

## CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE CROATIAN VICTIMS AT BLEIBURG AND IN "DEATH MARCHES"

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Croatian contemporary history is marked by controversial issues, and even though many years have now gone by, some still seek to manipulate these issues for their own ends. The Bleiburg tragedy and the postwar "death marches" are frequently brought up in this sense in the daily press and elsewhere. These issues are also discussed in historiography, which still appears unable to deal with those topics properly. To do so, it is therefore first necessary to identify the events included in these topics. The Bleiburg tragedy includes the surrounding and capture of German and Croatian troops who were withdrawing through Slovenia toward Austria (Bleiburg) at the end of the World War II, the extradition of prisoners from the Viktring POW camp, and the "death marches" that followed, which are also called the "Ways of the cross".

During the last days of WW II members of the Allied forces created their own spheres of control, often ignoring the destiny of the defeated party. The postwar period called for individuals able to carry out the "final struggle with the enemy". Even today, the number of losses during those days cannot be clarified. Previous interpretations by Croatian and Yugoslav historians are often subjective and ignored the question of responsibility for the crimes committed then.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, members of the Croatian emigration tried to present their view of the truth, but their efforts, while often well-intentioned, also included inaccuracies, creating additional problems for contemporary scholars. During the 1990's some new efforts have been made, but even after fifteen years we have no concrete answers. Indeed, the issues are still far from being resolved.

Final advance of the Allied forces and the withdrawal of Commander Alexander Löhner's Army Group E,<sup>2</sup> caused a significant reduction of the com-

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<sup>1</sup> Such interpretations can be found in the majority of the studies produced on this topic by Yugoslav historiography. E.g.: Basta Milan, *Rat je završen 7 dana kasnije* (Zagreb: Globus, 1976); Brajović Petar S., *Konačno oslobođenje, (Sjećanja i obrade)* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1983); *Za pobjedu i slobodu – Završne operacije za oslobođenje Jugoslavije (učesnici govore)*, ed. Ivo Matović (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Bauer, "General Löhner i kapitulacija njemačke vojske pred Bleiburgom", *Hrvatska revija*, 4(80) (December 1970): 741-751; E. Bauer, "General Löhner i događaji oko Bleiburga", in: *50 godina Bleiburga*, ed. Jozo Marević, Zagreb 1995, p. 101-105; Erich Schmidt – Richberg, *Der Endkampf auf dem Balkan, Die Operationen der Heeresgruppe E von Griechenland bis zu den Alpen*, (Heidelberg: Scharnhorft Buchkameradschaft, 1955), p. 89.-160.; Franz Schraml, *Hrvatsko ratište* (Zaprešić: Brkić i sin, 1993), p. 259.

bat zone in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH - *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*),<sup>3</sup> Five army corps of the Croatian army were still engaged with Partisan forces, but the number of soldiers in these units at the end of 1944 and in the beginning of 1945 is still unknown. According to the first figures available, at the end of 1944 the entire Croatian army numbered 209,000 individuals, but due to a permanent lack of reserves the real number was more likely around 179,000.<sup>4</sup> Similar assessments are accepted by most authors of both the Croatian emigration and domestic authors.<sup>5</sup> Some authors mention considerably lower number of victims.<sup>6</sup> Davor Marijan, who has consulted the intelligence reports of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (NOV - *Narodno-oslobodilačka vojska*) and the Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia (PO - *Partizanski odredi*) from 9 December 1944,<sup>7</sup> notes a permanent decline in Croatian armed forces by the end of 1944. He concludes that "the quantitative condition of the entire Croatian armed forces [...] could not have exceeded 100,000 men."<sup>8</sup> This is probably the most accurate estimate we have, but like all estimates, even these figures are more guesswork than an accurate count.

The advance of Partisan forces and the retreat of Croatian units triggered a massive movement of people from various parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and southern parts of Croatia.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to determine whether civilians were forced to leave their homes, as Narcisa Lengel-Krizman claims,<sup>10</sup> or whether, as available memoirs show, people were overtaken by a fear of Partisan units, because "[...] they were known for their brutality, crimes and wickedness."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Vojna enciklopedija*, vol. 9., s. v. "Svetski rat, Drugi" by Stjepan Kerečin, (Beograd 1975), 446.-447.; Anđelko Mijatović, "Politički i vojnički kraj NDH", *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 23 (1995), no. 3: 498.

<sup>4</sup> Vjekoslav Vrančić, "Postrojenje i brojučano stanje Hrvatskih oružanih snaga u godinama 1941. - 1945.", *Godišnjak Hrvatskog Domobrana*, (1953): 141-169; Fedor Dragojlov, "Der Krieg 1941. - 1945. auf dem Gebiete des Unabhängigen States Kroatien", *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*, 5-7 (May - July 1956).

<sup>5</sup> Ante Ljerkić, "Od Ivan Planine do Bleiburga - dokumenti o povlačenju hrvatske vojske 1945. godine", *Drina*, 2 (1963): 11; Vinko Nikolić, Frano Nevistić, ed., *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, (München-Barcelona: Hrvatska revija, 1976 and 1977), 134; Zdravko Dizdar, "Brojtbene pokazatelji odnosa vojničkih postrojbi na teritoriju Nezavisne Države Hrvatske 1941. - 1945. godine", *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 24 (1996), no. 1-2: 161-197; *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslavenskih naroda*, tom. V., no. 34. (Beograd: Istorijski institut, 1966), 513-550; Josip Jurčević, *Bleiburg: jugoslavenski poratni zločini nad Hrvatima* (Zagreb: DIS: Udruga ratnih veterana Hrvatski domobran: Hrvatsko društvo političkih zatvorenika, 2005), 205, 207.

<sup>6</sup> Mladenko Colić, "Kolaboracionističke oružane formacije u Jugoslaviji 1941.-1945. godine", in: *Oslobodilačka borba naroda Jugoslavije kao opštenarodni rat i socijalistička revolucija*, 2 vols. (Beograd: 1977.), 2: 61-79.

<sup>7</sup> *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslavenskih naroda*, tom V, no. 36. (Beograd: Istorijski institut, 1986), 525-564.

<sup>8</sup> Davor Marijan, "Ustaške vojne postrojbe" (MA, University of Zagreb, 2004), p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> A. Ljerkić, "Od Ivan Planine do Bleiburga", 43-44.

<sup>10</sup> "Increasing number of enemy forces, followed by civilians who escaped partisans, because of their previous activities or misled by Ustashi propaganda" arrived in Zagreb, Narcisa Lengel-Krizman, *Zagreb u NOB-u* (Zagreb: Globus, 1980), 276-277; Bogdan Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich II* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986), 274.

Organized preparations for the withdrawal are rarely mentioned in literature, but many memoirs mention the fact that enormous number of people and vehicles blocked the roads.<sup>12</sup> Vjekoslav Luburić attributed the main responsibility for the withdrawal to the Germans, who left Herzegovina without making previous arrangements with Croatian army authorities.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps, but the final outcome of WW II was inevitable, and there was no time left for any significant activities, had there been any substantial indications for such activities.

During the last days of the war, Zagreb was a “real beehive of manpower, as if all Croatia has settled there.”<sup>14</sup> Some have estimated that the number of its residents during May have been anywhere from “500,000 civilians”,<sup>15</sup> up to a million inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the constant arrival of refugees into the Croatian capital, the figure of a million appears to be exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is clear that Zagreb could not accommodate all the refugees.<sup>17</sup> It “was a living example of a scared city”, whose inhabitants watched as “German troops just passed by.”<sup>18</sup> The chaos was not the result of the fact that people knew what lay ahead; quite the contrary, they were moving towards an uncertain future. But the numerous refugees, whose exact number is impossible to determine, put a great burden on the urban infrastructure and created constant disorder.

The “Zvonimir Line”, the last planned defense line in the NDH, should have extended from Karlovac towards Dugo Selo, Vrbovac, Križevci, Koprivnica and the river Drava.<sup>19</sup> This final concentration of the army was important, and

<sup>12</sup> Tomislav Obrdaj, “Kolona duha više od 70 kilometara”, in: *Bleiburg 1945 - 1995.*, ed. Anđelko Mijatović, Zagreb 1995, 130-134; Stjepan Slipac, *Svjedok. Moj križni put* (Novi Travnik: Napredak, 1999), 17; Lucijan Kordić, “U danima srdžbe i gnjeva”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, ed. Vinko Nikolić, Zagreb 1998, 112; Darko Sagrak, *Zagreb 1941. - 1945.* (Zagreb: self published, 1995), 185-199.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Šklopčan, “Povlačenje hrvatskih oružanih snaga u svibnju 1945.”, in: *Od Bleiburga do naših dana*, ed. Jozo Marević, Zagreb 1994, 78-79.

<sup>14</sup> Vjekoslav Luburić, “The End of The Croatian Army”, in: *Operation Slaughterhouse Eyewitness Accounts of Postwar Massacres In Yugoslavia*, ed. John Ivan Prcela, Stanko Guldescu, (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company, 1970 and 1995), p. 43-71; J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust - dokumenti i svjedočanstva o poratnim pokoljima u Jugoslaviji* (Zagreb: Hrvatsko društvo političkih zatvorenika, 2001 and 2005), p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Lucijan Kordić, “U danima srdžbe i gnjeva”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 116.

<sup>16</sup> N. Lengel - Krizman, *Zagreb u NOB-u*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 29-32; Ante Beljo, *Yu - genocide. Bleiburg, Death marches, Udba* (Toronto: Northern Tribune Publishing; Zagreb: Croatian Information Centre, 1995), 64-70.

<sup>18</sup> Mato Rupiće, Zdravko Dizdar, “Izjave zarobljenih i izručenih dužnosnika NDH i drugih pojedinaca o povlačenju hrvatske vojske i civila prema Austriji”, in: *Spomenica Bleiburg 1945. - 1995.*, ed. Mirko Valentić, Zagreb 1995, 100.

<sup>19</sup> N. Lengel - Krizman, *Zagreb u NOB-u*, 276; B. Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich II*, 274.

<sup>20</sup> E. Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf auf dem Balkan, karta broj 5.*; Fikreta Jelić - Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941. - 1945* (Zagreb: Liber: Školska knjiga, 1977 and 1978), 308-309.

preparations to deploy it along the Zvonimir Line started in the fall of 1944.<sup>20</sup> However, Schmit-Richberg concludes that maintenance of this line would have been impossible, given that in April 1945 it was not finished or even started in some sections.<sup>21</sup> All this indicates that this was just another “weak link” that was trying to maintain the untenable.

During the last days of WW II the NDH government was trying in vain to obtain support from Allied forces, which were coordinating their final operations with the Partisans. Seeking to put aside all previous differences with the Allies, the NDH government sought to organize a joint anticommunist action by negotiating with Serbian and Slovenian deputation.<sup>22</sup> The NDH government’s Memorandum to Allied forces sought to do the same, but the Croatian mission had no great significance.<sup>23</sup> These efforts to persuade the Allies to view the NDH as a potential partner against the Communist Partisans yielded no results, and they came much too late. Danijel Crljen, aware of what was awaiting the members of the NDH and its armed forces, concluded that these “last attempts intended to save the situation were not very promising.”<sup>24</sup>

Unable to strike a deal with the advancing Allies and hard-pressed by the Partisans, the NDH political and army leadership discussed whether to fight on or retreat. One of directions for withdrawal was through Istria towards Italy, but A. Ljerkić argued that it would be more logical to retreat to Carinthia, together with the Germans “who supported the Croats in every way.”<sup>25</sup> Those who supported continuing the struggle believed it would be wiser to withdraw to the woods and establish a resistance movement there, or to move to Istria and link forces with the Western Allies. However, it was unlikely that the West would accept and protect those who once were supported by the Germans and had fought with them. Vjekoslav Luburić later commented that “there was no one so naïve who could have thought that the western democracies would do what we really wanted – supply us with artillery, tanks and airplanes – we needed to stop the Russians.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> B. Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich II*, 274.

<sup>21</sup> E. Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf auf dem Balkan*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Svetimir Đukić, “Iz šume u emigraciju”, in: *Povlačenje 1945. Krivci i žrtve*, ed. Tomislav Sabljak, Ivo Smoljan, Zagreb 2000, 285-302; Hrvoje Matković, *Povijest Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Naklada Pavičić, 2002), 229-241; F. Jelić – Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941. – 1945.*, 304-306.

<sup>23</sup> V. Vrančić, *S bielom zastavom preko Alpa (u misiji Hrvatske državne vlade za predaju hrvatskih oružanih snaga)* (Buenos Aires: “Federico Grote”, 1953). A copy of Memorandum was presented to Allays by captive American pilots, but offered proposal was not accepted. B. Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich II*, 289-294.

<sup>24</sup> Danijel Crljen, “Čimbenici bleiburškog sloma”, *Hrvatska revija*, 1 and 2 (77 and 78) (1970): 46-47; B. Krizman, *Pavelić u bjekstvu* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986), 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> A. Ljerkić, “Od Ivan Planine do Bleiburga”, 14.

<sup>26</sup> J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 49.

The final decision to withdraw reopened the discussion regarding how to do so. Some authors think that the continuation of the conflict would have made the situation even more difficult,<sup>27</sup> but most believe that the decision to withdraw was wrong.<sup>28</sup> Petar Bareza argues that Poglavnik and the government liquidated the NDH, and that when they made that dubious decision, they did not think about the nation, only about the welfare of chosen individuals.<sup>29</sup> Even at the end, they claimed that they expected some “major” changes, or perhaps they were just misleading the public with this phraseology.<sup>30</sup> What seems clear is that at the end, chaos reigned in Zagreb.

According to Vinko Nikolić, “there was something terrifying in the air ... everybody running, not looking back, or greeting anybody ... Nothing is certain. ... But, it seems we are moving tonight.”<sup>31</sup> Most of the refugees left the Croatian capital on May 7, after the Poglavnik and members of his government had already taken steps to save themselves.<sup>32</sup> Danijel Crljen recalled that “... numerous refugees embraced our vehicle. ... As far as I could see the road was filled with soldiers, or civilians of both gender and different age ...”<sup>33</sup> Each person became “just another part of meaningless and amorphous mass that was moving without any will or hope.”<sup>34</sup> Even so, the first stage of the withdrawal was actually conducted under some kind of control, and occurred without major conflicts with Partisan units,<sup>35</sup> which had been ordered to advance towards Carinthia.<sup>36</sup> But upon reaching Celje (Slovenia) Croatian

<sup>27</sup> A. Ljerkić, “Od Ivan Planine do Bleiburga”, 10; Zvonimir Dusper, *U vrtlogu Bleiburga* (Rijeka: Vitagraf, 2001), 201-202.

<sup>28</sup> Dragutin Kamber, *Slom NDH. Kako sam ga ja proživio* (Zagreb: Hrvatski informativni centar, 1995), 33-34; Stjepan Buć, “Da li smo Hrvatsku mogli sačuvati?”, *Hrvatska revija*, 2-3 (1960): 226; Josip Aleksić, “Vojnički aspekti hrvatskog povlačenja u svibnju 1945”, in: *Na prekretnici*, no. 7, ed. Jure Petričević, Brugg 1986, 31-32; J. Aleksić, “Bleiburg”, in: *50 godina Bleiburga*, ed. Jozo Marević, Zagreb 1995, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Petar Bareza, “Bleiburška katastrofa”, *Hrvatska revija*, 1(37) (1960): 31-43.

<sup>30</sup> Preparing the last number of paper “Nova Hrvatska” “great news” was expected (it was about some members of HSS entering the government), but since it did not come the number was concluded; M. Rupić, Z. Dizdar, “Izjave zarobljenih i izručenih dužnosnika NDH”, in: *Spomenica Bleiburg*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> Vinko Nikolić, *Tragedija se dogodila u svibnju*, 2 vols. (Barcelona-München: Knjižnica Hrvatske revije, 1984-1985 and Zagreb: Školske novine, 1995), 1:88.

<sup>32</sup> Jere Jareb, “Sudbina posljednje hrvatske državne vlade i hrvatskih ministara iz Drugog svjetskog rata (Prilog za studiju o hrvatskoj državnoj vladi)”, *Hrvatska revija*, 2 (110) (June 1978): 218-224.

<sup>33</sup> Danijel Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 2.- 4. (Decembar 1966): 265; *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 263-268; Dinko Šakić, *S Poglavnikom u Alpama* (Split: Laus, 2001), 7-25; Tomislav Koševac, “Posljednja bitka”, *Hrvatska revija*, 2 (1983): 264.

<sup>34</sup> S. Slipac, *Svjedok. Moj križni put*, 31-32.

<sup>35</sup> Aleksandar Vojinović, “Tragični finale rata”, in: *Otvoreni dossier: Bleiburg*, ed. Marko Grčić, Zagreb 1990, 71; Nikola Pavelić, “Tragom krvi i užasa”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 193; J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 420.

<sup>36</sup> Milan Basta, *Rat je završen 7 dana kasnije* (Zagreb: Globus, 1976), 302.

columns lost any contact with their command.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Partisan units were advancing towards Dravograd (Slovenia – Austria border),<sup>38</sup> forming a “human wall which ... eliminated any possibility to proceed.”<sup>39</sup> Despite determined resistance, the Partisans managed to surround the column completely.<sup>40</sup> The retreat was coming to an end and “a major group was blocked at Bleiburg and some at Dravograd. A huge emigration – after eight days of wandering, hunger and struggle – arrived at Bleiburg on 15 May.”<sup>41</sup> So the British, Partisan, and NDH armies met on the fields at Bleiburg.

On the evening of 14 May, a Croatian Liaison Officer arrived at the headquarters of the 38<sup>th</sup> Irish Infantry Brigade and informed it that “two groups of Croats, each of about 100,000 men under arms,” with “about 500,000 civilians” were arriving in the areas.<sup>42</sup> A British officer, Patrick T. D. Scott, requested the Croats to refrain from advancing further, “because behind his units there are Partisans and since the night is approaching there could be incidents, which he certainly wants to avoid.” During this conversation the Croatian delegation allegedly was promised that they would be able to proceed freely on the following day.<sup>43</sup> It is likely that the British officer was worried over possible conflicts, since the Partisans were very close and ready to attack. Moreover both sides, as he noted, “hated each other till death.”<sup>44</sup> Still, he notes in his diary that he was told by higher authority that on no account could any British officer accept an offer to surrender; because the Croats “had fought against the Yugoslavs in support of Germany and they must become Yugoslav prisoners.”<sup>45</sup> Even major D. C. Owen, the head of Anglo-American army mission, said at the headquarters of the Fourth Operational Zone that, “Yugoslav units are truly fighting for the Allies against the Axis powers.”<sup>46</sup>

Ivan Kovačić Efenka came to infantry headquarters with the same intentions and probably also met with Scott to examine what was happening at Bleiburg.<sup>47</sup> The final decision regarding the Croats was made the morning of

<sup>37</sup> D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 269; A. Vojinović, “Tragični finale rata”, in: *Otvoreni dossier: Bleiburg*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Sreta Savić, *51 vojvodanska divizija* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1974), 206; M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 324-325.

<sup>39</sup> D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 270; Jure Zovko, *Križni put i dvadeset godina robi-je* (Zagreb: Globus, 1997), 17-26; J. Aleksić, “Vojnički aspekti hrvatskog povlačenja u svibnju 1945.”, in: *Na prekretnici*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> A. Ljerkić, “Od Ivan planine do Bleiburga”, 76-80; M. Basta, *Rat je završen 7 dana kasnije*, 339.

<sup>41</sup> A. Ljerkić, “Od Ivan planine do Bleiburga”, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Jerome Jareb, Ivo Omrčanin, “The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg, Austria in May 1945 according to English Military Documents”, *Journal of Croatian Studies*, Vol. XVIII-XIX (1977-1978): 51; D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 283.

<sup>43</sup> D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 283.

<sup>44</sup> *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 403-404.

<sup>45</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, “The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg”, 52.

<sup>46</sup> Petar S. Brajović, *Konačno oslobođenje (Sjećanja i obrade)* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1983.), 555.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 559-560.



15 May. British policy was laid out in a report by the local commander: "(a) National emigration in progress with the object of surrendering to British Army. Numbers involved about 1½ million now approaching BLEIBURG, including two Army Corps of approx 100.000 each, arrived but short of ammunition. (b) Their surrender has been refused and they are not to cross the old Austrian frontier. They have been so informed and warned we intend to use force of arms to enforce our decision."<sup>48</sup> It appears that the Croatian surrender had already been refused during the first contacts with British Headquarters on 14 May. Yet Crljen recalled that the British had said the column could proceed the following day. Indeed, according to Crljen, : "General Herenčić asked me to go back through column and announce the good news ...."<sup>49</sup> It is possible that the British may have said this just to keep the Croatian troops quiet.

The crisis reached its climax on the 15<sup>th</sup> when the Croat Liaison officer returned from British headquarters and reported that the British attitude had changed and that he had seen some Partisan officers at British Headquarters. Negotiations followed. Milan Basta and Ivan Kovačić-Efenka represented the Partisans while Ivan Herenčić, Vjekoslav Servatzy, Vladimir Metikoš, and Danijel Crljen represented the Croatians. The Partisan delegates entered first, and Basta said that General Scott stated that "300.000 enemy soldiers" were facing the Partisans. "These forces understandable would not surrender to you," he said. "They want to surrender to us, and since we are allies we will deal with the problem later."<sup>50</sup> Basta responded that the enemy forces "have no more than 30.000 people (I really believed that there were no more people, but later it was determined that just in there last group there were around 100.000 soldiers ...)."<sup>51</sup> Scott's diary does not mention the exact number of enemy forces; he was only informed that there were two corps of 100.000 men each.<sup>52</sup> He noticed that the Partisan emissary immediately said that it had been decided "without delay to attack Croats" and that "the battle should start in a half an hour." He emphasized that he had "explicit orders ... to defeat the enemy army and force it to surrender ... As a soldier," he added, "I am obligated to do everything possible to carry out these orders ...."<sup>53</sup>

The British officer suggested that "the elimination of the Croatian Army, which no doubt was highly desirable, would be more satisfactorily achieved if the Croats laid down their arms."<sup>54</sup> He thought that it would be impossible for a surrender of so many people to occur in half an hour, but Basta insisted, say-

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<sup>48</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, "The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg", 25-26; Milan Blažeković, "Ministar i pokolji. Prilog pitanju odgovornosti za prisilno vraćanje ratnih zarobljenika poslije Drugog svjetskog rata", in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 405-406.

<sup>49</sup> D. Crljen, "Bleiburg", *Hrvatska revija*, 283.

<sup>50</sup> M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 355.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>52</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, "The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg", 53.

<sup>53</sup> M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 357.

<sup>54</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, "The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg", 53.

ing that “it is important that capitulation starts as soon as possible and then it can last a few days if necessary.”<sup>55</sup> Only then did the three Croatian delegates enter. They started by announcing that “We are here by decree of Croatian leader and the government offering our surrender and asking to be put in the custody of the Western Allies.” Crljen noted that the “British officer briskly responded that our surrender will not be accepted and we should be treated like illegal bandits because we had not surrendered our arms to the Partisans eight days ago, as stipulated in the truce agreement...” When Crljen noted that there were many civilians in the mass of refugees, Scott answered tersely that those were “political matters, which I as a soldier cannot discuss”. He added that he had orders from Field-Marshal Alexander, who had received “precise political instructions from Prime Minister Churchill.”<sup>56</sup>

Scott later admitted that his “additional problem was that the radio receiver on his vehicle, his only contact with higher authorities, was only working sporadically, so it was not possible to report his problem to Marshal Alexander, as the Croatian negotiator wanted.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Scott claims that he gave the Croatian delegation three explicit options: “First: That they would surrender to the Yugoslavs [sic=Partisans]. That I would use my influence, though unofficially, to try and ensure that would be treated correctly. Secondly: That they stay where they were and be attacked by the Yugoslavs. Third: That they endeavor to advance into the British lines.”<sup>58</sup> Scott sought to avoid this third possibility because it represented “a major political and administrative problem for his soldiers and him.”<sup>59</sup> He emphasized that if the Croats should advance into British lines, “they would not only be attacked by the Yugoslavs, but by the full weight of the British and American Air Forces, land forces and everything else that I could get my hands on, in which case they would unquestionably be annihilated.” [check quote] When the Croats saw how hopeless the situation was, they “sensibly decided on the first course”. However he added “If they took either of the other alternatives they would be bound to die, so what?”<sup>60</sup> But Herenčić says that Scott’s claim that he offered the Croats three possibilities was a lie. The Croats, Herenčić recalls, were offered only one option – “to lay down their arms and surrender!”<sup>61</sup>

During the final stage of negotiations, Basta stated the terms of capitulation. The remains of your Ustasha-Home Guard army are in a difficult situation,” he began. “You are surrounded by powerful forces of the Yugoslav army. ... It is in your best interest to consent to capitulation and save all the refugees that moved to emigration. ... An hour after you return to the units the capitulation

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<sup>55</sup> M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 357.

<sup>56</sup> D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 287.

<sup>57</sup> *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 403.

<sup>58</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, “The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg”, 54.

<sup>59</sup> *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 404-405.

<sup>60</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, “The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg”, 55.

<sup>61</sup> M. Blažeković, “Ministar i pokolji”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 410-412.



deadline begins. ... Civilian refugees will be repatriated and sent home; if you consent to our terms, your whole army will be placed in captive camps under the protection of International law for human rights and protection of prisoners of war. ...".<sup>62</sup> Scott thought these terms "fair enough".<sup>63</sup> Any Croatian hopes remaining disappeared when Scott turned to the Partisan officer: and said, "my tanks are at your disposal."<sup>64</sup> When the Croatian representative requested the presence of a British commission during extradition, Scott ended the meeting by responding that: "you cannot demand anything. This concerns only our Allies, if they want us to be there". Should the Croats not surrender immediately, he warned that "we will start bombing you after one hour."<sup>65</sup>

According to the Croatian delegation there are some inaccuracies in Scott's description of the "delivery agreement" to the Partisans. General Herenčić emphasized that it was not true that the Croats agreed to surrender to a Partisan commissar. "We answered to the British commissar and did not directly negotiate with the Partisans." It is quite interesting how the British describe their role in negotiations. They were, they insist, just intermediaries who "helped [facilitate] the Croatian extradition to the Yugoslavs. In that way they could not be considered responsible for them."<sup>66</sup> Herenčić recalled that partisans never promised anything, but that the British general had promised that the Croats would receive humane treatment and the Partisans would respect all the international rights of war prisoners and victims.<sup>67</sup> But Scott claimed that "the Croatian Army was to be treated as prisoners of war with the exception of political criminals, who would be tried by Allied courts, while the civil population was to be fed and returned to Croatia ...". Yet even Scott questioned the execution of these. But it seems that the Croatian representatives offered their surrender to the British, who conveyed it on to the Partisans, who accepted the British decision. Scott stated that the Partisans "insured him everybody will be repatriated and cared for. I was not sure whether they did or did not follow the agreement. I would not be surprised if they were all massacred."<sup>68</sup>

During the negotiations, reference was often made to the regulations of the Hague and Geneva Conventions, which determine the treatment of prisoners of war.<sup>69</sup> But Allied governments which had signed the Moscow Declaration in

<sup>62</sup> M. Basta, *Rat posle rata: Pavelićevi generali se predaju* (Zagreb: Stvarnost, 1963), 87-98.

<sup>63</sup> J. Jareb, I. Omrčanin, "The end of the Croatian Army at Bleiburg", 55.

<sup>64</sup> M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 362-363.

<sup>65</sup> D. Crljen, "Bleiburg", *Hrvatska revija*, 292-293.

<sup>66</sup> Darko Bekić, "Slučaj Bleiburg: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja", *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 21 (1989), no. 1-3: 204-205.

<sup>67</sup> M. Blažeković, "Ministar i pokolji", in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 411.

<sup>68</sup> *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 405.

<sup>69</sup> Boško Petković, ed., *Međunarodne konvencije o ratnom pravu i o sigurnosti* (Zagreb: Zavod za općenarodnu obranu i društvenu samozaštitu SRH, 1979), 337-358.; Boško Petković, *Međunarodne konvencije o ratnom pravu* (Zagreb: Sveučilišna tiskara, <sup>2</sup>1992), 398-424; Stjepan Hefer, "Izručivanje hrvatske vojske god. 1945. u svjetlu međunarodnog prava", *Hrvatski kalendar* (1955): 86-92.

1943 had also taken a definite stand regarding the punishment of war crimes.<sup>70</sup> According to the Yalta Conference Declaration of 1945, the Allies had decided that all prisoners who were Soviet citizens and had belonged to enemy formations supporting the Third Reich should be handed over to the country they had fought against. Although this agreement included only Soviet citizens, it was supported by “each of Stalin’s protégés, including Josip Broz Tito”.<sup>71</sup> It is interesting that none of the international conventions regarding prisoners of war mentions whether a country has the right to repatriate prisoners against their will. The Geneva Convention stipulates that prisoners be protected “against acts of violence” and it represents a humane aspect in which repatriation represents a right, and not an obligation.<sup>72</sup>

At Bleiburg, the issue was to settle a complicated condition in Carinthia that had been caused by arrival of NDH army with many Croatian civilians and the Partisans in hot pursuit. Regarding the civilians, Eden wrote in his note to Winston Churchill that, “it seems that the ‘Anti-Titoists’ will offer ‘their services’ to Allied Headquarters, which could be ‘very unpleasant’. I do not know how we could explain collaboration with units which had been until now openly collaborating with the Germans ...”. He therefore recommended that they should be disarmed and placed in refugee camps.<sup>73</sup> On 3 May, after the proposition was accepted, 8<sup>th</sup> Army issued order no. 1465, which read in part that Chetniks, Mihailović’s troops, and other dissident Yugoslavs will be considered as surrendered personnel and will be treated as such.<sup>74</sup> Anthony Crosland writes that, “When they arrived for the first time, willing to surrender, the staff was benevolent regarding the acceptance of the troops confronted with Tito.”<sup>75</sup>

However, after 4 May, it was clear that Partisan troops were moving towards Klagenfurt.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, Alexander informed J. B. Tito in writing that, “Yugoslav troops in Stiria and Carinthia can cause difficulties and make my mission more complicated”.<sup>77</sup> The possibility of a conflict with the Partisans

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<sup>70</sup> Venceslav Glišić, “Zločin i kazna”, in: *Drugi svjetski rat*, 3 vols. (Zagreb, Ljubljana, Beograd: Mladost, 1980), 3: 397-398.

<sup>71</sup> Michael McAdams, “Yalta and The Bleiburg Tragedy”, in: *Od Bleiburga do naših dana*, 93-101.

<sup>72</sup> Vladan Jončić, *Ratni zarobljenici. Međunarodnopravni status* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 2002), 315-316.

<sup>73</sup> D. Bekić, “Slučaj Bleiburg: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja”, 199-200.

<sup>74</sup> Staniša R. Vlahović, *Zbornik dokumenata iz britanske arhive. Anglo – Jugoslavenski odnosi 1941. - 1948.* (Birmingham: self publish, 1985), 352.

<sup>75</sup> Nikolay Tolstoj, *Ministar i pokolji. Bleiburg i Kočevski Rog 1945.* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1991), 102-103.

<sup>76</sup> Dušan Biber, “Britansko – jugoslovanski nesporazumi okrog Koroške 1944 – 1945”, *Zgodovinski časopis* 32 (1978), no 4: 480; William Deakin, “Britanci, Jugoslovani in Avstrija (1943 – maj 1945)”, *Zgodovinski časopis* 33 (1979), no. 1: 121.

<sup>77</sup> D. Biber, “Međunarodni položaj Jugoslavije u posljednjoj godini drugog svjetskog rata”, in: *Za pobjedu i slobodu – Završne operacije za oslobođenje Jugoslavije (učesnici govore)*, ed. Ivo Matović (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1986), 835.

clearly disconcerted Alexander and he entertained the idea that “it would not be bad if the resistance of Ustasha and White guard forces could briefly detain Tito around Ljubljana and Zagreb ...”<sup>78</sup> However, British soldiers were reluctant to engage in conflicts with former Allies, and for some units “those days, after the end of war were worse than real struggle. We had to deal with things that do not concern soldiers ....”<sup>79</sup> Additionally, “Tito was considered an Ally, although he caused his the Allies a great deal of trouble.”<sup>80</sup>

The British historian Nikolai Tolstoy noticed “anomalies”, regarding the problem of extradition of many Soviet citizens and “Yugoslavs”.<sup>81</sup> He concluded that there was a “Klagenfurt conspiracy” in which the later premier Harold Macmillan played a major part. <sup>82</sup>As evidence, Tolstoy notes that on 12 May, in agreement with Alexander, Macmillan departed for the Headquarters of 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. His main intention was to “put Generals McCreery and Harding fully in the picture”.<sup>83</sup> After that, allegedly on his own initiative, he met with General Keightley in Klagenfurt.<sup>84</sup> The most probable motive for his journey was that “thousands of so-called Ustashi or Chetniks mostly with wives and children are fleeing in panic into this area in front of the advancing Yugoslavs. These expressions, Ustashi and Chetnik, cover anything from guerilla forces raised by the Germans from Slovenes and Croats and Serbs to fight Tito, and armed and maintained by the Germans – to people who, either because they are Roman Catholics or Conservative in politics, or for whatever cause are out of sympathy with revolutionary Communism and therefore labeled as Fascists or Nazis. ....”<sup>85</sup>

Macmillan also discussed “Yugoslavs” who had already surrendered to the British units.<sup>86</sup> According to Tolstoy, the alleged visit resulted in a major policy change concerning the Yugoslavs, given the fact that Keightley was willing, in accordance with the Allied Headquarters command of 3 May, to send them to safety. But the next day, 13 May Macmillan held a meeting with General Robertson, Alexander’s Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), who requested

<sup>78</sup> D. Biber, “Britansko – jugoslovanski nesporazumi okrog Koroške 1944 – 1945”, 479.

<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Bethell, “Zašto su Englezi izručili zarobljenike”, *Nova Hrvatska*, 9 (19 May 1975): 12-14; Borivoje M. Karapandžić, *Jugoslovensko krvavo proleće 1945. Titovi Katini i Gulazi* (Kleveland: (s.n., 1976 and Beograd: Mladost, 1990), 232-237.

<sup>80</sup> B. M. Karapandžić, *Jugoslavensko krvavo proleće 1945*, 233-237.

<sup>81</sup> Nikolai Tolstoy, *Victims of Yalta* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977 and Corgi Books 1986).

<sup>82</sup> N. Tolstoy, “The Klagenfurt Conspiracy. War Crimes & Diplomatic Secrets”, *Encounter*, LX/5 (1983); N. Tolstoy, *Celoveška zarota. Vojni zločini in diplomatske tajnosti* (Celovec: Mohorjeva založba, 1986); N. Tolstoj, Matjaž Klepec, Tomaž Kovač, *Trilogija o pobjedu vojnih beguncev iz leta 1945. Vetrinji – Teharje – Rog* (Maribor: ZAT, 1991), 13-37; N. Tolstoy, “Verzija grofa Nikolaia Tolstoya”, in: *Otvoreni dossier: Bleiburg*, 121-193.

<sup>83</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres* (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd, 1986), 64.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.-67.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

Washington's approval so he could send a telegram to the CG British 8th Army commander, empowering him to "turn over to Yugoslav Partisans a large number of dissident Yugoslav troops with the exception of Chetniks". He stated that "Macmillan, who talked with the CG Eight Army yesterday, had recommended this course of action. ... the CAO expressed disappointment that we did not seem to agree with him on this point but added that he was faced with a grave administrative problem with hundreds of thousands of German POWS on his hands and could not be bothered at the same time about who might or might not be turned over to the Russians and Partisans to be shot."<sup>87</sup> Joseph Grew, the Acting Secretary of State for the United States., pointed out: "... that such contemplated violation of agreed Anglo-American policy cannot be justified on grounds of administrative expediency."<sup>88</sup> The Cowgill report,<sup>89</sup> which was issued as a reaction of the British government to Tolstoy's research, does not mention these documents and the protests of American officials and so conceals the apparent discord in making decisions.<sup>90</sup>

What is beyond doubt is that on 14 May Robertson ordered: that "all Russians should be handed over to the Soviet forces ...." He also ordered that "all surrendered personnel of established Yugoslav nationality who were serving in German forces should be disarmed and handed over to Yugoslav forces."<sup>91</sup> It is interesting to note in which way this formulation tended to differentiate Yugoslav captives. On 14 May, the 5th Corps received a note about the arrival of new refugees. British sources reported that there were "300.000 PW surrendered personnel and refugees in Corps area. a further 600.000 reported moving North to Austria from Yugoslavia. should this number materialize food and guard situation will become critical."<sup>92</sup> When he forwarded this report McCreery requested that Keightley "take over formed bodies and disarm them as they cross the border ... Suggest Croats become Tito's show."<sup>93</sup> On 15 May field marshal Alexander sent a message to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army saying: "approximately 200.000 Yugoslav nationals who were serving in German armed forces surrendered to him. We should like to turn these over immediately to Marshal Tito's forces."<sup>94</sup> The agreement reached on 15 May between brigadier-general Toby Law (Lord Aldington), who was in charge of the refugees in camp Viktring,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>89</sup> Anthony Cowgill, Christopher Booker, lord Thomas Brimelow, Teddy Tryon-Wilson, *Interim Report on An Enquiry Into the repatriation of Surrendered Enemy Personnel to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia From Austria in May 1945 and the Alleged 'Klagenfurt Conspiracy'* (London, September 1988); D. Bekić, "Slučaj Bleiburg: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja", 197-214; D. Bekić, "Verzija Cowgillova izvještaja", in: *Otvoreni dossier: Bleiburg*, 27-68.

<sup>90</sup> D. Bekić, "Slučaj Bleiburg: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja", 212-213.

<sup>91</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 91-92; S. R. Vlahović, *Zbornik dokumenata iz britanske arhive*, 355-356.

<sup>92</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 100, 113; D. Bekić, "Slučaj Bleiburg: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja", 204.

<sup>94</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 113.

and commissar Hočevar from the Yugoslav 9<sup>th</sup> Corp. followed the latter agreement.<sup>95</sup> In a memo addressed to general Eisenhower, Alexander states: “the most important thing for me is to clear up my communication lines from this burden. Army efficiency of my units is significantly disturbed [...]”<sup>96</sup>

So it seems clear that the British were anxious to rid themselves of the Croats. Yet Tolstoy constantly justifies Alexander’s role and its significance in this situation; arguing that he was wrongly informed about the mass of military and civilians refugees, who had already surrendered to the British troops. According to Tolstoy, there could not be any extradition, making his order “inoperative” and creating a “nonexistent surrender” to which Robertson’s order from 14 May referred. Finally, Tolstoy concludes that it is hard to determine “to what extent the misunderstanding represented a genuine error, and to what extent a deception profiting from it.”<sup>97</sup> Another view on Alexander’s responsibility is offered in a letter from R. M. B. Chevallier (Head of the Southern Section of the Foreign Office). Sent on 11 September 1951, it says that the extraditions were carried out “by the order of Supreme Allied Commander for the Mediterranean, based on the fact that those people were fighting on German side against Allied units of Marshal Tito and therefore will be treated as war prisoners.”<sup>98</sup>

After the “critical period” had past, on 17 May Alexander issued a new order. According to it, the Chetniks and other Yugoslav dissidents should be treated like disarmed enemy units and evacuated in British concentration zone Distone. In a second telegram sent to Combined Chiefs of Staff, Alexander asked for guidelines regarding the final disposition of “50.000 Cossacks including 11.000 women, children and old men; present estimate of total 35.000 Chetniks – 11.000 of them already evacuated to Italy – and 25.000 German and Croat units.” In each of above cases “return them to their country of origin immediately might be fatal to their health.”<sup>99</sup>

The agreement regarding the repatriation of refugees under Allied protection was accepted on 15 May, although the operation started four days later. In spite of Alexander’s clear prohibition of repatriation, brigade commander Law issued a secret order on 17 May which read, : “All Yugoslav nationals at present in Corps area will be handed over to Tito forces as soon as possible. these units will be disarmed immediately but will NOT be told of their destination.”<sup>100</sup> Although it was specified that they should not be informed of their destination, they were told that they were moving to Italy by trains.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>96</sup> D. Bekić, “Slučaj Bleiburg’: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja”, 208.

<sup>97</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 114.

<sup>98</sup> D. Bekić, “Slučaj Bleiburg’: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja”, 213; Christopher Booker, *A Looking-Glass Tragedy. The controversy over the repatriations from Austria in 1945*. (London: Duckworth, 1997), passim.

<sup>99</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 124-125.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 138; S. R. Vlahović, *Zbornik dokumenata iz britanske arhive*, 357.

<sup>101</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 139.

Colonel Robin Rose Price commented that this was an order of "... most sinister duplicity i.e. to send Croats to their foes i.e. Tito to Yugoslavia under the impression they were to go to Italy."<sup>102</sup> When Lord Aldington was asked why the refugees were told they were moving to Italy, he answered: "It was not me who told them so. My order was explicit – they should not be told of their destination ... I do not know. All I know is that these rumors were spread around. Nobody knows, neither did the trial establish who gave this information to the Yugoslavs ..."<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, numerous memoirs confirm quite the opposite. "The Croats have been given no warning of their fate" "and are being allowed to believe that their destination is not Yugo-Slavia, but Italy, until the actual moment of their handover."<sup>104</sup> Leaving the camp, even the British colonel gave a speech emphasizing that in Italy they would be "reformed and dressed in new uniforms and trained for new tasks."<sup>105</sup> The same promises were given to the Serbs and Slovenians whose extraditions started on 23 May. The following day, while waiting for the transports, lieutenant-colonel Radoslav Tatalović asked a British major, "Mr. Major where are we going?" The major answered: "To your units in Italy." We have your word of honor?," Tatlovic asked. "You have my word of honor!," the major replied.<sup>106</sup>

On 19 May, General Keightley and Colonel Ivanović from the 3rd Partisan army discussed the repatriation of the remaining Slovenians and Serbs. They agreed that the evacuation of Yugoslav troops from Austrian territory should start no later than 21 May at 7 p.m.<sup>107</sup> According to the agreement, the 5th Corps. was assigned to turn over to Tito's forces [?] "all Yugoslav Nationals now in the Corps area who had been fighting in uniform with the Germans and their camp followers."<sup>108</sup> Under these circumstances, it may seem that prisoners were extradited in order to assure that Partisans forces withdrew from Carinthia. However, available documents do not support this theory, and this thesis is therefore not accepted in the literature.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>103</sup> "Lord Aldington protiv grofa Tolstoya", *Start*, 20 January 1990, p. 50.

<sup>104</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 133; J. I. Prcela – D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 306.

<sup>105</sup> J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 306; Josip Hećimović, *In Tito's Death Marches. Testimony on the Massacres of the Croatian War Prisoners and Civilians after World War II*. (Chicago: Croatian Franciscan Press, 1961), 30-31; *In Tito's Death Marches and Extermination Camps* (New York: Carlton Press, 1962), 24-25.

<sup>106</sup> B. M. Karapandžić, *Jugoslavensko krvavo proleće 1945.*, 33-34; *Vetrinjska tragedija. V spomin nesmrtnim junakom, izdanim u Vetrinju od 27. – 31. maja 1945. in pomorjenim za velike ideje svobode* (Cleveland: Zveza slovenskih protikomunističnih borcev, 1960 and Ljubljana 1991), 34.

<sup>107</sup> Zdravko Dizdar, Vladimir Geiger, Milan Pojić, Mate Rupić, ed., *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944. – 1946. Dokumenti* (Slavonski Brod: Hrvatski institut za povijest - Podružnica za povijest Slavonije, Srijema i Baranje, 2005), 126-127.

<sup>108</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 140.

<sup>109</sup> Jera Vodušek Starič, *Prevzem oblasti 1944 – 1946* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1992), 237.



order regarding the extradition was reached two days before the agreement with the Partisans was signed.<sup>110</sup>

Furthermore, as Tolstoy writes, Alexander did not know about the extraditions until 21 May. On the same day, McCreery asked in writing about the treatment of armed and civilian groups of different nationalities and whether it was possible to send a deputy who could help to find a solution.<sup>111</sup> This request for new instructions seems a odd, especially given that it was already clear on 19 May who will be extradited. Alexander responded that, "No Yugoslavs who have come into the hands of Allied Troops will be returned direct to Yugoslavia or handed over to Yugoslav Troops against their will." Those who were fighting against Tito had to be treated like prisoners of war or surrendered enemy soldiers, while all others had to be classified as refugees and settled in refugee camps in Italy.<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, McCreery forwarded an order requiring an extradition of Yugoslav citizens. It is interesting that regarding the extradition of Yugoslavs after the 23 May even the Cowgill report states that there was a "contradiction between what the 5<sup>th</sup> Corp thought should be done and of what the higher command, up to AFHQ in Caserta, was aware and capable to approve at that level."<sup>113</sup> Although Tolstoy concludes that "there were individuals who had more possibilities than McCreery to understand what is happening", it is not possible to evade the question of who was responsible.<sup>114</sup>

Allied Headquarters, answered Alexander's request of 26 May and ordered that Cossacks should be handed over to the Soviets. Regarding the Chetniks, they agreed that they should not be extradited to Yugoslavia. However, they considered the troops of the NDH to be part of "... the regular forces of a quisling government operating under German direction." ... Consequently, Allied Headquarters believed that, "We should therefore be in favor of handing the Croat troops in Austria over to Tito's forces. Such a move would certainly please Tito and would show him that in some matters at any rate we are willing to treat him as a regular and responsible ally."<sup>115</sup> If the USA government was not pleased with those recommendations, they would agree to treat Croat prisoners of war like Chetniks.

But the Americans did protest,<sup>116</sup> and on 4 July the final order reversed the earlier decision. It read in part that, "1) Yugoslavs should not be repatriated in Yugoslavia or handed over to partisan troops against their will. 2) The Yugoslavs fighting against Tito will be treated like displaced persons and be transported at disposal to camp Viktring. [...] 3) All those people will be

<sup>110</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 142.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>113</sup> Darko Bekić, "Slučaj Bleiburg: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja", 213.

<sup>114</sup> N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 153.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

considered like displaced persons and finally be transferred to Italy.”<sup>117</sup> The Cowgill Report noted that this decision represented the final act and concluded the “Bleiburg case”.<sup>118</sup> Tolstoy concludes that there are not enough facts for a definite conclusion.[?] Nevertheless, his studies represent the only comprehensive investigation about the extraditions after the World War II. The Cowgill Report, as a “... private inquiry ... conducted in absence of official investigation”<sup>119</sup> and sponsored by British Ministry of defense, looks only at “the operative necessity”, and assigns all responsibility to people low in the diplomatic and army hierarchies. Unfortunately, we currently lack the sources needed to offer more daring conclusions regarding who was to blame.

Following capitulation soldiers were released from their oaths, and each person sought to save himself, often not knowing to whom he was surrendering.<sup>120</sup> Milan Basta recalls that: “Enemy soldiers acted like they were racing who will surrender first.”<sup>121</sup> But it is questionable whether it was really like that, especially given that most memoirs report that prisoners did not hoist white flags until the agreed deadlines. In fact, Partisans “fired machine guns and mortars on the Ustasha column from our positions. The attack lasted for about fifteen to twenty minutes and only then Ustasha’s hoisted white flags [...]”<sup>122</sup> According to available documentation two battalions started firing, killing at least sixteen people. Apparently, no artillery was involved, so “this, so-called, massacre was carried out by fire arms. I always said we had ideal positions, short distance and a great mass in front of us...”<sup>123</sup>

It seems that the surrender deadline was postponed while “British tanks situated on the north part of the valley assaulted the Ustashes compelling them to withdraw and surrender ... ‘these actions’ shocked Slovenian Partisans “even though they hated the traitors”.<sup>124</sup> Zvonimir Zorić testifies about the British presence on the northern side of the field, but does not mention anyone resisting there, while “down in the valley was a real hell. Constant fire from thousand of different calibers was accompanied with scaring scream of wounded, woman and children together with horse’s neighing. Dead and wounded people were falling down as sheaves.”<sup>125</sup> Given conflicting and partial accounts, it is impossible to determine what really happened on Bleiburg field or whether people hoisted their flags on time. But it is highly probable that there were victims in these conflicts, even though it is impossible to establish exactly how many people died on Bleiburg field.

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<sup>117</sup> *Vetrinjska tragedija*, 47-48.

<sup>118</sup> D. Bekić, “‘Slučaj Bleiburg’: nova istraživanja, nova iskušenja”, 211-212.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>120</sup> J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 209; D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 293-295; Oton Knezović, *Pokolj hrvatske vojske 1945. Dokumenti o zvjerstvima Srba nad Hrvatima* (Chicago, 1960), 9.

<sup>121</sup> M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 365.

<sup>122</sup> P. S. Brajović, *Konačno oslobođenje*, 564.

<sup>123</sup> *Otvoreni dossier: Bleiburg*, 81.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82; M. Basta, *Rat posle rata*, 381; *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 329.

<sup>125</sup> Zvonimir Zorić, “Put u grotno pakla”, in: *Od Bleiburga do naših dana*, 294-295; N. Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, 103-104.

## The “Ways of the Cross”

Basta claims that he ordered the members of the 12<sup>th</sup> Proletarian Brigade to “...prepare soldiers on strict army discipline.” They were to “...issue explicit orders explaining to their soldiers there must not be any mistakes handling the captives. ... Let them explain to their intimates that our government will examine the degree of each person’s guilt and that those, who had spilt innocent blood would be accused in front of the People’s Court and adequately punished.”<sup>126</sup> In a similar vein, on 13 May Tito allegedly sent a dispatch to the General Staff of Croatia and Slovenia, as well as to the Staffs of their armies, asking them to undertake “the most stringent measures and by all means to prevent our units, some groups, or individuals killing the prisoners of war and captives. If there were people, among the prisoners and captives who might be guilty of war crimes, they should be handed over to army courts because of further processing.”<sup>127</sup>

However, this dispatch is available only as a transcript, and when Brigadier-General Anthony Cowgill and Nikolai Tolstoy analyzed it, the latter noted that it did not bear Tito’s signature and concluded that it was an obvious forgery.<sup>128</sup> The dispatch is not published in collections of the Yugoslav Army, and the only available version is an instruction from 29 April, issued by the 3<sup>rd</sup> army and forwarded to the 16<sup>th</sup> Division General Staff, because a similar order from 6 December 1944<sup>129</sup> was not executed properly. So it was once again requested that prisoners should be treated according to international humanitarian law. For each violation of these rights the responsible individuals were to be “most severely handled.”<sup>130</sup> But the available documents do not support these allegations, while numerous memoirs describing the “death marches,” regardless of their limitations and prejudices, indicate that the Partisans sought to solve the problem of the many captives extradited by the British army quickly. The prisoners were just “a large, nameless, amorphous mass which should have been diminished, as much as possible, regardless of the consequences.”<sup>131</sup>

However, Milan Basta reports that on 16 May “Home guard members and civilians” had already been released to their homes.<sup>132</sup> But it appears that these were isolated, individual cases. Most of the prisoners were organized in “four-row columns” and forced to march [to where?why, i.e., what was the ostensible

<sup>126</sup> M. Basta, *Rat posle rata*, 99.

<sup>127</sup> VA VII, Beograd, A. NOB, reg. br. 9-22/10; Pero Damjanović, ed., J. B. Tito, *Sabrana djela 28* (Beograd: Komunist, 1988), 43. In the footnote it is indicated that Tito issued similar instructions many times during the war. Most of them in situations when it increased possibility of revenge by the members of NOVJ.

<sup>128</sup> N. Tolstoy, “Povijest pred sudom”, *Start*, 6 January 1990, p. 51.

<sup>129</sup> The order dated 5 December, 1944 has been published in: Pero Damjanović, ed., J. B. Tito, *Sabrana djela 25* (Beograd: Komunist, 1982.), 82.

<sup>130</sup> *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944. – 1946.*, 100.

<sup>131</sup> Tomislav Brozović, “Na cesti Dravograd – Maribor”, *Forum*, 4-6 (April – June 1998): 709.

<sup>132</sup> Đurica Labović, Milan Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom 1941. -1945.* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1986), 325.

reason for the march?]. An especially hard stage of this forced march was the section between Dravograd and Maribor.<sup>133</sup> On the afternoon of 16 May, Basta had left for Maribor, where he arrived after three hours. He reported that the “column from Dravograd to Maribor was almost 60 km long.”<sup>134</sup> [can you do a rough estimate of how many people would be in a column this long if they were four abreast, e.g., one meter for every four people, so  $1000 \times 4 = 4,000$  per km  $\times 60 = 240,000$  people?]

During the “death marches” the captives were forced to walk as far as to the Romanian border (a distance of roughly 500 km), the Partisans executed thousands of prisoner without trial. Therefore, it is not surprising that many witnesses describe how the scores of captives were driven by trucks to improvised scaffolds. The same scenario was repeated in Tezno, Pohorje, and Kočevski Rog. “We were lined up on the edge of a deep pit. In a moment the firing of accompanied by machine gun began and I felt a strong twitch of wire around my wrist. Through the flashes and the firing I fell in a deep dark pit.”<sup>135</sup> Zdenko Zavadlav confirms this account. “Tonight we were shooting at Pohorje again! ... they removed the prisoners from the trucks and forced them to walk towards the open grave. ... Five by five they were dragged to the front of the pit and shot at from both sides by machine guns. The victims were falling into the pit [...] Serial killing is resuming.”<sup>136</sup>

Those who survived continued their journey through Yugoslavia. Prisoners were thirsty, but around every well along the way there were many corpses, so nobody dared to stop to drink.<sup>137</sup> Along the way guards took all of the prisoners’ possessions and often even their clothes.<sup>138</sup> It is often said that it was particularly hard passing through the Serbian villages, where the residents prepared a “warm welcome” for the Croatian prisoners.

Even after the official amnesty of 3 August, 1945, Croatian prisoners were sent to camps. According to the testimonies by witnesses and participants, there was a great difference between what was proscribed by regulations and what was done in the field. Enough leeway was left for “revolutionary justice”

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<sup>133</sup> Z. Zorić, “Dravogradski most – srijeda, 16. svibnja 1945. god. u svitanje dana”, in: *50 godina Bleiburga*, 286-287; Zvonimir Brdarić, “Moj put u nepoznato – Bleiburg, 1945.”, in: Đuro Mikašek, *Našička spomenica 1941. – 1945.* (Našice: DRV Hrvatski domobran, 1997), 164.

<sup>134</sup> M. Basta, *Rat je završio 7 dana kasnije*, 418.

<sup>135</sup> Z. Dusper, *U vrtlogu Bleiburga*, 33-34; B. M. Karapandžić, *Jugoslavensko krvavo proleće 1945.*, 227-228; J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 294.

<sup>136</sup> Zdenko Zavadlav, *Iz dnevnih zapiskov mariborskoga oznovca (Izbrani listi) 1. del: Leto 1945.* (Maribor: ZAT, 1990), 91-93.

<sup>137</sup> J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 224; Mato Šaravanja, “Kako su nas desetkovali”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 250; *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 358.

<sup>138</sup> M. Šaravanja, “Kako su nas desetkovali”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 249; *Bleiburška tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 350; J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 232, 263; Mate Šimundić, *Hrvatski smrtni put* (Split: Matica Hrvatska, 2001), 387; Josip Kereži, “Od Bleiburga do Velesa”, in: *Od Bleiburga do naših dana*, 190; Nikola Mulanović, “Nas su ubijali komunisti!”, in: *Bleiburg: uzroci i posljedice*, 145.

(not without at least the tacit approval of the political elite), in order to take revenge on those who had a “different opinion.”<sup>139</sup> “The hatred towards the enemy was evident during the punishment of Ustasha and Chetnick criminals. The soldiers did not kill the captives only because of the instructions, but because they hated them too.”<sup>140</sup>

The number of victims of those vengeful operations is still an open question.<sup>141</sup> Estimates of between 200,000 and 600,000 victims are probably? Certainly? exaggerated.<sup>142</sup> Some have pared their estimates to between 100.000 and 150.000 victims.<sup>143</sup> According to published documents of the People’s Liberation War (NOR - *Narodno-oslobodilački rat*), in May 1945 military and civilian prisoners of war numbered at least “105,000 Germans, Ustasas and Chetniks; 25,000 people were murdered and 4,000 wounded.” From those prisoners, 40,000 were Germans, around 60,000 Ustasha and Home Guard Units, and approximately 5,000 Chetnik members.<sup>144</sup> Most of these reports do not go further than 15 May, so it makes it impossible to determine the number who perished with any accuracy. The same partial estimates are noticeable in Petar Brajović and Milan Basta.<sup>145</sup> Ivan Dolničar estimates that 341.000 enemy soldiers were captured and that 100.000 t died in the final Yugoslav offensive.<sup>146</sup> But most of these allegations are not supported by a systematic investigation of documents, although Vladimir Žerjavić offers a demographic analysis.<sup>147</sup> Based on the population censuses from 1931 and 1948, and on a statistical assessment of expected population growth, Žerjavić concludes

<sup>139</sup> Zorica Stipetić, “O Titu u povijesti i posebno u hrvatskoj povijesti”, *Hrvatska ljevica*, 1(31 January 2004): 14.

<sup>140</sup> *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944. – 1946.*, 153-154.

<sup>141</sup> Franjo Tuđman, *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti – rasprava o povijesti i filozofiji zlosilja* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1989), 101.

<sup>142</sup> O. Knezović, *Pokolj hrvatske vojske 1945*, 38; J. I. Prcela, D. Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust*, 110; D. Crljen, “Bleiburg”, *Hrvatska revija*, 287; Jure Petričević, “Razmatranja u povodu 40. godišnjice hrvatske narodne tragedije kod Bleiburga”, in: *Na prekretnici*, 50-54; B. M. Karapandžić, *Jugoslavensko krvavo proleće 1945.*, 18; Ivo Bogdan, ed., *La tragedia de Bleiburg* (Buenos Aires: El Instituto cultural Croata Latinoamericano, 1963), 29; *Bleiburska tragedija hrvatskog naroda*, 46.

<sup>143</sup> Rudolf Kiszling, *Die Kroaten: Der Schicksalsweg eines Südslawenvolkes* (Graz-Köln: H. Boehlaus Hachf., 1956), 219-223; J. Jareb, *Pola stoljeća hrvatske politike* (Zagreb: Institut za suvremenu povijest, 1995), 127; Željko Krušelj, “Komunisti su 1945. iz osvete likvidirali 150.000 ljudi”, *Večernji list*, (8 July 1998), p. 7; Kazimir Katalinić, *Argumenti: NDH, BiH, Bleiburg i genocid* (Buenos Aires-Zagreb: Časopis Republika Hrvatska 1993), 119-122.

<sup>144</sup> *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije*, tom. XI, no. 3 (Beograd: Istorijski institut, 1976), 643-646; *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944. – 1946.*, 125-126, 131-138.

<sup>145</sup> P. S. Brajović, *Konačno oslobođenje*, 565; M. Basta, *Rat posle rata*, 5-6.

<sup>146</sup> Ivan Dolničar, “Okruženje i kapitulacija neprijateljevih snaga u severozapadnom delu Jugoslavije”, in: *Za pobjedu i slobodu*, 540; “Saopštenje Ministarstva unutrašnjih poslova FNRJ”, *Borba*, 8 February 1949, p. 1; *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944. – 1946.*, 161-162, 198-205; J. Vodušek Starić, *Prevzem oblasti*, 230-231.

<sup>147</sup> Vladimir Žerjavić, *Opsesije i megalomanije oko Jasenovca i Bleiburga* (Zagreb: Globus, 1992), passim.

that, only around 75,000 army personnel and 45,000 civilians arrived at the Austrian border, and that the advance of the Yugoslav army in 1945 resulted in the disarming of only part of the NDH forces.<sup>148</sup> He believes the largest number of victims occurred during the “death marches”, during which 26,500 soldiers and 6,800 civilians perished. He estimates that in actions before the surrender, 11,600 people lost their lives, with another 12,000 interned in the camp at Viktring.<sup>149</sup> Although his research is still an estimate and the numbers may appear small compared to earlier estimates, Žerjavić’s study is the most precise and most widely accepted analysis to date.<sup>150</sup>

## Historiographische Kontroversen um Bleiburg und Totenmarsch

### Zusammenfassung

In der vorliegenden Arbeit werden manche interessante Fragen und Meinungsverschiedenheiten in Bezug auf die Ereignisse vom Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges untersucht. Bleiburg und Totenmarsch (in kroatischer Historiographie und Öffentlichkeit wird der Begriff “Kreuzweg“ verwendet) stellen eines der emotionalen Themen der neueren kroatischen, slowenischen, serbischen, bosnisch-herzegowinischen und mazedonischen Historiographie dar. Dieses, obwohl sehr kurzes Zeitalter, verfügt über viele Unbekanntheiten, die die kroatische Historiographie in den letzten fünfzehn Jahren nicht im Stande zu lösen ist, oder vielleicht nicht lösen will. Die objektiven, erschwerenden Umstände gehen aus der Tatsache hervor, dass über die erwähnten Ereignisse wenig Archivstoff zur Verfügung steht, sondern im Gegenteil, nur reichhaltige, untereinander widersprüchliche Memoirenliteratur. Ihre Herkunft, d.h. ob sie von Emigrantenprovenienz ist oder aus der “offiziellen“ jugoslawischen Historiographie stammt, beeinflusst in vielerlei Hinsicht auch ihren Inhalt. Die neueren Untersuchungen zeigten eine gewisse Initiative, aber ohne bedeutende Fortschritte. Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass eine große Anzahl von Fragen den künftigen Untersuchungen überlassen bleibt, obwohl es manchmal scheint, dass keine Antworten bald zu erwarten sind.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>149</sup> Boro Jurković, “Verzija grofa Nikolaia Tolstoya”, in: *Otvoreni dossier: Bleiburg*, 192.

<sup>150</sup> Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941 – 1945. Occupation and collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 743.