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FATHOMLESS PITS - PLACES OF MASS EXECUTION IN THE COMPLEX OF JADOVNO USTASHA CAMPS

Jadovno camp and multiple fathomless pits are the places witnessing the biggest crime against humanity and international law, the law against newborn babies, grandparents, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, whose screams of horror resounded helplessly from fathomless pits of Velebit (t/n: *the largest though not the highest mountain range in Croatia*) and in places of mass execution on Pag (t/n: *a Croatian island in the northern Adriatic Sea*).

The Ustasha camp in Velebit – Jadovno is a symbolic place, a place of death, horror, fright, screams and painful memories.

This was one of the first beastliest and most brutal concentration camps - places of mass murder in Europe.

The Croatian Ustasha camp of Jadovno was a forerunner of the Jasenovac camp, an Ustasha factory of death, the largest complex of camps for extermination of ethnic Serbs, Jews, Roma and anti-fascist Croats and other peoples in Yugoslavia in the period 1941-1945.

However, Jadovno is a place about which no complete literary or scientific work has been published for more than 68 years. The truth about this complex of Croatian Ustasha death camps was carried away into fathomless pits and abysses by its inmates, whose voices of horror helplessly resounded

for days across rugged Velebit, places of execution on Pag and in the waves of the Adriatic Sea.

The majority of people know something about Jasenovac death camp, which existed for four years; they also know of Auschwitz and Treblinka, whose gas chambers were put into operation on 4th July, where the Nazi “industry of murdering” was started on 23rd July 1942. However, very little is known about the complex of Croatian Ustasha death camps of Jadovno, which existed for less than four months, from 11th April to 25th August 1941.

The camps in Velebit and on Pag were started earlier than the majority of death camps in Germany. The Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), led by Ante Pavelić, was more effective at racial persecution than Nazi Germany.

As soon as he came to power, with the help from Germans and Italians, Pavelić did everything to create the pure Catholic state of Croatia through the extermination of the Serb and Jewish population. Unlike his Nazi masters, in order to commit mass murders in Velebit, the Ustashes did not spend money or build death factories with gas chambers for poisoning their victims; they simply used the natural pits. They would bring tied men, women and children over the pits, hit them with mallets or stab them with knives - mostly several of those helpless who were the first in line so as to pull down the others who, according to the slaughterers themselves, would precipitate into the darkness of the pit. Others were killed over pits they had had to dig themselves or were pushed into the sea, a stone tied to their neck.

Ustashes found a great joy in the sadistic torturing of their victims - the raping of women and little girls in front of their grandmothers, grandfathers and husbands, afterwards throwing their victims still alive and covered in blood into the fathomless pits. If Auschwitz is said to have been a death factory, in the Jadovno complex of mass killing fields death was dealt manually, as if on a “production line”.

In the places of mass murder in Jadovno and on Pag, Maks Luburić set the foundations of the Jasenovac hell, becoming the head of all Pavelić's camps in the NDH.

There are no words to describe the agony of victims in the Jadovno complex of Croatian Ustasha-Home Guard camps. It surpasses the human fantasy. In

1941, Jadovno complex consisted of the following collection camps: The building of District Court Prison, its corridors and courtyards in Gospić, „Ovčara” camp¹ near Gospić, Stupaničevo near Baške Oštarije, camps near Risova Glava in Velebit, the extermination camps Slana and Metajna on the island of Pag, the collection camps in Gospić railway station, the extermination camp in Čačić Dolac, Jadovno in Velebit and 32 fathomless pits which I discovered by searching through original documents and walking across Velebit crags and its surroundings for years to describe them in detail.²

The camps in Gospić were collection and transit camps, which started as early as April 1941, much before 2nd June, when Ante Pavelić issued an official order for the establishment of the camps.

Jadovno camp was situated 22 kilometres north-west from Gospić, deep in a dense forest of the Velebit mountain range, at 1200 metres above sea level, with very cold nights and hot and dry days. The inmates were kept outdoors, unsheltered. Far away from civilisation, deep in the unsettled remote area of Velebit.

Guarded by Ustashas and Home Guard, the inmates had to put up a four-metre high, 50 x 25-metre barbed wire fence around the camp in May 1941. The camp expanded over time until 24th July, when it got its final shape of 188 x 90 metres in area, so that day was taken as the official date of the establishment of one of first places of mass execution in the Independent State of Croatia in 1941.³

¹ „Ovčara“: The barns of a Serb merchant named Matija Maksimović, who, apart from a printing house, library and reading room in Gospić near Novčica River, owned three big barns where he kept sheep, cows and several horses used to provide services for other merchants. As early as May 1941, Ustashas plundered his estate, murdering him and several members of his family in a cruel way. The Ustashas turned the barns into a collection camp for Jews and Serbs, named "Ovčara" by the inmates themselves.

² For more information see: Dr Đuro Zatezalo *Jadovno – Kompleks ustaških logora 1941*, knjiga I, Muzej žrtava genocida, Beograd, 2007, pp. 169.189.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 112 - 125

The first fathomless pit, 1,880 metres away from a small Croatia village Jadovno, which the camp in Velebit was named after, was Šaranova pit.⁴

The aforesaid Ustasha camps were formed by the NDH state bodies with the aid of a part of the Catholic clergy. They were established by the NDH Ministry of Interior, led by Andrija Artuković, Eugen Kvaternik, Chief of the Ustasha Internal Security Service, Juco Rukavina, an Ustasha colonel, emigrant Jurica Frković, the Great District Prefect of Lika and Gacko, Stjepan Rubinić, Chief of the Ustasha police in Gospić, Rudo Rico and Dragutin Pudić Paraliza. The camp chief was a notorious Ustasha, teacher Rude Ric.⁵

The camp was secured by 200 Ustashas and 50 Croatian Home Guard soldiers, some of which were in fezzes (t/n: *The Croatian Home Guard, “Domobrani”, was part of the armed forces of the Independent State of Croatia which existed during World War II*).

Jadovno camp was under the direct command of the Ustasha Police Battalion in Gospić, commanded by major Stjepan Rubinić.⁶ The battalion included a special unit, whose members' task was to take Serbs and Jews from the camp to the nearby places of execution and pits and kill them there. They were commanded by four Ustasha officers who were in charge of Ustashas and Home Guards who kept guard around Jadovno camp. The Gospić prison warden was the notorious Ustasha Milan Staračeh, who had absolute authority in the whole prison.

Ante Pavelić, accompanied by about 250 Ustasha emigrants, arrived in Ogulin on 13th April 1941. They were escorted by a group of Italian officers and sitting beside him in the car was an Italian general. Ustashas, led by parish priest Ivan Mikan and lawyer Lovro Sušić, gave Pavelić ceremonial

⁴ Until 1939, the pit was called Vodena jama (Water pit). The pit changed its name into Šaranova pit after a young man named Bubaš, whose parents were nicknamed Šaran, had lost his life after an unsuccessful attempt to jump over it.

⁵ The Ustasha 40-year-old First Lieutenant, well knew the territory of Lika and Krbava, which he used in arresting and murdering Serbs. He was a great supporter of the Yugoslavian idea, thus skilfully hiding his hatred towards the Serbs; Historijski arhiv Karlovac (HAK), Zbornik 20, 1989, pp. 148, 155, 189, 191, 202, 205, 798, 800, 806, 816.

⁶ Dr Đuro Zatezalo, pp. 112-113.

welcome in Ogulin. In his impassioned speech, priest Ivan Mikan called for “cleansing” all non-Croats, while Pavelić, in his speech to a crowd of locals, publicly announced terror and carnage as well as absolute obedience to their fascist masters. He exclaimed the Ustasha slaughterers' slogan “Bježe psine preko Drine!” (“Serbian bastards are fleeing across Drina River!”), which only a month later the Ustasha government vice-president (“doglavnik”) Mile Budak, in his speech in Karlovac, turned into the horrible slogan “Srbe na vrbe!” (“Hang Serbs from the willow trees!”)

As early as 10th April 1941, five days before the arrival of poglavnik Ante Pavelić in Zagreb, Vlatko Maček (t/n: *a Croatian politician active within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the first half of the 20th century*) issued a proclamation in which he invited his numerous supporters and all Croats to support the new Croatian government.

The same support to the new Ustasha government was given by the high-ranking Catholic clergy such as archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, Sarajevo archbishop Šarić and many others, all with the blessing by the Holy See and notorious fascist Pope Pius XII. As early as 11th April 1941, archbishop Stepinac visited Dr Milovan Žanić, the Ministry of Interior, on his own behalf and on behalf of the Catholic Church.⁷

On Holy Saturday, he made a return visit to the NDH military commander, general Slavko Kvaternik, who, on behalf of poglavnik Ante Pavelić, proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia in 10th April 1941 and congratulated Pavelić on the establishment of the NDH, which also meant establishing a close cooperation between the Ustasha regime and the highest representative of the Catholic Church in the NDH.

In Ustasha press, the visit was given a special attention by Alojzije Stepinac, which he paid to Ante Pavelić on 16th April 1941, three days after his arrival in Zagreb, as well as a ceremony he hosted in his palace for Ustasha emigrant officers. Thus Stepinac showed the course of himself and the Catholic Church during the period of Ustasha regime.⁸

⁷ Hrvatski narod, 14th April 1941.

⁸ See photo in: *Dokumenti o protunarodnom radu*, 156; Viktor Novak: *Magnum Crimen*, p. 544

After that, cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, in his circular of 28th April 1941, saluted the Independent State of Croatia as the “son of Croats” and “representative of the Holy Church” and appealed to the Catholic clergy for “sublime devotedness to protection and improvement of the NDH”.⁹ What ensued were hate speech and calls for ethnic cleansing of Serbs and Jews by Ustasha ministers, certain bishops, parish priests etc. instituted in genocidal laws, orders and provisions.¹⁰

The first day of the establishment of the NDH they clearly showed that ethnic Serbs and Jews would be treated in atrocious manner. They were considered outlaws.

Regardless of their age, the Jews had to wear the “Jewish mark Ž” (t/n: “Ž” stands for *Židovi*, Croatian term for “Jews”). The Serbs had to wear a blue ribbon around the arm with capitalised letter “P”, which, besides political, also was the religious mark (t/n: “P” stands for “pravoslavac”, which means “Orthodox”). They had to convert to Catholicism, “the faith of forefathers” and become Croats or vanish from the NDH by expulsion to Serbia or murdering.

On 3rd May 1941, the Religious Conversion Law was passed, which was signed by the Minister of Education and Faith, Mile Budak, m.p.¹¹

After that, the Instruction for Conversion was issued.¹²

Religious conversion of Serbs was the common goal of Croatian bishops and the NDH authorities. It was conducted by the Council of Three, led by cardinal Alojzije Stepinac and the Working Committee for Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in agreement with the Ministry of Education and Faith.¹³

Ustashes gathered Serbs in various ways – by summoning them to certain places to receive new documents or telling them that Catholic priests would

⁹ Dr Đuro Zatezalo, *ibid.* p. 44; Cvitković Ivan, *Ko je bio Alojzije Stepinac*, Sarajevo, 1966. 73 – 87; Viktor Novak, *ibid.* Jelić Butić Fikreta, Zagreb 1977, p. 59

¹⁰ „*Katolički list*“ 1941. No. 17, 197, 198.

¹¹ *Narodne novine*, 27th May 1941.

¹² Uputstvo o prelaženju iz jedne vjere u drugu, Ministarstvo bogoštovlja i nastave, br. 178, Zagreb, 27th May 1941.

¹³ Viktor Novak, *ibid.* p. 16.

come to convert them to Catholicism, so that they could live and work in peace as Croats. In many places, the Ustashas succeeded in assembling even several hundreds of Serbs. However, instead of the priests, Ustashas would come in trucks, surround the Serbs, tie them and take them to death. The conversion campaign was an easy way for Ustashas to gather as many Serbs as possible so that they could arrest and murder them instantly or take them to Orthodox churches and slaughter them bestially.¹⁴

The genocide in NDH was committed in public places through sadistic torturing: in Serbian Orthodox churches, schools, houses, gardens, fields, forests, places of mass executions, fathomless pits etc. Since 11th April 1941, Serbs, Jews and anti-fascists had been brought to Jadovno complex of Ustasha camps, before any kind of resistance to the NDH even started. That represented the beginning of meticulously planned and committed crime of genocide against the Serbs and holocaust against the Jews.

From mid-May to 18th August 1941, trains would arrive to Gospić railway station on a daily basis, consisting of stock cars carrying 250 - 370 Serbs and Jews tortured by thirst, starvation and beating, whom Ustashas and Home Guard captured across the NDH at home, in towns, villages, workplaces, churches, fields etc. Wherever they would find them, day and night. They sent them to collection camps in Gospić every day. When the camps were full of inmates, the Ustasha criminals would herd them, tied in twos and all together by a longitudinal chain, to Jadovno death camp in Velebit and the camps on the island of Pag.

They would often transport the inmates in trucks or herd them on foot only to the nearest pits by the road to execute them by blunt objects or to throw the tortured prisoners into fathomless pits, without getting to the aforesaid camps and many pits inside them. The inmates who were not killed in the pits by the road would be further tortured – starved, thirsty and cursed by the Ustashas who beat them with stakes and gun stocks or stabbed with knives all the way to the camps in Velebit or Pag, where they would be finished off after brutal torturing to a great joy of the Ustasha butchers.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dr Đuro Zatezalo, *ibid.* p. 298.

Since the first day of its establishment on 10th April 1941, the Ustasha, quisling and clerical-fascist creation of NDH carried out the previously devised plan of genocide against the Serbian and Jewish people consistently and comprehensively on a daily basis, with the aim of their complete extermination in Croatia.

Jadovno camp in Velebit, with its subcamps and fathomless pits, was the first mass execution camp in the NDH. The Ustasha regime systematically tortured innocent people in indescribable ways.

Ustashas were notorious for incomprehensible and unimaginable cruelties, unprecedented in the modern human history. It is easy to conclude that Ustashas, in their sadism and cruelty, overdid Nazis in holocaust and the Young Turks in the genocide against Armenians.¹⁶

German Nazis and Italian fascists were also appalled with the beastliness of the Ustasha atrocities. They were disgusted at the Ustasha blood-thirstiness. They had the reason to be, as there were no similar crimes in whole Europe during the Second World War. The German head of defence in Zagreb, general Artur Heffner, informed Berlin on 24th April 1942 of horrible atrocities against the Serbs, who had lived there for centuries, and plundering of their property. In his letter he said that he could not understand that the carrier of the Ustasha crimes are also a large number of Catholic clergy. He quotes the Sarajevo archbishop Sorić, who wrote the following in a Catholic newspaper on 11th May 1941: "I visited our Ustashas in North America. I sang our Ustasha hymns from the bottom of my heart and with tears in my eyes. We have always been loyal and devoted to the fatherland of Croats! More Catholics! God and Croats!" - he exclaimed, declaring himself as an Ustasha. Heffner mentions Franciscan Francetić, who ordered a primary school teacher to separate Serbian children from the others for Ustashas to kill them in front of their teacher and school mates.¹⁷

¹⁶ Addressing Ustashas, poglavnik Ante Pavelić would often say: "A good Ustasha is the one who can use a knife and take a Serbian child out of the mother's womb."

¹⁷ Saint Ante Herald, No. 7 - 8 pp. 88,81,1941.

The same general mentions some other Catholic priests with atrocious intentions and instructions as to how to ethnically cleanse the Independent State of Croatia from Serbs, Jews and Roma.

The German historian Walter Gerlock says: “Unfortunately, one of the first measures taken by the Catholic Ustasha regime was the horrifying military campaign of extermination aimed against the Greek-Orthodox population.”¹⁸

Colonel Giuseppe Angelini, commander of a regiment of the 13th Infantry Division “Re” [English: King], says in his memoirs: “Thousands of Serbs have been blinded and brutally tortured, and whole families have been massacred regardless of the sex or age whatsoever. The organisers and executors would often celebrate the carnage, eating and drinking cheerfully. One example is the Ustasha celebration in August 1941, when they celebrated the murdering of Gospić secondary school principal's son, who was their thousandth victim.”¹⁹

Similar accounts were recorded by many other Italian and German soldiers and officers during or after the war. The Germans and Italians alone were stupefied by the atrocities of Croatian soldiers under the command of the NDH leader, Ante Pavelić.

All members of the Axis alliance and their satellite states had death camps where innocent people lost their lives. However, the camps founded and organised by the NDH in the period 1941-1945, in their monstrosity and inhuman drive for extermination of the Serbian, Jewish and Roma inmates, surpass the animal cruelty of extermination in the Third Reich death camps.

Based on many years of field research and numerous original archive material of different provenance, I came to the conclusion that, in this Ustasha death camp complex, which did not exist for long (11th April - 21st August 1941), Ustashes interned 42,246 Serbs, Jews and anti-fascist Croats from the whole NDH, out of which they executed 40,123 in just 132 days of the camp existence.

Due to the Italian re-occupation of the Croatian Littoral and Lika province, which begun on 15th August caused by the uprising in the provinces of Lika,

¹⁸ Marco Aurelio Rivelli, *The Archbishop of Genocide*, Jasen, Nikšić, p. 121.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Kordun, Banija and Kninska Krajina, Ustashas, concerned about the reaction of the Italians, instantly liquidated the camps Jadovno, Slana and Metajna. In Jadovno camp alone, the Ustashas quickly executed 763 inmates, 256 of which over the pit which was only 40 metres away from the camp fence. Hurriedly, before the Italians came, the Ustashas packed the remaining 2,123 inmates from the camp on the island of Pag and other camps onto the same railway stock cars on which they had been brought to the camps and transported them to the Ustasha camp Jastrebarsko near Zagreb on 19th, 20th and 21st August. In the last transport, on 21st August, there were 900 Serbs who were transported the same day from Jastrebarsko camp to Jasenovac camp. The remaining inmates brought from Gospić were transported in a few following days to the camps in Kruščica, Lepoglava, Jasenovac and some other camps. The Ustashas executed 200 inmates in Jastrebarsko camp.

Out of 40,123 executed inmates in the complex of camps in Gospić, Jadovno and Pag, there were 38,010 Serbs, 1,988 Jews, 88 Croats, 11 Slovenes, 9 Muslims, two Czechs, two Hungarians, one Russian, one Roma and one Montenegrin.

The aforesaid data show that the Ustashas in Jadovno executed the average of 304 inmates per day, almost the same number of inmates transported from Gospić.²⁰

For the last 68 years, the truth about the places of execution in Jadovno camp in Velebit have remained undiscovered and without a written record. The tendency was for the evidences to be destroyed of atrocities committed by Croatian soldiers, Ustashas and Croatian Home Guard in a planned and organised way against the Serbs and Jews. The crime was to be hushed up and forgotten over time. All of that was being done under the slogan of “brotherhood and unity” of the peoples of Yugoslavia. Ustashas were destroying the traces of their crimes even during the war, as well as at the time they were committed and afterwards. The truth about the cruelty of Ustasha crimes was carried away into fathomless pits and abysses by the victims, whose voices of horror helplessly resounded for days from the pits of rugged Velebit, places of execution on Pag and in the waves of the Adriatic Sea.

²⁰ Dr Đuro Zatezalo, *ibid.* pp. 382 - 384

They have not been exhumed, counted or decently buried yet. It was said that "it should not be done for the benefit of brotherhood and unity, so may their bones rest in peace where they are."²¹ It is not time for that yet, it takes 50 years to wait so that the feelings of the people Ustasha belonged to would not be hurt. All that evil should be put aside until some better time. The horrible Ustasha atrocities should not be investigated, recorded or published. Why recording mass graves and places of execution or discover fathomless pits and exhume the victims? This period will remain in memory forever for the evil plan to exterminate a whole nation.

Many things were kept secret. Instead, all crimes committed in the Second World War in the period 1941-1945 should be thoroughly investigated and publicly presented by experts for our posterity to know about the human evil so that such atrocities never happen to anybody again.

And thus, a new evil sprang from the old one, having been hushed up.

The year of 1991 came. The Serbs in Croatia were deprived of their status of constitutive and nation-building ethnic group in their home land. The Serbs were transformed into a national minority and, out of 12.16 of the total population of the Socialist Republic of Croatia, according to the 1991 census, the Serbs were reduced to the mere 4.54 of the total population of Republic of Croatia according to the 2001 census.

Serbian places in Croatia have almost totally disappeared. Their inhabitants have been expelled from their centuries-old hearths. Their houses and estates have been plundered and mostly burnt or inhabited by Croats, not only by refugees but also those from towns and places in Croatia unaffected by the conflict. Humble monuments erected in memory of the victims of Ustasha regime have been destroyed. Thus, their names disappeared - they have been killed for the second time. The names of streets, places, schools and institutions have been changed.

²¹ Of all fathomless pits and places of execution in Kordun, Banija, Lika and parts of Gorski kotar, I have recorded 337. The majority of them have still remained unknown. Almost all places of the legalised Ustasha crime are unmarked and inaccessible. Dr Đuro Zatezalo: „Radio sam svoj seljački i kovački posao“ – Svjedočanstva genocida – Srpsko kulturno društvo „Prosvjeta“, Zagreb, 2005. pp. 332 - 357.

For example, the Memorial Centre, together with commemorative plaques with the names of victims, was built in the place where the Serbian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of the Holy Mother (built in 1826) was in Glina, where Ustashas and Home Guard slaughtered 1,564 Serbs in late July and early August of 1941. On 25th, 26th and 27th September 1995, the plaques were shattered and removed, while the Memorial Centre was renamed into the Croatian Centre.

Today's picture of the complex of Ustasha death camps in Jadovno, both in Velebit and the island of Pag, is more than outrageous. Contemporary negators of the truth falsify even their own biographies, while the effort to reveal the truth and provide evidences has been made totally impossible.

Nevertheless, the indestructible and unchanged womb of the fathomless pits and places of massacre has remained together with the mortal remains of countless victims. They still have not been exhumed, counted or given a decent burial.

Karlovac

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