time when the Katyn massacre was first discovered in 1943, the British government instructed the BBC not to ‘get involved’ in the mass graves controversy but to treat the German story as an attempt ‘to revive the Bolshevik Bogey’; the Katyn story should be treated by implication as false, but not by assertion and never in detail.²⁵ Balfour believed that ‘the affair was, and remains, highly embarrassing to the British’, but ‘the Government had little choice but to damp down the wave of humanitarian sympathy which would undoubtedly in other circumstances have developed towards the Poles’.²⁶ Brown is convinced that, although the Allies were aware of this massacre, they kept it a secret because they did not want to provoke

²⁴Note by Shelepin to Khrushchev, 3 March 1959, Proposing to Destroy the Documents of the Operation Sanctioned by the Politburo on 5 March 1940. Quoted in: Anna M. Cienciala, Natalia S. Lebedeva and Wojciech Materski (eds), *Katyn, A Crime Without Punishment* (New Haven–London, 2007), pp. 332–333.

²⁵Michael Stenton, *Radio London and Resistance in Occupied Europe, British Political Warfare 1939–1943* (Oxford, 2011), p. 301.

²⁶Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War 1939–1945, Organisations, Policies and Publics in Britain and Germany* (London, Boston and Henley, 1979), p. 333.

the Soviet Union which at that time carried the heaviest burden in the war against Nazi Germany.²⁷ Since Stalin was a more important ally than the Polish government-in-exile, it was more comfortable for the British and the Americans to accept the mendacious Soviet version of the Katyn massacre and blame the Germans, as well as encouraging the Poles to compromise.²⁸

However, the Allies showed no desire to raise the subject of Katyn after the Second World War either. Although the Katyn case was not listed in the tribunal's verdicts in Nuremberg, Nazi leaders were nonetheless found guilty of all the crimes with which they were charged, including Katyn. Satter believes this was done in order to avoid any conflicts between the Allies, and, as a result, until April 1990 the Soviets insisted that they had won their case on Katyn at Nuremberg.²⁹ Sir Owen O'Malley, a British diplomat and an ambassador to the Polish government-in-exile, wrote after the war of his own disillusionment, stating that 'between 1943 and the autumn of 1945, much more than a sacrifice of Poland was esteemed necessary to keep Stalin in a good temper; and to appease him an indifferent eye was turned upon his destruction and dismemberment of a number of smaller nations'.³⁰ Questioning British foreign politics at that time, Rees underlines that

there was a middle way...one which recognized the value of the Soviet Union as a fighting ally, but which reaffirmed the policy that, as Churchill put it in January 1942, Western Allies adhered to those principles of freedom and democracy set forth in the Atlantic Charter and that these principles must become especially active whenever any question of transferring territory is raised.³¹

Extradition of the Croats and other groups to the Yugoslav Army in May 1945 and events that followed which will be discussed in the fifth chapter of this book proved how little the Atlantic Charter values meant in the situation when the Allies found themselves on the verge of a war with Tito.

²⁷Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London, 2009), p. 141. For further reading, see *The Katyn Forest Massacre, Hearing before the Select Committee to Conduct an Investigations of the Focus, Evidence and Circumstances of the Katyn Forest Massacre* (Washington, 1952).

²⁸Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p. 298.

²⁹David Satter, *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway, Russia and the Communist Past* (New Haven – London, 2012), p. 239.

³⁰Laurence Rees, *World War Two Behind Closed Doors, Stalin, The Nazis and the West* (London, 2009), p. 409.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 409.

Katyn was only the beginning. During and after the war, crimes were committed by communist parties or organizations all over Eastern Europe including Yugoslavia. Occasionally the Allies played directly into the hands of the Yugoslav communists. In May 1945, thousands of ‘Yugoslav’ citizens who had previously fallen into British hands were repatriated. The leader of the Yugoslav communist Partisans, Josip Broz Tito, had promised to return the civilians to their homes and to treat the soldiers as prisoners of war. However, he did not keep his promise and many repatriated persons were executed.

Approximately at the same time when these crimes were committed, general Milovan Đilas, the future vice-president in Tito’s government of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, complained about Soviet soldiers killing all German civilian refugees, including women and children. According to him, Stalin knew about it, but replied: ‘We lecture our soldiers too much; let them have some initiative’.³² Archival documents, which will be examined in this book, prove that the same license was given to Yugoslav soldiers led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (abbreviated KPJ – Komunistička partija Jugoslavije) who never faced any consequences for the atrocities they had committed. It is still unclear how many people died as a result of these atrocities as the KPJ followed the Soviet example and tried to attribute some of the crimes they committed to others.

Research Questions and Chapter Overview

This book has a combined chronological and thematic approach. The second part of the book focuses on the events that took place in late 1944 and 1945. The aim is to provide an overview of the mass crimes committed in that period revealing previously unknown details about the most significant ones and trying to answer four main questions:

1. How many people were killed in Yugoslavia during and immediately after the Second World War and how many of them fell victim to communist repression?
2. Which military units were the perpetrators?

³²Paul Hollander, Editor’s Introduction: The Distinctive Features of Repression in Communist States, in Paul Hollander (ed.), *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields, Personal Accounts of Communist Violence and Repression* (Wilmington, 2007), p. xxviii.

3. How did they carry out the executions?
4. Was the violence systematically organized and carried out under the command of the Yugoslav Army and the KPJ?

The first chapter tries to answer the first question and introduces the reader into the problem of researching demographic and war losses in the former Yugoslavia. The work of several commissions and offices that were conducting the research in the past is analysed in detail.

Political and military events from April 1941 until June 1944, are discussed in the second chapter, especially the relations between the KPJ and the Soviet Union, as well as those between the Chetniks and the British. Changes in British policy in 1943 had a significant impact on the events that took place in May 1945 when thousands of Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian and Montenegrin prisoners of war were handed over to the Partisans near the Austrian-Slovenian border.

The third chapter analyses the establishment, organization and tasks of the Yugoslav intelligence and counter-intelligence service during the Second World War. It particularly focuses on the role of OZNA and KNOJ, two crucial organizations in the period analysed in the fourth chapter of this book.

In chapters four and five, I will discuss war crimes committed in the last stage of war (September 1944 – April 1945) and in the first months after the end of the the war (May – August 1945). The main sources used in both chapters are archival documents found in the Croatian and Slovenian archives, as well as the National Archive in London.

In the sixth chapter, I will try to explain if there was any difference in the conduct of the members of the KPJ in the areas that were perceived as friendly and those regions that were seen as 'enemy regions'. I will focus on the districts Dugopolje-Solin and Imotski-Vrgorac. The research relies mostly on documents kept in the State Archive in Split and the Croatian State Archives in Zagreb.

CHAPTER ONE

CHALLENGES IN RESEARCHING DEMOGRAPHIC LOSSES AND COMMUNIST CRIMES IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA AND ITS SUCCESSOR STATES

1.1 The Problem of Numbers

Researching demographic losses of the former Yugoslavia in the Second World War has remained one of the most controversial topics in the modern history of the Balkans. Between 1944 and 1964 three Yugoslav commissions produced lists of war victims. However, these lists included only ‘victims of fascist terror’ and served a political purpose. The victim numbers were not accurate and the circumstances of their death were not made clear.

These manipulations started in 1942 when Communist propaganda exaggerated the number of German and Italian victims, trying to motivate people to join their forces. The starting point was the existence of the labour camp Jasenovac in the Independent State of Croatia (abbreviated NDH—*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*), founded in the summer of 1941, where, according to a Communist brochure published in late 1942, 300,000 prisoners were murdered.¹ KPJ had no access to the camp and its documentation, and the estimation of the number of victims was based purely on testimonies. Upon the decision of the Anti-fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (abbreviated AVNOJ—*Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*) from November 1943, the State

¹Jovan Mirković, ‘Jasenovački logor u memoarskim zapisima objavljenima do 1950. godine’, in Hans-Georg Fleck and Igor Graovac (eds), *Dijalog povjesničara—istoričara, Knjiga 7* (Zagreb, 2003), pp. 509–525. *Jasenovački logor—Iskazi zatočenika koji su pobjegli iz logora* (Propagandni otdjel Narodno-oslobodilačkog vijeća Jugoslavije, 1942).

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Commission for the Determination of Crimes Committed by Occupiers and their Collaborators was formed, but it focused only on investigating the crimes committed by the opposite side.

The Commission continued its work until 1946 and since then these results have been a starting point of all research on the war crimes committed by the different armies on Yugoslav territory during the Second World War. The Commission published a series of Reports backed-up by a larger number of documents, but these findings have not been questioned or at least double-checked.² Its work was affected by political and ideological reasons and there was a tendency to attribute as many victims as possible to other armies.

During the Second World War the Yugoslav territory was divided between Italy, Germany, Bulgaria and Hungary, and the armies of these countries collaborated with other national armies and authorities in that region. Most of them were in one way or another involved in the war crimes committed in the region.

According to data from the State Commission for the Determination of Crimes Committed by Occupiers and their Collaborators from 1945, 132,098 people were killed on the territory of Croatia, and including 68,410 who were murdered by Ustashe, 29,046 by Germans, 8,101 by Italians, 1,247 by Germans and Italians, and 1,729 by the Chetniks.³ Unofficial research was also conducted by SUBNOR in 1950 which calculated 155,954 war victims in Croatia.⁴ The collected data relied mostly on testimonies, particularly those given by the victims' relatives. Among the victims were 84,709 Serbs, 55,802 Croats, 6,002 Jews, and 5,341 Gypsies. 34,711 people died in the camps and 6,422 in jails. Most of them (46,377) were killed in action, and 44,221 died in 'another way'. According to the 1964 research, 194,749 people lost their lives in Croatia, including 97,731 Serbs, 72,819 Croats and 11,294 Jews. Among them were 61,833 Croats and Serbs who were killed as members of the Yugoslav Army.⁵

²First six Reports (Serbian: Saopštenja) were published in Belgrade in 1944, and those from number 7 to 53 in 1945. The last Reports (No. 66–93) were published in Belgrade in 1946.

³Hrvatski državni arhiv (Later: HDA), f. 306, Zemaljska komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača Hrvatske (Later: ZKRZ), ZKRZ GUZ, 2624/45.

⁴Mate Rupić, 'Popis žrtava Drugoga svjetskog rata u Hrvatskoj iz 1950. godine', in Hans-Georg Fleck and Igor Graovac (eds), *Dijalog povjesničara—istoričara, Knjiga 4* (Zagreb, 2001), pp. 539–545. SUBNOR (today: SAB—Savez antifašističkih boraca) was an association of the Second World War veterans, former members of the Yugoslav Army.

⁵Vladimir Geiger, 'Ljudski gubici Hrvatske u Drugom svjetskom ratu koje su prouzročili "okupatori i njihovi pomagači". Brojdbeni pokazatelji (procjene, izračuni, popisi)', *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, No. 3 (2011), p. 706.

When discussing the number of victims, it is important to remember that these numbers are related to the deaths in the former Socialist Republic of Croatia, and they exclude ‘enemies of the people’, including civilians killed by the Partisans. The territory of the NDH was significantly larger and it included Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Srijem, but did not include parts of Croatia that were under the control of Italian and Hungarian authorities, such as Istria, Kvarner, parts of Dalmatia, Baranja and Međimurje. Moreover, as I will explain using the case of Dugopolje in Chapter Six, previous research was superficial which led to more inaccuracies, and as a result, not all civilians killed by non-Yugoslav armies were listed.

The first Chetniks’ war crimes committed against the Croatian population started as early as in April 1941 in the Mostar area, Herzegovina, and they continued during the entire war, often with support provided by the Italian Army. This had an enormous impact on the Croatian population in Dalmatia where Dinara Chetniks’ Division, led by Momčilo Đujić, committed horrific crimes, such as those that occurred in the regions of Vrgorac and Omiš in 1942. The Muslim population, particularly in Eastern Bosnia, was also affected, especially in 1941 and 1942, as well as the Croatian population in Central Bosnia in 1942 and 1943.⁶ The main difference between the Chetniks’ crimes in Bosnia and Dalmatia was that they had different allies. On Bosnian territory by mid-1942, (and in some areas later as well), the Chetniks were not supported only by Italians, but also by the communist Partisans.⁷

German war crimes on Croatian and Bosnian territory were largely related to the persecution and deportation of Jews and other undesirable inhabitants of the NDH founded on the larger part of today’s Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to camps in Auschwitz and other concentration and death camps, and with the persecution and execution of civilians before, during and after the fighting. Occasionally, Germans also carried out their crimes in collaboration with the Chetniks, such as the one in Dolac Donji and the surrounding area where in March 1944, approximately

⁶Over 100,000 Muslims in Eastern Bosnia were killed by 1942. Alexander Korb, ‘Understanding Ustasha violence’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 12/1–2 (2010), p. 11. For further reading, see Zdravko Dizdar and Mihael Sobolovski, *Preučivani četnički zločini u Hrvatskoj i u Bosni i Hercegovini 1941–1945* (Zagreb, 1999).

⁷*Saopštenja br. 7–33 o zločinima okupatora i njihovih pomagača* (Beograd, 1945). See Reports No. 8, 10, 22, 23.

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1,500 Croatian civilians were killed.⁸ This event is remembered as one of the most horrific mass crimes committed against the Croatian population during the Second World War.

Although Italy capitulated in September 1943, its share in the crimes on the territory of the NDH was much higher than that of Germany. Croatian civilians in Istria, Rijeka and around Rijeka, the Croatian coast, Gorski Kotar, Lika, Dalmatia and Herzegovina, were particularly affected, such as those in the villages of Vrgorac region (Kozica, Dragljane, Rašćane) and Gata (Omiš) where the Chetniks and Italians killed hundreds of civilians in August and October 1942. Apart from mass killings, most of their crimes also included persecution and deportations of civilians to concentration camps. This was partially a result of the strategic importance of these areas, and partially a result of the support Italians provided to the Chetniks and so-called anti-communist militia, founded in 1942.⁹

The authorities of the NDH are often linked to different war crimes. However, and given that no objective research has been conducted so far, it is difficult to say how many people were killed. Korb highlights that 'empirical analyses of collective violence committed in Yugoslavia during the Second World War are still rare'.¹⁰ He claims that historians estimate that up to 600,000 people perished during the four years the Ustasha were in power; however, not all were killed by them.¹¹ Korb also argues that the questions where and why the Nazis encouraged the Ustasha to persecute their enemies, and where and why they blamed the Ustasha for their pursuit of violence, have not yet been analysed in depth. He states that there is no documentary evidence that a plan of total destruction of the Ustashes' enemies existed.¹² According to him, Axis interests played an important role in shaping Ustasha policies of violence which were radicalised by the German presence.¹³ It was also affected by other events such as counter violence committed by the Partisans or the Chetniks, as well as non-ethnic factors such as national independence being threatened both internally and externally, lack of food etc. This is why Korb believes that

⁸For further reading, see Stjepan Marković, *Stradanja podno Kamešnice* (Zagreb, 2012).

⁹*Saopštenja br. 1–6 o zločinima italijanskih i nemačkih okupatora* (Beograd, 1944). See Reports No. 1–4.

¹⁰Korb, 'Understanding Ustasha violence', p. 3.

¹¹Alexander Korb, 'Nation-building and mass violence: The Independent State of Croatia, 1941–45', in Jonathan C. Friedman (ed.), *The Routledge History of the Holocaust* (New York, 2011), p. 291.

¹²Korb, 'Understanding Ustasha violence', p. 5.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 6.

‘a viable analysis of Ustasha violence requires establishing whether particular instances of violence were related to the general campaign of mass murder or whether they occurred for different reasons altogether.’¹⁴

From the very beginning, the authorities of the NDH were expected to support the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. Firstly, the Jews were excluded from public services, and their businesses and property were confiscated. Soon after synagogues were damaged, all this was accompanied by the press and other media with pronounced anti-Jewish articles and speeches. In late June 1941, the movement of Jews was restricted by legal acts and they were forced to wear the Star of David on their clothing. In the summer of 1941, mass arrests of Jews in NDH began, especially in Zagreb. Most of them were sent to the Croatian camps in Gospić, Pag, Jastrebarsko, Loborgrad and Jasenovac. Mass arrests and deportations continued in 1942 and 1943. Although the persecution of Jews in NDH was severe, some of them managed to survive, escaping to parts of the NDH under Italian control or joining the Partisans, while some had been protected by the NDH authorities.¹⁵ Korb underlines that ‘German officials were dissatisfied by the Ustashes’ rather unsystematic persecution of Jews.’¹⁶ This explains increasing efforts to deport Croatia’s Jews to German death camps in Poland, which was done on a massive scale particularly in the summer of 1942. It is important to emphasize here that the persecution of Jews continued after the war. For example, the remains of the synagogue in Rijeka (Croatia) were destroyed by the communist regime, which also confiscated properties of those Jews who decided to move to Israel.

The major problem the authorities of the NDH faced was a large Serbian population that made over one third of the total population. Between the two world wars Serbs were privileged and their anti-Croatian orientation resulted in numerous persecutions of the Croats.¹⁷ Apart from the radicalization of the ‘Croat question’ since 1929 when King Alexander of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia abolished the Constitution and introduced his dictatorship, these persecutions were another reason why the Ustasha movement, which advocated an independent and sovereign Croatian state,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁵Dušan Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest* (Zagreb, 1999), pp. 117–118. Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008* (Zagreb, 2008), pp. 253–271. Hrvoje Matković, *Povijest Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* (Zagreb, 2002), pp. 175–188. Hrvoje Matković, *Povijest Jugoslavije* (Zagreb, 2003), p. 245.

¹⁶Korb, ‘Nation-building and mass violence’, p. 292.

¹⁷For further reading, see Bosiljka Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj 1918–1935* (Zagreb, 2002).

was founded.¹⁸ The less known fact is that in the first days of the Second World War, meaning before the NDH was founded, Serbian soldiers committed war crimes against Croatian citizens, particularly in the area of Bjelovar where at least 20 people were murdered between 8 and 10 April 1941.¹⁹ Ustashes' actions during the Second World War were to a considerable degree a reaction to the events that had taken place before the war broke out. The Ustaša movement targeted the symbols of Serbian identity prohibiting the use of the Cyrillic alphabet and banning the Serbian Orthodox Church. Instead the Croatian Orthodox Church was founded in 1942. The Serbian population mostly supported the enemies of the newly established Croatian state. The Ustaša movement responded with mass persecutions and deportations to German and Croatian concentration camps.²⁰ Among them was Jasenovac, a labour and transit camp where allegedly hundreds of thousands were executed.

The manipulation of the number of Jasenovac's victims started immediately after the end of the Second World War and it served as the most important part of exaggerating the number of war victims in general. On 26 May 1945, Tito suggested that 1,685,000 people were killed during the Second World War in Yugoslavia.²¹ However, it is not clear on what information this estimation was based as there had been no population census held after 1931 and the last battle of the Second World War in Yugoslavia took place on 27 or 28 May 1945 in the Bosnian town of Odžak.²² Nevertheless, Tito repeated the number in July 1945 when he stated that 'during the four years we have lost one million and seven hundred thousand of our citizens'.²³

Tito's statement needed scientific confirmation, but the prominent demographer and Professor Dolfe Vogelnik and his assistant Alojz Debevec refused this assignment since there was no new data on which they could base their calculation. Instead, they decided to pass the task on to Vladeta Vučković, at that time a mathematics student who was working at the Bureau of Statistics in Belgrade. He was given two weeks

¹⁸So-called the 6th January Dictatorship (Croatian: šestosiječanjska diktatura) was introduced on 6 January 1929.

¹⁹Ivan Gabelica, *Blaženi Alojzije Stepinac i hrvatska država* (Zagreb, 2008), pp. 302–303.

²⁰Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008*, pp. 263–264, 268–271.

²¹Barry M. Lituchy, *Jasenovac and the Holocaust in Yugoslavia* (New York, 2006), p. 3.

²²Stipo Pilić and Blanka Matković, 'Bitka za Odžak: Rat je završio dvadeset dana kasnije', *Bosna Franciscana*, No. 37 (2012), pp. 109–138.

²³Josip Broz Tito, *Govori i članci, Knjiga 1* (Zagreb, 1959), pp. 362–3.

to calculate the total figure of all victims with the instruction that the number 'must be impressive, but scientifically-statistically based'.²⁴ Furthermore, as Vučković emphasized, 'either out of ignorance or in order to deceive, the people of the regime turned demographic losses into actual victims, which were according to all scientific investigations slightly more than a million.'²⁵

That figure of one million people was supposed to include also those killed by Communist forces.²⁶ Nevertheless, not this number but the number of over 1,700,000 war victims was presented by the Yugoslav representative Edvard Kardelj at the Paris Peace Conference in 1946, the same year when the first official victims' list was prepared by the Commission for War Damage, and it remained the official number of war victims until the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

However, based on the number of Yugoslav war victims of one million, provided by the USA government in 1954, Germany refused to pay reparations for 1,700,000 victims.²⁷ Therefore, the Yugoslav authorities were forced to conduct new research to provide more accurate data. The list of victims was finally completed in 1964 (see Table 3 and Table 4), but the result was disappointing since the total number was indeed approximately one million, including 597,323 victims of the so-called 'fascist terror'. According to the same list, approximately 60,000 people died or were killed in the Croatian camps Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška, where, as the Yugoslav authorities had previously claimed, at least 700,000 people were murdered.²⁸

The first, but unofficial excavations in the Jasenovac area were conducted by the municipal committee of former members of the Yugoslav Army from Bosanska Dubica in 1961 at Gradina, near Jasenovac. They found three mass graves and identified 17 human skulls in one of them, but failed to specify the exact number of bones found in the other two. Based on this finding, they counted 120 more undiscovered graves and concluded that the number of victims in Gradina only should be 350,800.²⁹

²⁴Bogoljub Kočović, *Sabrana jednog mita. Žrtve Drugog svetskog rata u Jugoslaviji* (Beograd, 2005), pp. xxi–xxiv. Vladeta Vučković, 'Sahrana jednog mita', *Naša Reč*, No. 368 (1985).

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Paul Mayers and Arthur Campbell, *The Population of Yugoslavia* (Washington D.C., 1954), p. 23.

²⁸Entire list was published in: Meho Visočak and Bejdo Sobica, *Žrtve rata prema podacima Statističkog zavoda Jugoslavije* (Zurich—Sarajevo, 1998).

²⁹Željko Krušelj, 'Kako je Živanović 284 kostura pretvorio u 700.000 žrtava', *Vjesnik*, 23 April 2005.

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Table 3 War losses in Yugoslavia (1941–1945), according to the research in 1964.

Republic/region	Lost lives	Victims according to nationality	Lost lives
Croatia	194,749	Serbs	346,740
Bosnia and Herzegovina	177,045	Croatians	83,257
Serbia, proper	97,728	Jews	45,000
Vojvodina	41,370	Slovenes	42,027
Slovenia	40,791	Muslims	32,300
Macedonia	19,076	Montenegrin	16,276
Montenegro	16,903	Macedonians	6,724
Kosovo	7,927	Albanians	3,241
Unknown	1,744	Others	4,526
Yugoslavia	597,323	Unknown	16,202

Source: Vladimir Žerjavić, *Opsesije i megalomanije oko Jasenovca i Bleiburga* (Zagreb, 1992), p. 35.

Table 4 Deaths in camps, according to the research in 1964.

Camps on Yugoslav territory	89,851
Camps in the Third Reich	24,752
Camps in other countries	19,861
Total	134,464

Source: Vladimir Geiger, 'Brojodbeni pokazatelji o žrtvama logora Jasenovac, 1941–1945', *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, No. 2 (2013), pp. 211–242.

Official forensic investigations, conducted in 1964 in Jasenovac, were supposed to prove huge numbers of victims at Jasenovac, and Yugoslav war victims in general, but were interrupted. After investigating 130 locations, only seven mass graves which held a total of 284 human remains had been found. However, it is important to emphasize that the report, signed by Dr. Alojz Šercelj, stated that 'a large amount of objects shows that the victims were brought directly to the bridge where the executions took place and they were not previously being held in the camp. On this he is particularly keen to indicate the presence of knives, rings, coins, etc.'³⁰ Therefore, the remains found did not belong to the prisoners from Jasenovac camp, but most likely to refugees, possibly Croatian soldiers and civilians who, fearing for their lives, fled the country in May 1945, but were surrendered to the Yugoslav Army by the Allies. The available data and the testimonies

³⁰HDA, f. 1241, Republički odbor Saveza udruženja boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata Hrvatske, kut.174, Izvještaj antropologa.