

THE YUGOSLAV JEWS IN WORLD WAR TWO

The history of Yugoslav Jews in World War Two is marked by the genocide perpetrated by the occupational forces of the Nazi Germany and the puppet Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska), and also by Jewish support or direct participation in the National Liberation movement and victory over fascism.

In comparison to the other Yugoslav nations, the Jews have - by percentage - suffered the greatest losses. From over 81.000 Yugoslav Jews (0.5% of the Yugoslav population in 1941) the war had survived about 15.000, while from 3.000 Jewish refugees in Yugoslavia only a few had saved their lives. The genocide was perpetrated systematically, according to plan, while the emphasis on the conviction of the Jewish "collective guilt" was disheartening. Also, the possibility of annihilation of a nation as a whole was by itself inconceivable. The greatest number of Jews was living in towns and it was relatively easy to register and control them. After the internment and execution of the Jewish men, their families were also destroyed. It was not only the annihilation of the Jewish lives, but also of their temples, cultural monuments and cemeteries, while their assets, property and belongings were pilfered and appropriated.

The tides of genocide in the parts of the divided Yugoslavia all led to one goal, but the methods of its execution in various occupied areas (German, Hungarian, Bulgarian) and in Independent State of Croatia were different.

Almost half of the Yugoslav Jews had lived on the territory of ISC, mostly in Zagreb, Sarajevo and Osijek. The largest part of the 30.500 executed ISC Jews (not counting about 1.800 refugees who also perished) had lost their lives in the ustashi concentration and extermination camps Jasenovac and Stara Gradiska (approximately 20.000); the rest were killed in other camps and on execution grounds, while about 5.000 Independent State of Croatia Jews

were, through cooperation with the German representatives, sent to the Polish death camps.

Serbia was the only part of Yugoslavia under the direct German military occupational administration. In this area lived about 16.600 Jews and 1.200 Jewish refugees. In the mass executions during the uprising in Serbia, till the beginning of November 1941, almost all Jewish males were shot. Since December 8. 1941, the remaining Jews, about 6.400 women, children and old people, were interned in the Belgrade Sajmiste camp. Till May 1942 they were most brutally killed in the mobile gas chamber - a large van. In the occupied Serbia were killed approximately 13.600 Serbian Jews and 1.200 Jewish refugees.

In the part of Yugoslavia occupied by Hungary, mostly Backa, lived about 16.000 Jews. During January 1942 in the mass executions ("the raid") in southern Backa and Novi Sad, Hungarian soldiers and local German population (Volksdeutsche), had killed and thrown under the Danube and Tisa ice 3.809 persons, among them 1.068 Jews.

After the German occupation of Hungary on March 18, 1944, the Hungarian government had interned the Jews from occupied territory and handed them over to the Germans. They have deported them to the Auschwitz camp where almost all had perished. From the Hungarian occupied area of Yugoslavia about 14.000 Jews have lost their lives.

On the Bulgarian occupied territory of Yugoslavia (most part of Macedonia and southeastern Serbia) lived less than 8.000 Jews, mostly in Bitola, Skopje and Stip. Under the pressure of the German representatives on March 11 and 12, 1943, the Bulgarian authorities had interned the Jews from the occupied area. To the end of March the Germans had deported these 7.332 Jews to the extermination camp Treblinka, where they all perished.

Italian anti-Jewish measures in the occupied parts of Yugoslavia (Istria, Dalmatia with islands and Montenegro) were limited to various modes of discrimination, but the internment of Jews in camps had not as a primary goal their physical annihilation. A few thousand Jewish refugees, mostly from Independent State of Croatia, had sought shelter in those areas. Supported by the representatives of the Third Reich the Croatian authorities had demanded their extradition, but in vain. In the spring of 1943 a large number of Jews were interned in the camp on island Rab. After the capitulation of Italy on September 8. 1943, most of the

Jews in the Italian occupied regions have joined the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, or were evacuated to the liberated areas and Italy. The remaining Jews were mostly deported to German and Croatian death camps where most of them were killed.

In spite of such unfavourable circumstances the considerable number of Yugoslav Jews had joined the National Liberation Army (partisan armed forces). Many Jewish women and men were also members of the Yugoslav Communist Party and League of Yugoslav Communist Youth; in addition, the Jewish youth organisations were mostly leftist. Jewish participation in the liberation movement differed in various parts of Yugoslavia, depending on diverse local conditions. Among the notable organizers and leaders of the rebellion and new revolutionary government was a large number of Jews.

After their liberation from the concentration camps (on Rab, in Bor), the Jewish inmates en masse joined the partisan units. The contribution of the Jewish medical personnel was particularly valuable for the National Liberation Army and in the liberated regions. Together with the other prisoners, the Yugoslav Jews participated in the organising of resistance and escapes from the prisons and camps in Yugoslavia and other countries, as well as taking part in the resistance movements outside Yugoslavia.

Of 4.572 Jews engaged in the war for liberation, 1.318 had lost their lives. In the National Liberation Army fought 2.993 Jews, and 722 were killed. Many of them held high, trusty positions in the partisan units. Ten Jews were honoured by the highest Yugoslav war decoration, The Medal of the National Hero. Of the Jews whose lives were saved during the war, most had survived due to the strong Yugoslav liberation movement, and their contribution to its organisation, activities and final victory was considerable.



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