

HOW THE USTASHA REGIME EXPLOITED PREJUDICES AND STEREOTYPES ABOUT JEWS IN CREATING THE MYTH ABOUT ENEMY

In examining the role of political myths in the Independent state of Croatia (NDH) propaganda, I will explore one political myth that aroused from pre-existing images and stereotypes about Jews in Croat lands that lie at the heart of NDH propaganda: The Myth about the Enemy. That myth was instrumental in providing “moral” justification for genocide and military violence against Jews throughout NDH history and is important for understanding how propaganda was successful in the recruitment of soldiers in the Ustasha movement, as well as for understanding war and genocidal rhetoric. I will discuss how official-level rhetoric has tailored that myth in order to provide significance for political circumstances and legitimize mass violence against Jews.

Key words: propaganda, political myth, stereotypes, prejudice, Jews, Ustasha.

Introduction. The Myth about Enemy has an effect on our perceptions of war and genocide in the 20th century. Also it has an influence on the extent to which such perceptions redefined our views of victimhood and identity. So, that myth can be viewed as among the most crucial issues of 20th century. This is a vast topic, and I do not presume to cover it all. I will focus on one issue: Croat self-perceptions and attitudes toward Jews, from the end of 19th century till the end of World War II. Unfortunately, this relationship has been crucial in defining national and individual identities of Croats and Jews, it has retained a persistently pernicious potential that has often led to repression, violence, and mass killing, rather than understanding and reconciliation.

First it should be known that, in the 19th and 20th century, among the most distinct features of the new nations and new nation states were the eradication of inner resistance to its claim to sovereignty and control and the ceaseless striving to expand either its proper borders or its overseas empire. These in turn tended to create a mechanism of self-definition and legitimization based on two mutually dependent conceptual and material

requirements, namely, the need to define enemies and the urge to make victims, even if the intensity and severity of its application depended on specific circumstances in each individual nation and state. From the nation's point of view, those seen as belonging to it had to be integrated, either willingly or by coercion, whereas those seen as not belonging to it had to be excluded or eliminated, no matter whether they wished to belong to it or not [1; 2]. In the course of this process, some ethnic, religious, or linguistically distinct minorities within these large entities retained an especially ambiguous status, like Jews. This process brought a profound transformation of the age-old anti-Jewish prejudices of Christian Europe into modern political and racial anti-Semitism.

It should be known that, the term “anti-Semitism”, as a form of prejudices, hatred or discrimination, is a hostile disposition toward Jews based on different traditional narratives (Greco-Roman, Christian, Muslim) which includes hatred as a (political, religious, economic, cultural and/or social) threat, and usually elaborates in religious, racial and nationalist terms, by, mostly, political and intellectual forces of extrinsic or intrinsic reasons [3]. The nationalist politically – oriented type of anti-Semitic narrative doctrine arose after the French and Industrial Revolutions which produced political, social, cultural, religious and racial problems. In those countries such as Croatia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the upheavals of modernization passed with raising major Jewish issues, the Jews became a salient element in the popular perception of critical problem in the national liberation struggle. Croat nationalists found that the anti-Semitic catchwords, grounded in nationalist narrative that spread prejudices and stereotypes, came easily to their tongue and that they were highly effective in the propaganda for their major objectives. In that sense, nationalists rooted anti-Semitism in their mythmaking strategy, by teaching and interpreting the past and present in Croatia with stories of Croatians martyrdom and injustice, where the Jews were seen as the enemy and the reason Croats suffered most of the time. With the Jews portrayed as the Croat enemy, nationalists supported the myth making process which marked Croats not only as victims but also as the honest, dissent, and hard working people in contrast with their enemies – the Jews – who were seen as immoral persons, robbers and traitors of the Croat national interests.

In a way, the anti-Semitic myth making process became a powerful weapon of the Croatian political elites, which through direct political control or through an indirect influence on the means of communication attempted to impose on all other parts of society their particular view of the position that Jews have in world history as the only possible view.

In terms of examining the role of prejudices about Jews while creating the Myth of the Enemy in the Independent state of Croatia (NDH) propaganda, I will explore the position of the Jews in the Myth about the Enemy, among Croat nationalist politicians from the end of the 19th century until the end of World War II. Following Joanne Esch's article [4] I will identify the words which serve as lexical triggers for that political myth. Through their connotative and denotative meanings, these words suggest who the victims were and who the perpetrators were. Each lexical trigger carries an opposite cognitive association: enemy (ies)/friend(s), innocent/guilty, and evil/good. Each of these pairs has a normatively positive word and a normatively negative opposite. When used as lexical triggers, the positive word is linked in the text, either implicitly or explicitly, with “Us” (Croats), and the negative with “Them” (Jews). These words became lexical triggers in this way, and supported the creation of The Myth about the Enemy, because their mimics used the binary framework to which the myth owes its intuitive appeal [5].

So, now, we can ask ourselves, why this topic is so important. First, because we have to know that, during the nineties, Croatian desire for statehood same as Croatian longing for sovereignty were rooted in a problematic historical memory of the earlier NDH that existed during the World War II. It should be known that NDH carried out numerous atrocities against non-Croats and other political enemies, including systematic extermination of Jews. Second, at the beginning in the nineties and continuing to the present day, Croatia commemorates pivotal and traumatic World War II events (most notably, concentration camp Jasenovac where Ustasha militia exterminated between 80 000 and 100 000 Jews, Serbs, Roma and communist activists and the site of communist execution of Ustasha militiamen – Bleiburg) where the second is used to promote contemporary interpretations of Croat nationalists in attention to portray innocent victim image of Ustasha militiamen. Third, teaching of the past in Croatia in that direction support rehabilitation of Croatia's dark past – notably the Ustasha movement and crimes committed against Jews, Serbs and Roma. Even at the beginning of 21 century, some Croatian historians and writers still portray a remarkably benign image of the Ustasha. Their crimes are noted but are said to have been committed strictly under German orders – they were not the authentic policies of homegrown fascists. And finally, fourth, even today some people in the country of 4.5 million still tend to diminish the crimes committed by their compatriots in the World War II, and Croatia is still faced with glorifying the NDH, condemning Jews for the world conspiracy, and with fact that Jewish community still received letters denying Holocaust, and calling for destruction of Jews [6].

In accordance to diminished such myths, the following sections investigate one long standing Ustasha regime political myth – Myth about Enemy - and examine how it has been adapted to provide significance for the political circumstances after the NDH was founded on 10 April 1941 and how it has been accessed in official rhetoric so as to legitimize policies of the genocide. But first, in the next chapter, it is important to shed a light on prejudices and stereotypes about Jews that gave a solid ground for creating the Myth about Enemy in Ustasha ideology.

The Origin and Development of anti-Semitism among Croatian Politicians. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 created the Dual Monarchy. Under the Compromise, Austria and Hungary each had separate [parliaments](#) that passed and maintained separate laws. The "common monarchy" consisted of the emperor-king and the common ministers of foreign affairs, defense and finance in Vienna. The Compromise confirmed Croatia-Slavonia's historic, eight-century-old relationship with Hungary and perpetuated the division of the Croat lands, for both [Dalmatia](#) and [Istria](#) remained under Austrian administration. At Franz Joseph's insistence, Hungary and Croatia reached the [Compromise](#) (or *Nagodba*) in 1868, giving the Croats a special status in Hungary. The agreement granted the Croats autonomy over their internal affairs. Although the *Nagodba* provided a measure of political autonomy to Croatia-Slavonia, it was subordinated politically and economically to Hungary.

With the arrival of the Jews in the north of Croatia at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, anti-Semitism also “arrived” in the Croatian land. It was seeded among Croats in the first place based on religious foundations using old hostility between Judaism and Christianity, but also hostility against Jewish merchant competition and xenophobia towards Jews as newcomers and strangers [7]. As Croatia was at that time in a difficult economic situation and Jewish financial wealth was dominant in regard to the Croatian, the young Croatian bourgeoisie saw the Jews as an obstacle for their own development [8]. Taking into account that fact, anti-Jewish protests were organized in Zagreb in 1838 and 1839 followed by demolitions of windows in Jewish shops and 10 years later in some Croatian cities requests for the deportation of Jews were reported.

Antisemitism was being expressed by Croatian politicians. At the beginning of the 20th century Jews were mainly targeted by some Croat politicians for socio-economic reasons. Because the Jewish life was concentrated in the towns and cities and because they were seen as wealthy people who had power in their hands but also supporters of the Hungarian authorities, in the early twentieth century, the Croat Peasant Party leaders, Stjepan and Antun Radić began to view the Jews as aliens to the Croatian peasant national culture.

It should be kept in mind that the Jewish communities in the Kingdom of Croatia and Slavonia tried to become part of the community they lived in, to assimilate and not to isolate themselves. From the beginning they experienced language barriers due to the fact that the Jews spoke the Croatian language the least. Although one part of the Jews accepted the Croat nationality, they still were not considered by the greater part of the public as „genuine“ members of the Croatian population. Due to the fact that a big part of the Jews didn't receive approval neither from the government or the public, they returned to their roots and hence strengthened the Zionist movement.

In some cases Croatian and Serbian nationalism collaborated and together expressed anti-Semitism. Similar prejudices and stereotypes at the expense of the Jews existed in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia) between two World Wars. That State had about 70,000 Jews, of whom about 60 percent were Ashkenazim and 40 percent Sephardim and most of them, lived in towns. The Jewish population of interwar Croatia consisted of somewhere between 36,000 to 39,000 people, concentrated in several northern towns and cities, above all Zagreb. Apart from the long established Sephardic communities found in Dalmatian ports (Split, Dubrovnik), the Jewish minority had a fairly recent history of settlement in Croatia [9]. During that period Jews born outside the newly created Kingdom, especially those from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, found obstacles put in the way of achieving citizenship; the Yugoslav authorities wanted to banish them altogether. Only intercession by Jewish organizations within Yugoslavia stopped the expulsion. However, by this time, many Jews had already suffered irreparable economic harm. Relative peace was during the twenties but in the early 1930s, under the influence of the Nazi propaganda, the new disturbances started till the end of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Even when prejudices and stereotypes about Jews were relatively weak during the 1920's, it was always an issue whether Jews were considered equal in everyday life, whether they were able to achieve the same professional goals with the same education, and so on. In the 1920s there were anti-Semitic incidents in every major Yugoslav town, including Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Ljubljana. Often used as a tool in internal political strife, Jews were accused of disloyalty to the new state and of economically exploiting the Croats and Serbs. Some incidents were indirectly encouraged by the authorities, some were the work of journalists, and some took place in the street. The attacks were motivated by religious and national intolerance, xenophobia or

fear of business competition. The Jews were accused of treason, of insufficiently expressing patriotism and of getting rich in devious ways.

The stereotype about Jew-communists appeared on the territory of the Kingdom of SCS after communists in former Tzar Russia came to power. Newly formed „bolshevich danger“ became a political myth about the enemy with which voters across Europe and in the Kingdom of SCS were frightened with. In this scope the idea that Jews made up Bolshevism and that they were behind the labour movement manifested, which made one of the strongest perceptions about the enemy both in Europe and on the territory of the Kingdom of SCS. In that perception the „enemy“ meant Jew capitalist, a stranger and person of different faith, as well as a Jew communist.

Therefore it is no surprise that the anti-Semitic attacks and outbursts of hatred continued for the duration of the new state, the Kingdom of SCS. In that sense, there were attacks on Jews on the whole territory of the new state and the reasons always depended on the anti-Semitic tradition of the particular areas. During the twenties, there were two pronouncedly anti-Semitic newspapers which were being published. In Croatia, the Franciscans from Makarska published „The New Journal to Religion and Science“ and in Serbia „the Political Gazette“ was published. The first paper published in several sequels „The Protocols of the Elders of Zion “ which had the task of spreading anti-Jewish propaganda. The mentioned Serbian paper praised the Croatian paper for its „publishing efforts“ and highlighted that the „Jewish danger“ is a „World problem“ [10]. Between the two World Wars books were published which represented anti-Jewish ideas. During the thirties of the 20th century, under the influence of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, in the time of the Yugoslavian government, starting from Stojadinovic (1935-1939) and then the Cvetkovic-Macek government (1939-1940), there were more frequent anti-Jewish attacks. In November 1939, almost all universities in Zagreb accepted a conclusion to limit the number of Jewish students.

The Jews as the Enemy in Ustasha Media. From the very first moment of the founding Ustasha movement, it began not only with agitation with the aim to destroy Yugoslavia, but also spread hatred towards Jews. It was an addition to the already existing Croatian anti-Semitism and Ustasha propaganda in accordance with national-socialism, which had the stance that the root of all problems lay in the purity of race and as soon as racial problems have been solved, political, social and economic problems will be solved as well [11]. When it comes to hatred and prejudice towards Jews, the Ustasha ideology was a substrate pre-war Croatian nationalism and anti-Semitism with Nazi ideology. Prejudices and hatred were expressed through ideas and practices that included chauvinism, racism, xenophobia, anti-communism, glorification of violence, contempt for the „Jewish“ liberal democracy, hatred towards „Jewish“ Bolshevism and communism [12].

It should be mentioned that the Ustasha ideology had its specificity compared to other similar movements, and those were anti-Yugoslav and anti-Serb feelings connected with confessional and religious intolerance. Ustaša-anti-Semitism had a specific phenotype since it was shaped by the anti-Serb ideology. Jews were perceived as agents of the Serbian people, as a fifth column that was helping the Serbs to break the racial unity of the Croatian people. In their mission to establish on the territory of the NDH an idea about the purity of the Croatian race, the Ustashes defined Croats as the white Europeans or „Aryans“ and identified the most part of the Balkan population including the Serbs as „Asians“. In doing so, they developed an exclusivist racial ideology that did not leave room for certain minorities, primarily the Jews who were identified as a non-European population. In addition to the „nomadic“ Balkan Serb-Vlach population, which according to the Ustasha ideology was rootless, there was another enemy – a cosmopolitan and mercantile Jew. This enemy was portrayed in similar terms to the past prejudices constructed by Croatian politicians as immoral and as a predator, the Ustasha propaganda heightened this political construction with emotion always portraying this enemy as the opposite to the ideal form of the European noble race of warriors and peasants – the Croat. The creation of such contradictions and racial prejudice was of vital importance for the theory of race to the Croatian Ustasha. In order to strengthen these antipodes, the Ustasha emigres and their sympathizers created the image of the Jew whose characteristics and appearance were the exact opposite of the Croatian appearance and characteristics already in the interwar period.

The Ustasha regime from the beginning showed a special interest in the field of culture so the authorities made an effort that almost all printed texts have the seal of the Ustasha propaganda policy in terms of its program principles. Therefore there was a need to carry out a so-called „profound cultural revolution“ or ideological transformation on basic national cultural institutions as the main carriers of the Ustasha cultural program in order to achieve a „new Croatian national consciousness and feelings“ [13].

The intelligentsia was given a special role in influencing the orientation of the Ustasha youth and writing numerous books and manuals in which the youth already in the early years were taught to hate Jews [14]. Because of the need to racially purify the nation and create a homogeneous nation, Ustasha national state

supreme objectives became the deportation and liquidation of “foreign elements”, such as Jews, Serbs and Roma [15].

The newspaper “Hrvatska Krajina” (*Croatian Krajina*) in every issue demonized the Jews and Serbs. During the spring and summer of 1941, when the largest arrests and detentions in concentration camps were carried out, the front page was reserved for the speeches of the Ustasha dignitaries Viktor Gutic and Ante Pavelic. Gutic's speeches called for violence by seeking Croats to eradicate Serbs and Jews, he stated himself that he received orders from the head of government to cleanse the Krajina region of Croatia from „undesirable elements“ [16].

The old prejudices of Croatian Semitism related to the Jews were transferred to the advertising space of the NDH. From May 1941, accusations against Jews began that they want to destroy Croatian education and schooling. An almost half a century old stereotype which states that there exists Jewish professions such as lawyers, bankers and doctors, was spread by the Ustasha propaganda spreading direct accusations for biological extermination of the Croatian national substrate by Jewish doctors who carry out abortions [17].

The Ustasha campaign against Jews was conducted under the motto that "there is no place in the NDH for Jews." Along with the media attacks, the Jews were subjected to racial laws as well. These were supposed to give legitimacy to persecution and genocide. Thus, all the newspapers were tasked with informing their readers of these racial laws, and in this sense, the most important law was the "Legal Decree on Racial origins", as well as the "Legal decree for the protection of Aryan blood and the honor of the Croatian people", with which marriage between Jews, as well as other people of “Non-Aryan” descent, and people of "Aryan" descent was banned [18].

In addition to the existing prejudices, which were primarily based on anti-Semitism that has already been manifested in Croatia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the propaganda of the Ustasha also spread anti-Semitic prejudices about the "Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy" that emerged after the success of the October Revolution. In this regard, in order to demonize the Jews, and to make them appear as enemies of the people and thus gain the support of the majority for the planned genocide, propaganda emphasized the political constructions that were first spread by the leadership of the NDH. Thus, among other fictional conspiracy theories in which the Jews were the main protagonists, lies were spread, in public, by leader Ante Pavelic about the "Moscow - Jewish - Bolshevik potentates who wanted to infiltrate the countries of Southeast Europe.

All of these were clear signs that special attention was paid towards the total annihilation of the Jews. This was made clear in mid-1943, when the Jewish question was written about as part of the "social (or state-forming) transformation of the Ustasha Croatia". According to the text, this is a matter "solved with thoroughness and persistence, which has to greatly distress all those whose paths intersect with the roads of the Ustasha social or state-forming revolution." [19].

The prejudices about Jews were also spread by propaganda posters. So, for example, on the 1st of May, 1942, in Zagreb, the visitors of the exhibition “On the development of Judaism and its destructive undertakings in Croatia before the 10th of April, 1941, and the Solution of the Jewish Question in NDH” could see Jews being portrayed as caricatures and in demeaning fashion which gave credit to the racist theory. The poster used to invite people to the showcase portraying a Jew as a venomous snake, and in the showcase as a spider, enveloping the globe with its legs, or the usual stereotype of an ugly fat rich guy with a crooked nose.

Lastly, it remains to be concluded that the entire anti-Semitic propaganda was directed toward one goal – the elimination of the Jews. The propaganda was supposed to incite and justify the apprehensions, deportations and massacres which started in June 1941. By December of 1941, according to the data Pavelic gave to count Ciano, the total number of Jews was reduced from 45,000 to 12,000, and that was only the beginning of their eradication [20]. Synagogues were ransacked, and then burned, with some, like the Synagogue in Banja Luka, redesigned as brothels for German and Ustasha soldiers [21]. The terror over the Jews gained an increased swing in mid-1941, and then culminated by the beginning of 1942. Ethnic cleansing is completed with absolute success – in part due to the liquidation of Jews in local communities, and partly due to deportation to concentration camps until 1942. In this period of mass arrests and executions by firing squads, followed all the way by propaganda, set to create an image of Jews as enemies of the Croatian state, only a small number of Jews remained free. After some calmness, which lasted till the spring of 1943, the rest were arrested and only around 5000 Jews survived the holocaust in the NDH, only by fleeing to the Italian occupation zone, or by joining the partisan movement. The final account was that an estimated 85% of the Jewish population was killed. The exact number of the Jewish victims who perished in the Ustasha genocide will remain unknown [22], but what is evident is that, aside from demonizing the Jews, the Ustasha propaganda successfully mobilized the Croatian people.

Historians estimate that the Ustaša had approximately 4,000 pre war members only, and 30,000 to 40,000 active supporters. Realizing that many of the members were activists who had been trained in camps, and realizing that more than 100,000 Croats bought Ustaša publications, the Ustaša stands in a more powerful light. The Ustaša was able to dominate the universities, some Catholic convents, and intellectual circles, and it was far from being a movement of the socially declassed. After the takeover, quickly more than 100,000 men and women swore the Ustaša oath [23]. But whatever the exact number of sympathizers was, the question of public participation in violence cannot be answered with sheer numbers.

Summary. In NDH myth making process such as creating the Myth about Enemy played particularly powerful role in extermination of the Jews. It had its roots in the growth of anti-Semitic sentiment among some Croat politicians and its development into an ideology at the end of 19th century. In accordance with that, this article emphasized danger of wide spreading prejudice, discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism through press during that critical historical period. Also, it stress, that the story about state's origin, its past, nation self victim status, nation suffering and past injustices and contrary to that, "enemy's wickedness" and "alien craving for power" – made not only human rights abuses against Jews, but even worse, mass killings and extermination. In that light, NDH propaganda passes off war crimes to look defensive, justifiable, and even necessary. By this article, it is obvious that Ustasha regime promoted the negative image of the Jews as the "enemy" and reinforces it with rhetoric about the righteousness of "ourselves". The attempt was to muster up support and nurture the belief that what is to be done is in the positive and beneficial interest of all Croats. In that sense, the Myth about Enemy had a key role in Ustasha propaganda.

So, unmasking political mythology of fascist regimes such as it was NDH regime, which was filled with prejudices and stereotypes, is important because of at least the three facts. First, it shed a light on importance of propaganda in purges and mass killings. It can sensitize society to the danger of prejudice, discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism. And finally, unmasking political mythology also addresses one of the central mandates of education in Europe, which is to examine what it means to be a responsible citizen same as to provide a structure inquiry for an investigation into human behavior.

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