

World War II and Auschwitz as it is remembered in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

Modern-day Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a small, but unique spot on the map of Europe. It is a country that hosts a capital, often referred to as Jerusalem of the Europe, due to its location on the map of the cultural perspectives of the human civilization. But, even though it is a country small, both by population and area, it is a country deeply scarred and heavily burdened by its past. One of the marks that hugely influenced evolution of identity of inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the construction of paradigm through which present and future events are perceived, of course, is Second World War and circumstances that revolve around it. Everything in Bosnia and Herzegovina is symbolized by the number of three; there are three major ethnicities, three spoken languages, three major religious groups, as well as three main tendencies in perception of the Truth.

In order to understand these perceptions of the Truth that engulf Bosnian reality and through this paradigm understand the views on the Second World War and Auschwitz, first, we will have to briefly introduce you to the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an old country. First evidences that point us to independent, self-governing political entity seize back to the Middle Ages, but evidences of Bosnia's autonomy reach far earlier. There are couple of moments that defined the essence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first is Slavic migration, which brought to this area Slavic culture and language and which defined the unrefined identity. The second is religion, which will, by time, shape the identity of the people living in this area. And the third one is (re)formation of the Slavic national states, as a source of national pride.

From the earliest beginnings, Bosnian society was diverse, but the nature of it is heavily controversial topic, from today's perspective. Everyone agrees that Bosnia was inhabited by Catholics, Orthodox, and followers of Church of Bosnia – which is the source of controversy, mentioned before. When Ottomans conquered Bosnia, follower of the Church of Bosnia had the highest percentage of conversion to Islam. From this point in history to now on, there will always be three separate views on every geopolitical event that occurs. At some times they will be closer to one another, while at the other they will be quite different, even opposite.

These separate approaches had been amplified by nineteenth century, at the wake of nationalistic movements in Europe.

This bring us to our topic, and that is perception of the World War Second, which, in a sense, was perceived as one of the many conflicts that sparked a hostility between ethnicities on the Balkans, and which added just another scar to be remember whom was it inflicted from, and yet in the other, event that shocked the political and social foundations of the World, and made people question the share basics of morality. This event is still an event, wounds from which are still fresh and healing, especially since terrible atrocities committed in the Second World War were deeply embedded in to the minds of the people and later used, side by side with other traumatic events from the past, to evoke anger and wish for “revenge”.

Second World War

After the First World War and the fall of the two empires – Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman – foundations for the larger Slavic state were laid out. First the State of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was united with the kingdom of Serbia, under the banner of Karadorđević dynasty, and by so, the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which would be later renamed to kingdom of Yugoslavia, was created. At first, this new union was viewed favorably optimistic by some, as expectations of the new state were high – but, as the time went by, some changes and reforms were instituted, agreements and promises were not carried out, and political climate became tense, so more and more people started second guessing the new order. Macedonians, Slovenians, Croats and especially Bosniaks viewed their position in the new constellations as unfavorable, and strived towards more decentralized state, as they feared the domination of Serbs; while Serbs viewed the decentralization as destabilization which would lead to dismantlement of the Union. Serbs tried to make Yugoslavian identity stronger, but this tendencies were perceived by all others as a way for Serbs to impose their interests, culture, values and influence. This whole political mess sparked the distrust between ethnicities and fear of own integrity being damaged by others, which would result in rise of nationalism and hostile views towards others.

All this time, behind the curtains, the new power was on rise, and it was getting more and more supporters as the time went by. One of its prominent members, which would to become its leader – Josip Broz Tito – managed to unite all of the ethnicities under the banner of

communism, but under the cost of rejecting some cultural values, mostly in a form of a religion.

Then came the invasion and occupation of Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany and whole this political mess was interrupted, but the unstable climate of distrust remained. Yugoslav Army was quickly defeated and Kingdom of Yugoslavia capitulated in a week. Government and the King went to exile and some members of the Yugoslav Army, predominantly Serbs, retreated to the mountains in Serbia and formed Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland – commonly known as Četniks.

Shortly after the occupation, new political order was instituted again, and Nazi puppet state of Independent State of Croatia was formed. Ante Pavelić, former politician turned revolutionary, and the leader of the Ustašas order, became the leader of a newly formed fascist state.

So in the middle of the war, in Yugoslavia, there were three sides; Royalist Četniks, Communist Partisans and Fascist Ustašas. Number of casualties during Second World War, on the territory of Yugoslavia was estimated to be around 1 000 000. Now, one could notice that whole this section was dedicated to the Second World War from the perspective of Yugoslavia, and the reason is that there is no Second World War history of Yugoslavia without of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and vice versa; all the major events that directly shaped or indirectly influenced the faith of Yugoslavia happened on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Foundation for kingdom and socialist Yugoslavia were laid in Bosnia and Herzegovina, first and second session of Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (which would later become National Assembly of Socialist Yugoslavia) was held on territory of Bosnia, all the major battles for Yugoslavia in the Second World War occurred on the territory of Bosnia; and the list goes on and on.

Perception of the three sides

Četniks

Četniks were originally founded in nineteenth century, as a Serb independence movement order. They had influential role in Balkan Wars, First World War, Second World War and in the War of the nineties. Their actions were perceived by others – non Serbs – as violent and

zealotic, as they committed mass atrocities, during Balkan Wars and First World War against all non-Orthodox, non-Serbs, especially those of Islamic faith; so the memory of them as being perpetrators persisted through time. Serbs, on the other hand, perceived them as freedom fighters, as they protected vulnerable Serb minorities and fought the centuries old occupier. During Second World War, the movement was reborn in a form of numerous separate orders, most influential of which was Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland, the Movement of Ravna Gora, or most commonly just Četniks. This particular branch of the Četniks order originated as a resistance movement against Nazi occupation, but quickly the very nature of the order changed. Their goal still remained the liberation of Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but they adopted an agenda to create a Greater Serbia within Yugoslavia – ethnically cleansed from all non-Serbs – in a borders that include Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and parts of Croatia and Hungary. They started collaborating with Fascist Italy, rarely with Nazi Germany to achieve their plan, since most of their troops were stationed under zone occupied by Fascist Italy. They even collaborated with Ustašas, which they considered one of the biggest enemy of theirs.

In the popular image, Četniks are often remembered as dark-haired, long-bearded big men, dressed in black traditional Serbian outfit. The image of the knife is dominant in the perception of the Četniks, since their preferred method of killing was slaughtering, but they also practiced as a method of execution, setting on fire building with alive a group of people inside, as well as skinning victims alive, which was a practice of executing catholic priest, as it was reported in one of the accounts. It is really difficult to estimate total number of the casualties executed by Četniks, but what we can tell from the individual actions is that is certainly a big number, since one action of the Četniks could claim up to 10 000 victims.

Ustaša

Ustašas – Croatia Revolutionary Movement – originated as resistance movement against, what has been perceived as, Serb domination in Kingdom of Yugoslavia. At the very beginning influence of Ustašas was quite weak, but later, they started to acquire more and more power through their outposts, which they had opened all around Europe, although in reality they became influential player in politics only after occupation of Yugoslavia. They collaborated with Nazis, rarely with Fascist – since leader of the Ustaša, Ante Pavelić, was not on great foot with Mussolini. The movement was mainly composed of Croat nationalist,

but a significant number of Bosniaks was also involved. The politics of Ustaša often reflected those of Nazi Germany; they prosecuted Jewish people, Roma people, communists, anarchists, as well as other political dissidents, but what characterizes Ustaša regime is massive prosecution of Serbs. It is difficult to determine the number of victims killed by Ustaša, especially since data had been manipulated by each side, but the data that we are offered varies from 290 000 to 1 200 000. One way or the other, it is clear that under the Ustaša regime, Serbs suffered the most by number, and Jewish by percentage (by some estimates, out of 32 000 Jewish people who inhabited the area controlled by Independent State of Croatia, only 5 600 survived the war. Independent State of Croatia and Ustaša regime is also responsible for the creation of the biggest concentration camp in Southern Europe – Jasenovac.

The image of Ustaša soldier is deeply embedded in the mind of the people, especially Serbs. The sheer brutality of killings done by Ustaša are often incomprehensible, especially since most of the killings were done by hands, facing victims and looking them in the eyes. They even had special weapons, exclusively made for killing Serbs; *Srbosjek* – the Serb cutter, and *Srbomlat* – the Serb clubber. Regarding their selection, they made no difference between man, women, children – everyone was a target. Humiliation of the victims was often part of the ceremony of the killings, so there were instances where the meat of the victims was on sale for very low prices.

Partisans

National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia, or commonly just partisans was armed formation created by Communist Party of Yugoslavia as a resistance to the occupation. Formally, the commander-in-chief of the Partisan movement was Josip Broz Tito who was awarded with the title of marshal. Unlike two other groups, Partisans were not ethnically exclusive and among their ranks were members of all ethnicities – though, at the beginning, there were some ethnic clashes within their own orders. This inclusive nature of the Partisan movement attracted significant number of Jewish people, and it could be said that this was their only option, since the other two groups collaborated with the Nazi and Fascist regime which prosecuted Jewish population. But, even though Partisan movement differed from Ustaša and Četniks regarding the prosecutions, atrocities and war crimes still were committed by its members.

It is impossible to determine the number of victims of the Partisan orders since, after the war, many evidences were destroyed and the crimes were attributed to Četniks and Ustaša. The post-war propaganda machinery was depicting Partisans as honorable freedom fighters, who would not take a single grain of wheat without permission of the owner, when in fact the truth could not be more opposite. As communist movement was antireligious by its nature, Partisans oftentimes desecrated churches and mosques, as well as killed and humiliated religious figures. The villages and towns which supported Četnik and Ustaša movement often were raided and its inhabitants killed and slaughtered. Methods of killings were rarely mirrored to those of Četniks and Ustaša, but nevertheless dead bodies were mutilated by the members of Partisans. The executions by the firing squads were quite often at the end of the war, and there are accounts of execution up to 10 000 members of Ustaša and Četnik movement at once.

Perception of Auschwitz

It is estimated that around 10 000 prisoners were kept in Auschwitz from the territories of Yugoslavia. The vast majority of those prisoners were Jewish.

Auschwitz in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other neighboring countries is mainly perceived in triple contexts; context on the universal level, context on the local level and the context on the personal level.

In the context on the universal level, Auschwitz is perceived through the eyes of the human civilization as a personification of the worst and the lowest of humanity; the very incarnation of the evil within. In this context Auschwitz has become synonym for injustice, madness and inhumanity. Genocide was defined because of Auschwitz and Auschwitz was created because of genocide.

Context on the local level perceives Auschwitz through the eyes of the concentration camps in the local areas. The best paradigm during nineteen-forties was Jasenovac, but more recent times the best representatives are the camps of death, as part of machinery in Bosnian genocide.

Context on the personal level sees Auschwitz as struggle with own identity, struggle with the burdened past of own ethnicity. Here Auschwitz is not seen as a factual place, it transcended the real world; in this context Auschwitz is seen as a symbol of suffering, symbol of pain.

Every ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, throughout history, lived through suffering of mass atrocities, some of which, today, could be classified even as genocides – every ethnicity lived throughout own pain, lived through event which defined it; every ethnicity had its own Auschwitz.

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