

Rescuing the ‘Sava victims’ from oblivion and denial: History and memory of the last Ustasha crime in Sisak

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The article explores the history and memory of the last Ustasha crime in Sisak: the massacre perpetrated on the banks of the River Sava on 4 May 1945, on the eve of the Ustasha withdrawal from the city. Although the victims of this massacre – known locally as “Sava victims” – became a visible object of public remembrance in Sisak after the war, no scholarly works have ever been published on the event, and memorialisation was accompanied by a striking lack of interest in the identities of the victims, or the facts of what happened to them. This article is an attempt to explain and counter this longstanding tradition of neglect by addressing, for the first time, key questions about who the victims were, how many were killed and why. Examining the story of the Sisak massacre is important because, since the 1970s, there has been speculation that bodies discovered on the banks of the Sava were victims not of an Ustasha massacre, but of Partisan revenge killings perpetrated after the liberation of Sisak. This revisionist interpretation has gained traction in Croatia since the 1990s, and even some mainstream Croatian historians have suggested that, due to the paucity of historical evidence about the crime, the revisionists' views cannot be dismissed outright. The paper critically examines this argument, and by illuminating the facts of the case, hopes to provide some much-needed clarity. Also, in mapping the events in Sisak in the final weeks of the war, the article reveals that the massacre on the banks of the Sava in Sisak was not an isolated event. There were other crimes committed in and around Sisak in the final weeks of the war, crimes which are very much part of the story of the “Sava victims”, yet which were until now completely unknown. Among them are one of the last massacres of Serbs by the Ustasha, and what is probably the final act of the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia. The

article brings to light these previously unknown crimes and reveals the identities of some of the victims.

KEYWORDS: Sisak, Independent State of Croatia, Second World War, Ustasha crimes

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Approximately 50 km south of the Croatian capital Zagreb, sprawled across the confluence of three rivers – Sava, Kupa, and Odra – lies the small industrial city of Sisak. On the city's eastern boundary, where the River Sava meanders around a quiet neighbourhood known as Tomčev put, there is a small residential street composed of a single row of houses overlooking a tall grassy embankment. A solitary and inconspicuous street sign reveals its unusual name: Ulica Savskih žrtava, or Sava Victims' Street. This street is a rare reminder of what is today an unjustly neglected aspect of the city's past: the tragic story of the four-year-long Ustasha rule between 1941 and 1945. It commemorates the victims of a massacre perpetrated by the Ustasha on 4 May 1945, on the eve of their withdrawal from the city before the advancing army of Yugoslav Partisans. The scene of this crime, signified in the name given to the victims, was a secluded spot on the banks of the River Sava, less than a kilometre upstream from the street sign.

In the decades after the Second World War, the Sava victims were a visible object of public remembrance in Sisak. Apart from having the street named after them, there were two memorial plaques and a monument dedicated to their memory. And yet, the customary annual rituals around these monuments masked a striking lack of interest in the identities of the victims, or the facts of what happened to them. No scholarly works, or even serialized newspaper articles have ever been published about the last Ustasha crime in the city. Instead, memory revolved around the simple story about anonymous civilians who, having been incarcerated in the building of the former Teslić glass factory cum concentration camp, were dragged by the Ustasha to the bank of the Sava, and brutally murdered there. Questions about who the victims were, how many were killed or why, have never been properly asked.

This article tells, for the very first time, the story of the Sava victims. This is an important endeavour because, as we shall see, the murder on the banks of the Sava in Sisak was not an isolated event. There were other crimes committed in and around Sisak in the final weeks of the war, crimes which are very much part of the story of the Sava victims, yet which have been hitherto confined to oblivion. Among them are one of the last massacres of Serbs by the Ustasha, and what is probably the final act of the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia. The article brings to light these previously unknown crimes and, for the first time, reveals the identities of the victims.

However, the story of the Sava victims deserves to be told for reasons that extend beyond the well-established principle that all victims of the Nazis and their collaborators deserve a place in public memory. By a curious twist of fate, the last Ustasha crime in Sisak left an indelible mark on the post-war memory of Ustasha atrocities. When the scene of the crime was discovered, the authorities in the newly liberated city organized the recovery and burial of the bodies. These events were meticulously documented by a photographer. The 160 or so preserved images consist of a mixture of forensic photographs (wide shots of the corpses in situ and mid-range and close-up shots of individual victims), and artistically more accomplished images of grieving wives and mothers, or wide angled shots of rows of bodies suggestive of the scale of the massacre (Fig. 1).¹

Because of their poignancy and availability, these images instantly became the go-to generic illustrations of Ustasha atrocities, including those committed in the Jasenovac camp. From reports about Ustasha crimes published in the Yugoslav press in the immediate aftermath of the war, to the 12-part documentary series on the Independent State of Croatia broadcast on Croatian public television in 2021, there have been very few books, documentaries, or exhibitions on Jasenovac, or on Ustasha crimes more generally, which did not feature some of the iconic atrocity images from Sisak, in most instances without accurate attribution or information about their provenance.²

1 The collection can be found in the Croatian State Archives, HR-HDA-1422, Album ratni zločini 1, Z-161-325. The identity of the photographer who documented this event has been impossible to determine. It has been suggested by several authors that it was Hugo Fisher-Ribarić, a well-known partisan photographer, but this claim is based on hearsay, rather than reliable evidence. e.g. Nataša Mataušić, *Koncentracioni Logor Jasenovac – Fotomonografija*, (Zagreb: Spomen Područje Jasenovac, 2008), p.21.

2 E.g. Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača,

Elsewhere I examined in detail the post-war fate of the Sisak photographs, and the dynamic by which they became powerful, and contested, visual symbols of Ustasha depravity.³ This article, however, is not about the photographs, but about the events whose aftermath they portray. One problem



Zločini u Logoru Jasenovac (Zagreb: Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske, 1946), documentary film *Jasenovac*, directed by Gustav Gavrin and Kosta Hlavaty (Zagreb, Filmsko poduzeće FDJ, 1945), Hrvoje Klasić and Miljenko Bukovčan, *NDH*, Episode 11, 'Terror', Croatian Radio Television (HRT), 2021.

- 3 See Jovan Byford, *Picturing Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia: Atrocity Photographs and the Contested Memory of the Second World War in the Balkans* (Bloomsbury Academic: 2020); also, Jovan Byford, 'Picturing Jasenovac: Atrocity photography between evidence and propaganda' in Hildegard Frubis, Clara Oberle, and Agnieszka Pufelska (Eds), *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes: Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2019), pp. 227–248.



Fig. 1 a and b:
Images from
Sisak as
ubiquitous
illustrations
of Ustasha
atrocities
(HR-HDA-1422,
Z-177 and
Z-193)

that arises when images of an atrocity are used purely as illustrations is that critical scholarship about them becomes overly concerned with what these photographs do not show and what they are not an authentic representation of. Establishing what photographs *do* show is just as important, as a way of restoring their referentiality, authenticity and evidentiary value. Also, as Susan Crane put it, if certain atrocity photographs are to be used as ‘representative’ of some aspect of history, then historians must first ‘respond to an ethical injunction to find out more’ about what these photographs are actually of.⁴

The final reason for delving into the story of the Sava victims is to salvage their memory from revisionist manipulation. Since at least the 1970s, there

4 Susan A Crane, ‘Choosing not to look: Representation, repatriation and Holocaust atrocity photography’, *History and Theory* 47 (2008), p. 311.

has been speculation that bodies discovered on the bank of the Sava were victims not of an Ustasha massacre, but of Partisan revenge killings perpetrated after the liberation of Sisak. This alternative interpretation of the story of the Sava victims has gained traction since the 1990s, in part because revisionists successfully fed off the paucity of scholarly research about this crime. As we shall see, even some mainstream scholars in Croatia have lent credibility to the revisionist version of events by conceding that, because we don't know precisely what happened on the banks of the Sava on 4 May 1945, the revisionists' views cannot be dismissed outright. The article critically examines this argument, and by illuminating the facts of the case, hopes to provide some much-needed clarity.

/ Vicissitudes of memory of the Sava victims

In the late afternoon of 5 May 1945, soldiers of the 20th Serbian Brigade of the Yugoslav Army reached the main hospital complex in Sisak, across the River Kupa from the old city centre. By that time, most Ustasha units had already retreated towards Zagreb, so all that stood in the way of Partisan takeover of the city was the old bridge which had been rigged with explosives, several bunkers guarding the river crossing, and a machine gun firing from the nearby church tower.⁵

During their rapid advance through the suburbs of Sisak earlier that day, Partisan divisions maintained regular contact with hospital staff, many of whom had been involved with the resistance throughout the war. That morning, a courier was sent from the hospital with news that Ustasha were committing atrocities in the city. The previous night, the message said, a massacre took place on the banks of the River Sava. Among the victims were inmates held in the building of the local glass factory and residents whom the Ustasha had rounded up in the preceding days.⁶ Ivo Pedišić, a doctor at the hospital, later recalled that rumours about the massacre were rife that day, and that as soon as Partisans arrived, anxious relatives of persons known to be

5 Dragoljub Mirčetić-Duško, *Dvadeseta srpska brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1986), p.294.

6 Ivo Pedišić, 'Humanitarni ilegalni rad sisačke bolnice 1941 — 1945. Godine', *Putovi revolucije* 9, 1967, pp. 234–43.

in the hands of the Ustasha flocked to the hospital in search of information about their loved ones.⁷

The families' worst fears were confirmed the following day when a gruesome discovery was made on the banks of the Sava. Near the former glass factory, dozens of dead bodies were found floating in the shallow water or piled up over each other along the steep muddy riverbank. The authorities immediately organized the recovery of the bodies. The corpses were brought onto dry land, cleaned, and lined up along the embankment for identification.



⁷ Ibid. p.242.

Fig. 2 a and b:
Funeral
of the victims
in Sisak
(HR-HDA-1422,
Z-316 and
Z-307)



The recovery of the bodies was overseen by a hastily assembled commission comprising 'representatives of military and civilian authorities' as well as members of what was to become the municipal branch of the Country Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Accomplices for Croatia.⁸ The latter was not yet operational so soon after lib-

8 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', *Vjesnik*, 19 May 1945, p.3.

eration, which explains why a formal report of the kind that usually followed the commission's investigations of scenes of mass crimes was never compiled.⁹

The examination of the victims' remains revealed that they were killed with cold weapons. They died of stab wounds to the neck or the back of the head, or from skull fractures inflicted by an axe, a mallet, or a similar blunt instrument. Some corpses were found with hands tied behind their backs, or with weights tied to the shackles either to prevent escape during the short walk to the killing site, or to ensure that the corpses sunk to the bottom of the river. A significant proportion of the victims were women, and some of the corpses looked as if they could be of male adolescents. Also, several were wearing uniforms of the Domobrani, the regular army of the Independent State of Croatia.

As was customary at the time, the recovery of the bodies was a public event. It was observed by curious residents, including children, as well as by grief-stricken relatives of the victims, some of whom wept inconsolably as they recognized family members among the bodies. Early reports on the recovery suggested that bodies were left on the embankment for several days, to allow word of the massacre to spread, and for relatives to travel from surrounding villages to identify the victims. In the end, the bodies were placed in coffins and transported to the main municipal cemetery in Viktorovac, where they were buried in a mass grave on 12 May 1945.¹⁰

Photographs taken at the funeral suggest that this was a well-attended event, with all the trappings of the customary anti-fascist demonstrations that the authorities organised at the time in many liberated towns and cities in Croatia (Fig 2). A prominent theme at these events was moral outrage at the depravity of the Ustasha and calls for revenge and retribution.¹¹ At the funeral in Sisak, officials walked past the long line of partially open coffins carrying a banner with the message 'Perpetrators, you will not escape your sentence' (Fig 2b). Press reports emphasized that both victims and survivors are crying out for the ruthless pursuit and punishment of the Ustasha.¹² On the other

9 Earliest testimonies relating to this crime that I was able to locate were collected on 13 May 1945 (AJ 110, k.487, d.280).

10 'Popis žrtava fašističkog terora iz Siska', GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.242.

11 See Jovan Byford, *Picturing genocide*, Chapter 4.

12 'Dan pre oslobođenja Siska, Ustaše su pobile 400 zatvorenika iz logora u staklani Teslić', *Borba*, 28 May 1945, p.3; 'Zločini ustaško-nemačkih krvoloka u Sisku, Gročanima i Zagrebu', *Borba*, 20 May, 1945, p.2.

hand, the authorities at the time understood that the uncompromising calls for retribution pose a threat to the delicate interethnic relations in liberated areas. In his reports to superiors in Zagreb, Branko Drezga, public prosecutor for the Banija region, frequently alluded to the widespread perception among Croats that the Partisans were an alien force waging a vengeful, pro-Serbian war: 'a substantial proportion of the Croatian population' he wrote in June 1945, 'remains unconvinced that they too have been liberated, and that this is their state'.¹³ Thus, calls for revenge needed to be softened with more moderate rhetoric. A report on the Sisak killings published in the Zagreb daily *Vjesnik* in late May 1945 emphasized that most of those executed in Sisak were Croats, and that the arrival of the Partisans prevented further atrocities against the local, Croat population. Also, the article made no attempt to conceal that among the 'innocent people', the 'peasants, workers, clerks, employees and functionaries, women and young people' killed on the banks of the Sava were several members of the Domobrani army who, it was alleged, were killed 'as potential witnesses to the unimaginable crimes' perpetrated by the Ustasha in Jasenovac. Presenting Sisak's Croat population as victims of the Ustasha, and the Domobrani as witnesses rather than perpetrators, was probably a deliberate attempt by the authorities to reassure the Croat population. For the same reason, much was made of the fact that the funeral was officiated by a Roman Catholic priest: the large photograph accompanying the *Vjesnik* article showed him delivering a funeral sermon before a Partisan guard of honour.¹⁴

By the end of the 1940s, the mood of revenge subsided, and other motifs came to dominate the public memory of the war. In the 1950s, two memorial plaques dedicated to the Sava victims were erected in Sisak. The first, whose unveiling marked the tenth anniversary of the Partisan uprising in 1951, was placed on a small stone plinth on the bank of the River Sava, near where the killings took place (Fig. 3a). The second was erected seven years later, on the wall of the building of the former Teslić glass factory, from where the victims were taken to their deaths.¹⁵ In 1956, a larger and more representative memorial, the work of the local sculptor Želimir Janeš, was unveiled at the Viktorovac

13 'Izvjestaj javnom tužiocu Hrvatske, 30. VI 1945', HR-HDA-421, k.5.

14 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', p.3;

15 Ivica Šustić, *Spomenici revolucionarnog radničkog pokreta, NOB-a i socijalističke revolucije na području općine Sisak* (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1982), pp. 30, 32.

cemetery, marking the mass grave where victims were buried (Fig 3b).¹⁶ Also, a street near the cemetery was named after the Sava victims. Its name was changed in December 1991, as part of the campaign to rename 70 streets and five squares in Sisak, mostly those which bore the names of heroes of the Partisan struggle, or which were linked in some way to the history or geography of Yugoslavia.¹⁷ However, the memory of the Sava victims was not completely erased from the city's map: the name was assigned to the smaller, newly built street in Tomčev put, the one mentioned at the beginning of this article.¹⁸

Despite the existence of multiple memorials, the memory of the Sava victims had a distinctly superficial quality. The victims were referred to using familiar generalisations and clichéd labels – ‘victims of fascist terror’, ‘patriots and supporters of the struggle for national liberation’, ‘citizens of Sisak’, ‘innocent victims, fighters for freedom and new Yugoslavia’, and so on.¹⁹ Inaccuracies and gender bias permeated the descriptions. The death count fluctuated between ‘several hundred’ and 600, while the monument at the Viktorovac cemetery remembered the victims as ‘fathers, brothers and dear sons of the city’, even though as many as 40 percent of them were women.²⁰ Among those killed were mainly residents of Sisak and surrounding villages, yet the crime was sometimes given broader meaning by describing victims as ‘citizens of Sisak and other parts of our country’ or ‘four hundred people from Banija, Kordun, from Bosnia’.²¹ If identified at all, perpetrators were referred

- 16 The bronze monument consisted of a stylized representation of dead bodies floating in the river, next to which stood an inspirational message honouring the victims’ antifascist credentials and sacrifice, also cast in bronze. Both elements were mounted on short metal poles to give the impression that they were levitating above ground.
- 17 In 1991, the street was renamed after Jure Kaštelan, the Croatian poet and writer who died a year earlier. ‘Skupština općine Sisak: Odluka o promjeni i određivanju novih imena ulica i trgova u Sisku’, *Službeni vjesnik*, no. 78, 31 December 1991, pp. 36–38.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.38.
- 19 ‘U četvrtak: otkriće spomenika Savskim žrtvama’, *Jedinstvo*, no. 175–6, 24 November 1956, p.1; Šustić, *Spomenici revolucionarnog radničkog pokreta*, pp.32–33, ‘Otkrivena spomen ploča na savskom nasipu’, *Jedinstvo*, no. 80, 7 July 1951, p.1; ‘Otkriven spomenik Savskim žrtvama’, *Jedinstvo*, no. 177, 8 December 1956, pp.1–2.
- 20 ‘Otkriven spomenik Savskim žrtvama’, pp. 1–2; Šustić, *Spomenici revolucionarnog radničkog pokreta*, p.33. The monument at the cemetery mentions 600 victims. The most commonly cited death count in the post war period was 500.
- 21 ‘Stravična noć na Savi’, *Vjesnik željezare XII*, No. 8, 27 April 1963, p.12; ‘Otkriven spomenik Savskim žrtvama’, p.2.

to as ‘fascists’, ‘fascists and domestic traitors’ or ‘butchers’ [*krvnik*], rather than specifically as the Ustasha. The Sava victims received similar treatment in scholarly literature, where their fate was only ever mentioned in passing.²²

Several factors contributed to this superficial approach. The Sisak region had a rich ‘revolutionary tradition’: on 22 June 1941, the first Partisan detachment was founded in the Brezovica forest near the city. This event – an important source of civic pride – eclipsed most others, especially in the context of the broader tendency in post-war Yugoslav society to privilege the memoriali-

Fig 3.
Memorials to the Sava victims in Sisak monuments from (a) 1951 and (b) 1956 (reproduced with the publishers permission from Šustić, Ivica, *Spomenici revolucionarnog radničkog pokreta, NOV-a i socijalističke revolucije na području općine Sisak* (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1982), 31–32.)



22 E.g. Zdravko Dizdar, ‘Logori na području sjeverozapadne Hrvatske u toku drugoga svjetskog rata 1941 — 1945. godine’. *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* Vol. 22, No. 1–2, 1990, pp.83–110. Đuro Zatezalo mentioned 450 victims, but suggested, erroneously, that they were Serbs. See Zatezalo, *Radio sam svoj seljački i kovački posao* (Prosvjeta: Zagreb, 2005), p. 344.



sation of armed struggle and resistance. Civilian suffering tended to be seen as ‘a necessary sacrifice that must be made for one’s community’ rather than as an object of memory in its own right.²³ This resulted in civilian suffering being remembered in a formulaic way, which, while often exaggerating its scale and scope, also revealed a lack of regard for the particulars of the victims’ fate or identities. Even the victims of the Sisak concentration camp, among whom were thousands of Serbian children forcibly separated from their parents, mostly during the Kozara offensive in July 1942, received comparatively little attention until the 1970s.²⁴

Another barrier to better appreciation of civilian suffering, including in Sisak, was that, until the 1980s, key documents relating to war crimes – first and foremost evidence collected by the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes of the Occupiers and their Accomplices – were beyond the reach of most scholars. In late 1947 – early 1948, when the commission and its subsidiaries were abolished, their records were passed on to govern-

23 Wolfgang Hoepken, ‘War, memory and education in a fragmented society: the case of Yugoslavia’, *East European Politics and Society* 13, no. 1 (1998), p. 203.

24 For more in the Sisak camp see Dizdar, ‘Logori’, also Nataša Mataušić, *Diana Budisavljević: Prešućena heroina Drugog svjetskog rata* (Zagreb: Profil, 2019), pp. 164–176.

ment institutions and agencies, and it took decades for them to be transferred to the relevant archives and made public. In the meantime, the inaccessibility of documents fostered conjecture, and drove the overreliance on vague, standardised, and inconsistent descriptions of fascist crimes.

By the time archival sources became more widely available in the late 1980s, new perspectives on the Second World War were emerging throughout Yugoslavia, with radically different research priorities and foci of public memory. In Croatia, the Bleiburg massacre and the so called 'Way of the Cross' (Križni put) – both shorthand for the fate of collaborationist forces who fell into the hands of the Partisans in May 1945 – became the dominant theme of a new national martyrology. The newfound preoccupation with the wrongdoings of Yugoslav communists not only overshadowed any remaining interest in Ustasha atrocities but led to the whitewashing of the Independent State of Croatia's murderous record. One way in which this was achieved was through a particular form of denial, which involved attributing Ustasha atrocities to the Partisans.

This was the case with the massacre in Sisak. Since the 1970s, writers affiliated with the pro-Ustasha Croatian diaspora had been advancing the idea that bodies discovered on the banks of the Sava in early May 1945 were in fact victims of Partisan revenge killings. This idea was first mooted by the Ustasha in the immediate aftermath of the massacre: on the day of the liberation of Sisak, the main radio station in Zagreb announced that Partisans had massacred hundreds of residents upon entering the city.²⁵ This was part of familiar Ustasha propaganda which, at the time, was deliberately whipping up fear of Partisan atrocities, with the view of persuading as many Croat civilians as possible to retreat with the army, thus creating the impression, before the Allies, that Ustasha regime has popular support.²⁶ The claim about the Partisan atrocity in Sisak was revived a quarter of a century later in the book *Operation Slaughterhouse*, one of the first accounts of the Bleiburg massacre published in the United States. A brief testimony from a Croatian emigree identified as 'P.J' described 'a great number of horribly disfigured corpses' discovered 'near the Staklana glass factory on the right bank of the Sava River' in Sisak.

25 This was mentioned in the earliest post-war reports on the massacre. See 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', p.3.

26 See Narcisa Lengel-Krizman, *Zagreb u NOB-u* (Zagreb: Globus, 1980), p.277.

The victims' throats were slit, 'their eyes were gouged out and their teeth knocked loose from their mouths, probably to facilitate the removal of golden dentures. Severed arms and other disparate pieces of human anatomy were strewn all around'. These were, the testimony alleged, wounded Domobrani from the Sisak hospital who had been left behind during the retreat and were later captured, mutilated, and killed by the Partisans.²⁷ This account, which its author admitted was based on hearsay, was in fact an amalgamation of two unrelated events: the discovery of the bodies on the banks of the Sava and the extrajudicial killing (some 5km away) of 19 wounded Domobrani soldiers by the Partisans several days later.²⁸ In the testimony, the two events were fused together, embellished with gruesome details typical of atrocity propaganda, and given an ideologically convenient interpretation which exonerated the Ustasha and cast the Partisans (who were always identified in pro-Ustasha literature as predominantly Serbian) in the role of sadistic killers. The editor of *Operation Slaughterhouse*, John Prcela, also alleged that communist authorities regularly took photographs as they 'butchered the post-war victims' and then publicised them as evidence of 'Ustasha crimes'.²⁹ He mentioned 'pictures taken by Partisans of massacres they committed in Sisak' as a notable example of this practice.³⁰

In the 1990s, the revisionist claims were given a new lease of life. A series of articles published in 1992 in the weekly newspaper *Sisački tjednik* purported to reveal the 'truth' about communist crimes in and around Sisak, which had 'remained hidden for 47 years'.³¹ Although the articles did not explicitly

27 John Prcela and Stanko Guldescu (Eds), *Operation Slaughterhouse* (Philadelphia: Dorance and Company, 1970), Document LXXVII, p. 493. An edited version of *Operation Slaughterhouse* was published in Croatian in 2001 under the title *Croatian Holocaust*. See John Ivan Prcela and Dražen Živić, *Hrvatski holokaust: dokumenti i svjedočanstva o poratnim pokoljima u Jugoslaviji* (Zagreb: Hrvatsko društvo političkih zatvorenika, 2001).

28 The killing of the wounded Domobrani was acknowledged by the public prosecutor for the Banija region, Branko Drezga, in his report of 15 May 1945 ('Izveštaj javnom tužiocu Hrvatske, 15-V-1945', HR-HDA-421, k.5). Over the years, the number of soldiers said to have been killed grew to 116, although no credible evidence for this figure has ever been provided. See Lojzo Buturac, *Sisak 1945* (Sisak: Sisačka Biskupija, 2017), pp. 29–31.

29 Prcela and Guldescu (Eds), *Operation Slaughterhouse*, p.118.

30 Ibid, n. 18.

31 Željko Maljevac, 'Partizanski logor smrti', *Sisački tjednik*, 13 March 1992, p.10, 'Istina skrivana 47 godina', *Sisački tjednik*, 18 June 1992, p.7; Željko Maljevac, 'Kako je pobijeno osam tisuća hrvata', *Sisački tjednik*, 3 April, 1992, p.10; 'Otkrivena tajna Capraške šume', *Sisački tjednik*, 11

deny the events of the 4 May 1945, they indirectly brought into question the established interpretation by asserting that Partisans routinely pinned their massacres on the Ustasha, all as part of an orchestrated Serb-led campaign to instil in Croats ‘a sense of historical guilt and unpardonable, eternal sin’.³² Also, one of the articles suggested that the banks of the Sava later became the site of gruesome communist atrocities, while another described in detail the execution of a local Roman Catholic catechist, Petar Žagmeštar, which allegedly took place on 17 May 1945 at the very same spot where Ustasha perpetrated the massacre less than two weeks earlier.³³ These claims drew equivalence between the Partisans and the Ustasha, but, more importantly, they gave the banks of the Sava near the Teslić glass factory very different symbolism, appropriating it for the new, post-Yugoslav culture of memory focused on ‘Serbo-communist’ crimes. Almost two decades later, in an article published in the main Catholic weekly in Croatia, *Glas Koncila*, the right-wing journalist Tomislav Vuković revitalised the revisionist argument when he asserted that iconic images of dead bodies on the banks of the Sava in Sisak were perfidiously sold to the public as evidence of an Ustasha atrocity, while they in fact showed the aftermath of a ‘Partisan massacre’.³⁴

Importantly, the questioning of the conventional story of the Sava victims is not confined to the usual suspects among Croatian right-wing revisionist. For example, Tomislav Vuković’s claim about the photographs from Sisak was not based on testimonies published in *Operation Slaughterhouse* or similar literature. Instead, it drew on the 2008 book *Jasenovac: A Photo-monograph* by the historian Nataša Mataušić. In that work, Mataušić – curator of the photographic collection at the Croatian Historical Museum in Zagreb and one of the authors of the permanent exhibition at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum which opened in 2006 – examined the photographic record of Jasenovac and drew attention to the questionable authenticity of many of the

June 1992, p.5;

32 Željko Maljevac, ‘Partizanski logor smrti’, p.10; ‘Istina skrivana 47 godina’, p.7.

33 Irinka Vidović, ‘Stratišta sisačkih Hrvata’, *Sisački vjesnik*, 9 July 1992, p.6; ‘Istina skrivana 47 godina’, p.7, see also Lojzo Buturac, *Sisak 1945*, pp.35–38.

34 See Tomislav Vuković, ‘Kako je partizanski masakr pripisan ustašama’ *Glas Koncila*, no. 9, 1 March 2009, p. 25; reprinted in Tomislav Vuković, *Drugačija povijest (O Srbu, Jasenovcu, Glini...)* (Zagreb, Glas Koncila, 2012), pp.137–146.

images that have been used over the years to depict the killings at this camp.³⁵ Mataušić accurately identified the Sisak photographs as a notable example of the way images that demonstrably have little to do with Jasenovac have been attributed to it. However, in her analysis of the Sisak case, Mataušić alluded to the claim, made by ‘some researchers’, that photographs from the banks of the River Sava ‘show members of the Croatian armed forces murdered by the Partisans after their arrival in Sisak’. Although Mataušić did not endorse this claim, she nevertheless conceded that ‘the culpability of this or that side’ for the crime ‘cannot be established until hard evidence is found’, and she called for ‘utmost caution’ when apportioning blame.³⁶ It was this acknowledgment that revisionists may have a point that Vuković went on to exploit.

Mataušić’s agnosticism was informed by the thinking of another mainstream Croatian historian, Mario Jareb. In 2006, the publisher of Mataušić’s book sent an early draft of the manuscript to Jareb for review. In that draft, Mataušić acknowledged the views of unnamed revisionist ‘researchers’, but unequivocally attributed the killings to the Ustasha. Jareb, a scholar of the Independent State of Croatia and frequent media contributor on the topics of communist crimes and Croatian memory politics, was of the view that the revisionist interpretation was plausible, and he convinced Mataušić to explicitly acknowledge this in the book.³⁷ Jareb’s influence on the wording in the final version of Mataušić’s manuscript is evident in the fact that the above-quoted sentence about the need for ‘utmost caution’ when apportioning blame until hard evidence is found was taken more or less verbatim from Jareb’s review.

Significantly, Jareb’s opinion was not based on any concrete evidence pointing to Partisan culpability. It was informed by nothing more than his assessment of the plausibility of what was reported in the daily *Vjesnik* in May 1945, and a simple, but fundamentally flawed premise: ‘there is no hard proof that the Ustasha committed this crime’ Jareb wrote in the review, ‘while at the same time, it is well known that units of the Yugoslav Army commit-

35 Nataša Mataušić, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac: Fotomonografija*.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

37 Mario Jareb, ‘Predmet: Mišljenje o znanstveno-stručnoj kvaliteti rada Nataše Mataušić pod naslovom *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac: Fotomonografija*’, 5 July 2006, Archives of the Jasenovac Memorial Area, JUSPJ 2006, pp.1–11.

ted numerous crimes after they entered cities in Croatia and Bosnia'.³⁸ The suggestion that criminality of the Partisans is common knowledge while that of the Ustasha needs to be proven not only gives the benefit of the doubt to revisionist writers, but also reveals that behind Jareb's ostensibly 'objective', agnostic position lies, if not full endorsement, then certainly an affinity for the revisionist argument.

One way of counteracting the ongoing revisionist speculation regarding the Sava victims, whose inevitable consequence has been the further marginalisation and delegitimization of their memory, is to go beyond conjecture, and look at the available evidence. The remainder of the article is an attempt to do just that, namely, to reconstruct the events leading up to the 4 May massacre, on the basis on hitherto unexplored evidence uncovered in archives in Sisak, Zagreb and Belgrade.

/ The story of the massacre(s) on the Sava

In the winter of 1996, the Croatian state television's documentary series 'Destinies' (Sudbine), featured an interview with the 96-year-old Josip Aleksić. With noticeable deference, and against the sounds of an upbeat marching song, the narrator introduced 'Mr Aleksić', a former Domobrani colonel, as 'the oldest living senior officer of the Croatian armed forces'. The 'legendary colonel's' long-awaited return to his 'liberated homeland' from exile in France was seen by the programme's authors as the perfect opportunity to honour his 'sacrifices' for Croatia and record an interview about his 'eventful and interesting life'.³⁹

During the 45-minute interview, Aleksić recounted his war time experience, much of which was spent in Sisak. In 1941, he defected from the Yugoslav army where he was a serving officer and joined the Domobrani. He formed and led an engineering battalion in Sisak (I obkoparska bojna), before taking overall charge, in early 1943, of the city's defence and the safeguarding of the strategically important Zagreb — Sisak — Sunja railway line. The programme presented Aleksić as an honourable and dedicated officer, respected by troops and civilians alike.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 3

³⁹ 'Sudbine: Josip Aleksić', written and directed by Vladimir Tadej, HRT, November 1996.

This account stands in stark contrast with how Aleksić, a Pavelić loyalist who was declared a war criminal by the Yugoslav authorities in 1947, was remembered after the war by residents of Sisak, especially those who had dealings with the city's police.⁴⁰ Aleksić was one of the pillars of the city's oppressive security apparatus alongside local Ustasha officials, most notably Roko Faget, a local businessman who held the rank of 'logornik' within the Ustasha organisation; Ferdinand Škarek, the chief of police; and Josip Stürmer, the city's mayor.⁴¹ Although police work fell outside Aleksić's remit as a regular army officer, he was involved in the running of covert intelligence operations. He set up a dedicated counter-espionage unit in Sisak comprising undercover police agents dressed in Domobrani uniforms. Their task was to infiltrate and expose pro-Partisan networks within the military and the city's administration. This intelligence work reflected the growing fear of pro-Partisan sentiments among the rank and file of the Croatian Armed Forces and the penetration of the army by Partisan intelligence.⁴² This fear was well founded. At that time, the Partisans were receiving detailed and reliable information about troop movements in Sisak and the position and strength of Ustasha and German units stationed around the whole Banija region. A Partisan undercover agent in the city who went by the cryptonym 'Block' reported in September 1943 that he was handling informants in various branches of the military, including at the headquarters of the 'notorious butcher Colonel Aleksić'.⁴³

- 40 Aleksić was declared a war criminal by the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupiers and Their Accomplices See 'Odluka o utvrđivanju zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača – Aleksić Josip', HR-HDA-306, k.354, Zh-k20773.
- 41 Faget and Stürmer both evaded justice after the war and settled, together with many other Ustasha (including Pavelić), in Buenos Aires, Argentina. See Klasić, 'Društveni život u Sisku u vrijeme Drugog svjetskog rata', *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 32, no. 3 (2000), p. 570. Škarek and many of his deputies were arrested and executed. Škarek was hanged in Sisak in July 1945.
- 42 See Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941 – 1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 434–439; Mladen Colić, 'Simpatizeri NOP-a u domobranstvu NDH u Zagrebu' in *Zagreb u NOB-i i socijalističkoj revoluciji*, Vol II (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1971) pp. 269–84.
- 43 Report dated 22. September 1943, in OZNA Rajonski obaveštajni Centar Sisak: Izveštaji i dnevne informacije 24.8.1943 – 6.2.1944, HR-HDA-1491/5.12.1, pp. 28–30. Another agent named Kostur (Skeleton) also reported having informants among German and Ustasha soldiers, but also railwaymen who were supplying information on train movements (report dated 10. October 1943, *ibid.*, pp. 7–10).

Aleksić's intelligence operations bore fruit and waves of arrests followed. In the autumn of 1943, organised resistance in the city was brought to a standstill after several prominent members were captured, many others fled the city and joined the Partisans, while those left behind were paralysed with paranoia about traitors within their ranks.⁴⁴ Testimonies collected after the war suggest that Aleksić was not just involved in gathering intelligence. He was a regular visitor to the city's police headquarters and the local concentration camp, where, usually at night, he actively participated, alongside police officials and camp guards, in the brutal interrogation and torture of arrested suspects.⁴⁵

The underground network in Sisak was dealt a further and decisive blow in June and July 1944, shortly after Aleksić departed from Sisak, when 82 suspects were detained. Among them were ten Domobrani officers, two judges (including Milan Žegarac, leader of the local People's Liberation Committee) and at least one police official.⁴⁶ Some of those arrested were summarily executed, others were deported to Zagreb for further interrogation (where most were killed), while the remaining 56 were sent to almost certain death at the Jasenovac concentration camp.⁴⁷

Most of those killed on the banks of the River Sava on 4 May 1945 were detained following a similar large-scale police operation, carried out on four consecutive nights between 12 and 16 April that year. To many residents of Sisak these arrests, the last on this scale to be carried out in the city, probably looked like yet another police action against the communist underground network. And yet, the raids differed from previous ones in several important

44 'ROC Sisak, izvještaj za mesec decembar 1943' 5 January 1944, HR-HDA-1491/5.12.1. OZNA, p.22.

45 See various witness testimonies collected in relation to the indictment of Josip Aleksić, HR-HDA-306, k.354, Zh. Br. 20773-20782, also AJ 110, Dos. br. 4667.

46 For more on the arrests, see testimonies in HR-HDA-306, k.690. At the time of the arrests, Aleksić had already left the city to take up a desk job in Zagreb. He later resumed active duty in Lika, before being appointed head of the Croatian army's military intelligence in late April 1945. The demise of the Independent State of Croatia prevented him from ever taking up the post. See Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941 – 1945*, p.463, Nikica Barić, *Ustroj kopnene vojske domobranstva Nezavisne Države Hrvatske, 1941. – 1945* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2003), p. 372.

47 See 'Odluka o utvrđivanju zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača – Aleksić Josip', HR-HDA-306, k.354, Zh-k20773 and associated documents Zh. Br. 20773-20782, also AJ 110, Dos. br. 4667.

respects. For one thing, they were neither carefully planned nor informed by intelligence work. Nor were they masterminded by the city's notorious chief of police, Ferdinand Škarek. More importantly, the motive for the raids was less obvious. By the spring of 1945, there was little threat to the Ustasha authorities from within the city. Previous police operations had effectively ended all forms of organised resistance in Sisak.⁴⁸ A much bigger source of concern, which no number of arrests could alleviate, were the destruction of the city's infrastructure by Allied bombing raids, the unstoppable advance of the Partisan armies and the imminent demise of the Ustasha state.⁴⁹

So, who ordered the mass arrests in April 1945, and why? Part of the answer lies in the impact on Sisak of the broader military and political developments in the Independent State of Croatia at the time. The raids started on 12 April, the very day that the Yugoslav Army broke the six-month-long stalemate at the Syrmian front and began its military advance through Slavonia towards the Croatian capital. Sarajevo, the second largest city in the Independent State of Croatia, had fallen to the Partisans a week earlier, which precipitated the rapid retreat of German and Croatian forces from central and western Bosnia. Partisan units were advancing towards the banks of the River Una on the Croatian-Bosnian border, in preparation for the offensive towards Sisak and Karlovac, and ultimately towards Zagreb. By the time the arrests in Sisak began, the Ustasha leadership in Zagreb understood that military defeat was inevitable and it began considering different options, including forging an alliance with, or surrendering to, the Allies in Italy or Austria.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the armed forces of the Independent State of Croatia, weakened by heavy losses, low morale, and frequent defections to the Partisans, were in disarray. Formally under German command and entirely dependent on the Wehrmacht for the supply of arms and ammunition, units were being constantly reorganised and moved around. In April 1945, the key strategic objective was to hold the so-called 'Zvonimir' defensive line running from

48 A report from the Pokuplje branch of the Partisan youth organisation SKOJ dated 28 April 1945 stated that there was only one member of SKOJ left in the city and that all other underground activists had fled Sisak. HR-HDA-1225, SKOJ-10-1074, p.2.

49 On the bombing of Sisak see Nikica Valent, 'Savezničko bombardiranje Siska u Drugom svjetskom ratu kroz sisačke "Hrvatske novine" i predmete Gradskog muzeja Sisak', *Godišnjak Gradskog muzeja Sisak* 9 (2009), pp.305–322.

50 See Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i NDH* (Zagreb: Liber, 1977), pp.278–310.

Koprivnica to Karlovac, which sought to slow down the advance of the Partisans towards Zagreb. Sisak, which was located just south of this line acquired new strategic importance, and army units flooded the area. At the end of March 1945, in the last major reorganisation of the Croatian army, Vjekoslav Max Luburić, the notorious former commander of the Jasenovac camp and one of the most bloodthirsty Ustasha officials, was placed in charge of the 11 Army Corps. Under his command was the 18th Assault Division which was being assembled in Sisak. This division was composed mainly of members of the Ustasha Defence Brigades, units previously involved in guarding Ustasha concentration camps who were now reassigned to regular combat duties due to the shortage of manpower.⁵¹ This meant that in early April 1945, hardened Ustasha killers responsible for some of the worst atrocities against civilians, were in town.⁵² The arrival of 'Luburić's Ustasha' – whom the locals also referred to as 'Black Ustasha' – caused fear among the civilian population in Sisak, while their arrogance, insubordination and propensity to violence deepened existing rivalries and distrust between different army formations, especially between Ustasha and Domobrani units.

A revealing account of events leading up to the arrests in April 1945 comes from an unusual source: the post-war testimony of Agata Benc, the landlady of 'Lovački rog' (or 'K lovačkom rogu'), one of the oldest and, at the time, best known restaurants in Sisak.⁵³ At the end of 1944, some of the city's most powerful men, including Faget, Stürmer and Škarek became regular customers at Benc's eatery. They gathered there to discuss business matters, unless they were accompanied by their wives, in which case conversation turned to small talk and casual banter over drinks and cold meats. In the spring of 1945, they were occasionally joined by Miroslav Schlacher, commander of a motorised brigade (Brzi zdug) which had been deployed to the area to deal with Partisan attacks on villages around Petrinja and Sisak.⁵⁴

- 51 Barić, *Ustroj kopnene vojske domobranstva Nezavisne Države Hrvatske, 1941. — 1945.*, p.385, 405, also Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941 — 1945*, p. 460.
- 52 The arrival of Luburić's Ustasha at the time, and the onset of a reign of terror was noted also in the 28 April 1945 report by the regional branch of SKOJ. See, HR-HDA-1225, SKOJ-10-1074, p.2.
- 53 The restaurant was in 4 Kranjčevićeva Street. The restaurant currently located in the same building has been closed since 2020 due to damage caused by the earthquake that struck Sisak in December that year.
- 54 On Schlacher's deployment in the region see Barić, *Ustroj kopnene vojske domobranstva Nezavisne Države Hrvatske, 1941. — 1945.*, pp. 252–255; Vladimir Valjan, *Brigada Franjo Oguinac Seljo*

In the evening of 12 April 1945, Schlacher hosted a party at 'Lovački rog'. He was in town for the official celebration of the fourth anniversary of the creation of the Independent State of Croatia, so the event may have been a way of thanking the local officials – including the mayor and the police chief – for their hospitality.⁵⁵ Shortly before midnight, the party atmosphere in the restaurant was ruined by the arrival of a group of armed Ustasha soldiers. The unwelcome guests, whom Benc identified as 'Luburić's Ustasha' came in looking for the chief of police Škarek. Schlacher ordered the men to leave, reminding them that he was in charge and that they had no business with the chief of police. A tense stand-off ensued. The Ustasha insisted that they were acting on higher authority (undoubtedly a reference to Luburić) and that they would not take orders from Schlacher. To defuse the situation, Škarek volunteered to go, but was advised by others do so only if accompanied by Schlacher and his men. Clearly, leaving the restaurant alone in the middle of the night with a group of Luburić's men was a dangerous proposition even for the chief of police. The Ustasha responded that Schlacher was welcome to come along, but that his men had to stay behind. Schlacher and Škarek got up, but then so did the whole of Schlacher's armed escort, who stated that they would risk a gunfight with the Ustasha before allowing their commander to leave unaccompanied. Benc recalled a tremendous noise rising in front of the restaurant, as all the cars and motorbikes fired up their engines at once and proceeded in a convoy through the empty streets of the city under curfew, towards the police headquarters.

Schlacher and Škarek returned to the restaurant several hours later, accompanied by the Ustasha. They shared a table in the empty dining hall and had some of the leftover food from the party. The mood was subdued, as the men finished up in silence and left.⁵⁶ The following morning Sisak woke up to the news of the first wave of mass arrests, carried out by police officials accompanied by Luburić's men.

The precise number of people from Sisak and the surrounding villages who were arrested over the four nights is unknown, but, based on survivor

(Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1968), p. 301; also, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda*, Part V, vol. 38 (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut Jugoslovenske narodne armije. 1969), p.630.

55 'Svečana proslava 10. travnja u Sisku', *Hrvatske novine*, 14 April 1945, no. 15, p.3.

56 Testimony of Agata Benc (19 June 1945), *AJ* 110, k.487, d.281, pp.1–2.

testimonies, it can be estimated to have been around 100. Of this number around half were Serbs and they were targeted for no reason other than their ethnicity. Among them were several couples, parents with adult children, and siblings, and just over half were women. Also arrested were seven Jewish men who had avoided previous deportations probably because they were married to an 'Aryan'.⁵⁷ The rest were Croats, of whom very few if any had links with the Partisans. Most were arrested for being acquaintances, colleagues or family members of individuals who had been investigated by the police in the past, including during the raids of the summer of 1944. Among this group were quite a few railwaymen and postal workers, but also some Domobrani soldiers, mostly naval officers.⁵⁸ During interrogation, the detainees were not presented with any incriminating evidence, and their captors made no reference to a specific incident, such as an act of sabotage, that might have precipitated the arrests. Instead, detainees were quizzed about their links with the Partisans, and they were encouraged to incriminate each other, which some of them did, under torture.⁵⁹ The arrested Domobrani, who were interrogated separately, were asked similarly vague or obsolete questions, about a foiled mutiny in the barracks in Sisak three months earlier, or about sabotage of communication equipment in their unit.⁶⁰

The Sisak raids clearly had little military or intelligence value. Instead, they fitted an emerging deadly pattern that Luburić and his men had established elsewhere in the preceding weeks and months. As they retreated from

- 57 On the life of the Jewish community in Croatia after the deportations to Auschwitz in 1943 see Ivo Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2001), Chapter 35. One of the arrested Jews, Marko Lieberman had already been arrested as a communist sympathiser in 1942. He was deported to Jasenovac, from where he was released six months into his 12-month sentence ('Odluka o puštanju Marka Liebermana na slobodu iz logora Jasenovac', Archive of the Jasenovac Memorial Area, A-SPJ-671). According to his wife Judita, Marko Lieberman spent some of the time between the summer 1942 and end of 1944 in Germany as a labourer (Testimony of Judita Lieberman, 24 November 1945, AJ110, k.487, d.298).
- 58 In the autumn of 1944, there were mass desertions of sailors from the Domobrani river flotilla, which may have made the authorities especially suspicious of sailors as the potential fifth column within the army ranks. See Barić, Nikica, 'Djelovanje i ustroj mornarice NDH na rijekama', *Istorija 20 veka*, 1, 2014, pp.125–142.
- 59 Testimony of Marjan Kolak (21 May 1945), AJ 110, k.497, d.820, p.2; Testimony of Zdenko Stiić (22 May 1945), AJ 110, k.497, d.823, p.1.
- 60 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.2; Testimony of Rajković Ivan (24 May 1945), AJ 110, k.497, d.819.



Fig 4:
The building
of the
Sokolana
in Sunja.
Postcard from
the 1930s

one city or region to the next, they left behind a trail of terror and destruction. They organised punitive, vengeful raids against ideological enemies and other ‘undesirable elements’, as well as against suspected deserters or mutineers from the ranks of the Domobrani.⁶¹ Such raids had been carried out in Sarajevo in late March, and later also in and around Zagreb and elsewhere.⁶² In mid-April, it was Sisak's turn. Therefore, when Luburić's men crashed Schlacher's party, it was to announce their arrival as the new bosses in town and to set in motion the final campaign of terror. The Ustasha came to ‘Lovački rog’ looking for the chief of police probably because they needed the names and addresses of the ‘undesirables’ and the help of local gendarmes to track them down.

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61 Goldstein, *Jasenovac* (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2018), p.724.

62 Slavko Dadić, ‘Posljednji dani okupatorske tiranije u Sarajevu’, *Sarajevo u revoluciji*, IV (Sarajevo: Istorijski arhiv, 1977), p. 181–195, Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), p.350.

On each of the four nights, arrested persons were taken to the Sisak police headquarters for processing, before being loaded onto trucks, and driven 20 km to the south, to the village of Lukavec Posavski. From there they proceeded on foot, first to the nearby ferry crossing over the Sava, and then a further 5 km to a local Ustasha stronghold, the village of Sunja.⁶³

In Sunja, prisoners were incarcerated in the Sokolana, a large building on the outskirts of the village which once served as the training facility for the Soko gymnastics organisation before it was turned into a restaurant and a village hall (Fig.4). In documents of the Yugoslav war crimes commission, Sokolana is often referred to as an Ustasha 'camp' ('Logor Sunja' or 'Logor u Sunji'). Although it must have felt like one to the prisoners, the building was never formally designated a 'camp' and there is no evidence that it was used as a detention facility prior to the arrival of prisoners from Sisak. After all, the direct rail link with Jasenovac, which is less than 40 km from Sunja, meant that Ustasha never needed a camp in the village.⁶⁴

Jasenovac was probably the intended destination for the prisoners from Sisak, and the reason why they were brought to Sunja in the first place. At the time, the largest camp in the Independent State of Croatia was still operational and served as a killing site for deportees from different parts of the country.⁶⁵ Because the Sisak — Sunja railway line had been damaged in the preceding months by Partisan sabotage and Allied bombing raids, the plan was probably to transport the prisoners from Sisak to Sunja by road and continue from there by train to Jasenovac.⁶⁶

In Sokolana, prisoners were treated harshly by local guards, and were subjected to insults, threats, and beatings. Again, the perpetrators were

63 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.1.

64 Just 10 days before the arrival of prisoners from Sisak, Ustasha from Sunja deported a group of locals suspected of Partisan sympathies to Jasenovac (see 'Zapisnik 64: Zločini crnih ustaša u Sunji', HR-HDA-309, k.690).

65 Luburić sent over 400 people to Jasenovac from Sarajevo in early April 1945. As late as 16 — 17 April, more than a thousand inmates from the Lepoglava camp were loaded into cattle cars and transported to Jasenovac where they were killed on arrival. Dejan Motl and Đorđe Mihovilović, *Zaboravljeni: Knjiga o posljednjim jasenovačkim logorašima* (Donja Gradina: JUSP Donja Gradina, 2015), p. 64; Goldstein, *Jasenovac*, pp. 731–2.

66 The railway line connecting Sunja and Jasenovac was still operational at the time, see Radomir Bulajić, 'Borbe Druge armije JA za oslobođenje Hrvatske s posebnim osvrtom na oslobođenje Zagreba', *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 18, no. 2, 1986, p.60.

Luburić's men who controlled Sunja, many of whom were affiliated with the First Ustasha Defence Brigade. Post-war testimonies mentioned as the main offenders the first lieutenant Ivan Klarić, a captain Katić (member of the First Ustasha Defence Brigade's investigation department), junior officer Danijel Rožić, and a former guard from Jasenovac, Muftić.⁶⁷ The small number of Jews among the inmates were singled out for particularly violent abuse and public humiliation. Among the prisoners brought to Sunja on 15 April were Marko Lieberman, an engineer at the tannin factory in Sisak, and Rudolf Fried, a local businessman. The two were picked on by Klarić and another guard and made to spend the next night in a stress position in the middle of the large hall. The Ustasha kicked and beat them, and occasionally ordered them to run around and perform humiliating exercises.⁶⁸

The Ustasha in Sunja were displeased about the growing number of prisoners under their jurisdiction, especially as it was clear to them that the onward transport to Jasenovac was not forthcoming. At one point, the guard Danijel Rožić was overheard cursing his colleagues in Sisak for sending the prisoners to Sunja instead of 'getting rid of the vermin' themselves.⁶⁹ On 17 April, the day after the last group of prisoners arrived from Sisak, the decision was made to dramatically reduce their number. During the regular evening rollcall, inmates were divided along ethnic lines: Serbs and Jews in one group, Croats in the other. Among the prisoners were Julija Alaica and her adult children Nada and Dušan. They were arrested two days earlier as Serbs, but during the rollcall, Nada, who was married to a Croat and had a different surname (Peskar) managed to negotiate her way into a different group than the rest of her family.⁷⁰ The inmates clearly understood that, for the Ustasha, categorising prisoners by ethnicity was never a purely administrative measure; being seen as a Croat improved the chances of survival. Serbs and Jews were then told that they would be driven to the Sunja train station for transportation

67 Other names mentioned in testimonies are Stjepan Bakarić, Sadik Hibić, Milan Dešković, and surnames Božić, Buljubašić, and Čučur, see AJ 110, k.497, d.818, also k.497, d.820; k.497, d.822. Most survivors mentioned Klarić only by his surname, but a resident of Sunja mentioned Ivan as his first name (Testimony of Kaja Miškulin, HR-HDA-306, k.690). For information about Katić, see Marko Ručnov, *Zašto Jasenovac?* (Donja Gradina: Spomen područje Donja Gradina, 2022), p.196. On Muftić and Rožić see AJ 110, F-17161 and F-25101, respectively.

68 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.1.

69 Testimony of Danica Cvijanović (21 May 1945), AJ 110, k.497, d.824, p.1.

70 Testimony of Nada Peskar (22 November 1945), AJ 110 k.487, d.256.

elsewhere. The prisoners' hands were secured behind their backs, before they were tied to one another, by their upper arms, in groups of two or three. Several Serbian prisoners were savagely beaten in the process.⁷¹

Danica Cvijanović, a 26-year-old Serbian woman from Sisak had been in the Sokolana for less than two days when she found herself on the move again. Like her fellow prisoners, she was ordered to climb into a horse-drawn farm cart and lie face down. But, instead of to the train station, the Serbs and Jews were driven back north, towards the place where they had crossed the Sava on their way to Sunja a few days earlier. They reached the river in the early hours of the morning. In a secluded spot between the villages of Gradusa Posavska and Gornja Letina, where the road ran on top of the raised embankment, the convoy stopped. By this time, most of the prisoners probably realised what was about to happen. They were unloaded off the carts and dragged 7 — 8 meters to the river's edge. The Ustasha proceeded to execute them with small axes and knives, before pushing their bodies down the riverbank. Danica Cvijanović was the only survivor and witness to this crime. She was one of a few people in the transport who was not tied to another prisoner, and in the back of the cart, she was able to untie her hands. An Ustasha hauled her to the riverbank, but in the last moment she dodged the swinging axe and slid down the muddy embankment. The blade grazed the back of her head, but she was able to swim across the Sava, and with the help of local peasants, reach the territory under Partisan control.

In her testimony to the war crimes commission's investigators, Cvijanović estimated that around a hundred people were executed that night.⁷² Marjan Kolak, a prisoner in Sunja who witnessed the Serbs and Jews being taken away put the number at around 50.⁷³ After the war, the municipal authorities in Sisak and the local branch of the Country Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Accomplices for Croatia compiled several lists of victims based on different sources including witness statements, registers of war dead, compensation claims, and so on.⁷⁴ While there are some

71 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.2.

72 Testimony of Danica Cvijanović, p.1.

73 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.2.

74 'Spisak žrtava', A-SPJ-2332 (Original source: HR-HDA-306, Zkrz-Zh, br. 12264-12267), 'Popis žrtava fašističkog terora iz Siska' and 'Podaci porodica žrtava fašističkog terora' both in GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.242, 'Spisak poginulih boraca i žrtava fašističkog terora' *Jedinstvo*, no.

inaccuracies, ambiguities and discrepancies in these lists, there is sufficient agreement between them to allow 47 victims to be identified with a satisfactory degree of certainty.⁷⁵ Even if we allow for the possibility that not all victims have been accounted for, it is likely that the number of people killed near Gradusa was probably between 40 and 50. The names of the 47 identified victims, some of whom do not feature in any of the later censuses of the victims of the Second World War in Yugoslavia, is provided in Appendix A.

Although the massacre near Gradusa Posavska was known to the authorities after the war, it was never investigated, documented, or memorialised. Data collected about the victims mostly mentioned that they were killed or had 'disappeared' in the 'Sunja camp'. The date of death was sometimes accurately recorded, the correct location almost never. An early press report on the fate of the Sava victims in Sisak mentioned in passing that there were Jews among the prisoners in Sunja who were tortured and killed and then 'thrown into the Sava' but there was no reference to the Serbian victims, or an accurate description of what had happened and where.⁷⁶ It was certainly not noted, either then, or later, that this was one of the last mass atrocities against Serbs by the Ustasha, and that the seven Jews from Sisak murdered near Gradusa Posavska – Marko Lieberman (44), an engineer at the Sisak tannin factory, David Egić-Eckstein (65) a medical doctor, and five local businessmen, Rudolf Fried (49), Iso Biermann (48), Leo Berger (39), Ferdinand Majer (56), and Ljudevit Spitzer (49) – were the last group of Jews in Croatia to be arrested and killed by the Ustasha in an act of mass murder.⁷⁷

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610, 10 April 1965; 'Prijave ratne štete', GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.209; 'Spisak žrtava', Zkrz OK Banija, HR-HDA-306, k.690; 'Kartoteka žrtava', HR-HDA-306, microfilms Z-3007 and Z-3012.

75 Of this number seven were Jews, and 40 were Serbs. Among the Serbian prisoners there were 21 women.

76 'Dan pre oslobođenja Siska, Ustaše su pobile 400 zatvorenika iz logora u staklani Teslić', p.3. One of the seven Jews, Marko Lieberman, was later included among the victims of Jasenovac, probably because he spent time in that camp in 1942 (see note 57), and the details of his release were not widely known.

77 More information on Egić-Eckstein and Marko Lieberman can be found in the *Židovski biografski leksikon*, available online at <https://zbl.lzmk.hr/>.

Back in Sunja, the Ustasha continued with the violent, and largely pointless interrogation of the remaining inmates. In addition to being beaten during questioning, female prisoners were subjected to sexual intimidation and violence. Unlike the men, women were regularly stripped during interrogation, and there were several documented instances of rape or attempted rape.⁷⁸ Among the victims of sexual abuse was Vida Čanković, a 17-year-old Serbian girl from Sisak. She was, by all accounts, the only Serbian inmate who was not selected for execution in Gradusa. Instead, the Ustasha kept her in Sunja. Her body was later found among the victims of the massacre in Sisak.⁷⁹

During the remaining time in Sunja, a small number of inmates were released, ostensibly due to 'lack of evidence', but most probably because of intervention by friends and relatives in Sisak. One group was freed at the behest of none other than Max Luburić. On 18 April, the day after the killing of Serbs and Jews, Luburić paid a visit to the Sokolana. He was passing through Sunja on the way to Jasenovac, where he was dispatched to coordinate the liquidation of the camp.⁸⁰ Luburić, a notorious attention seeker, addressed the prisoners gathered in the hall of the Sokolana with the callous duplicity for which he was once well known among prisoners in Jasenovac.⁸¹ He enquired after Jewish inmates Lieberman, Berger and Biermann, even though he almost certainly knew that they were dead. He asked the female inmates about the whereabouts and wellbeing of their children. He made the false promise to arrested Domobrani officers that beatings would stop and that they would be given army rations. But then he also asked after 'kuglaši' – 'the bowlers' – members of the local bowling club in Sisak who got caught up in the arrests.⁸² Several days later, most of the 'kuglaši' were released.⁸³ It is unclear

78 Testimony of Veljko and Marija Osmec (21 May 1945), AJ 110, k.497, d.822; Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.3.

79 Vida Čanković was arrested together with her brother Petar, who, by all accounts, was killed in Sunja. Testimony of Simo Dimić, AJ 110, k.487, d. 202.

80 Goldstein, *Jasenovac*, p.732.

81 *Ibid.*, pp. 393–4.

82 Bowling was the second most popular sport in Sisak after football. The city had five bowling clubs and a bowling association. See Klasić, 'Društveni život us Sisku za vrijeme Drugog svjetskog rata', p. 539.

83 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.4, Testimony of Janko Nožinić (22 May 1945), AJ 110, k.497, d. 818.

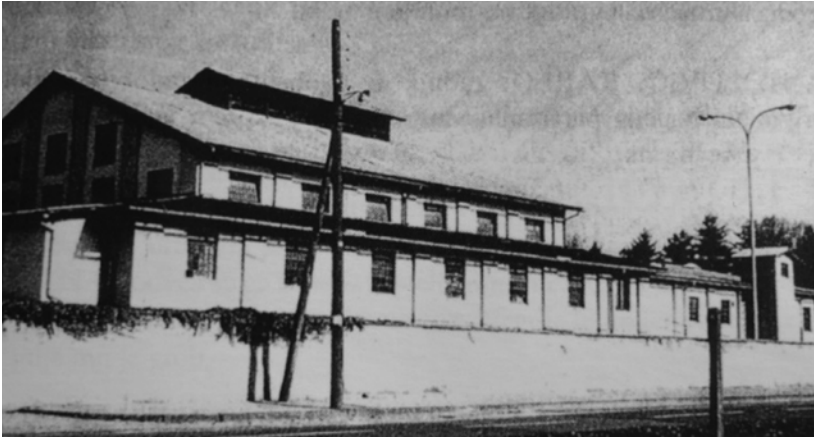


Fig. 5 Staklana in Sisak. Prisoners were housed in the building on the right (courtesy of the Museum of the City of Sisak, 510:SIK-95F).

why Luburić was interested in the fate of the sportsmen, but it is once again likely that someone in Sisak asked him to intercede on their behalf.⁸⁴

Over subsequent weeks, new prisoners were brought to the Sokolana. Among them were people arrested in and around Sunja, but also in Kostajnica, a town 20 km to the south.⁸⁵ At the end of April, the Ustasha even brought in four inmates from Jasenovac. These men – two of whom were former Domobrani officers – somehow managed to avoid being killed during the liquidation of the camp and were instead brought to Sunja by retreating Ustasha units.⁸⁶

By late April, the military situation in and around Sunja deteriorated. Fierce battles were being fought less than 30 km away along the River Una, and the Ustasha units in the village were preparing to retreat.⁸⁷ By that point, the prisoners in the Sokolana were receiving very little food. Occasionally a

84 According to Kolak's testimony, Ferdinand Škarek was also in Sunja at the time and was involved in the negotiation of the bowlers' release.

85 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.4. The number of people arrested in Sunja and Kostajnica is not known.

86 Among them were Domobrani officers Mato Idžojić and Eugen Dugan, both from Zagreb, and two men from Sunja, Viktor Turk and Ivan Bifl. Idžojić was released, the other three men were killed in Sisak on 4 May 1945. Testimony of Mato Idžojić, (19 May 1945), AJ 110, k 276, d.203.

87 Bulajić, 'Borbe Druge armije JA', p.64. Vjekoslav Luburić, 'The End of the Croatian Army', in John Prcela and Stanko Guldescu (Eds), *Operation Slaughterhouse* (Philadelphia: Dorance and Company, 1970), p.53

cauldron of weak potato broth was brought in, but there was never enough to go around, and canteen cups and cutlery were in short supply. Thus, the prisoners were already starving and exhausted when, on 1 May, it was announced that they too would be leaving Sunja. The destination was Sisak, and this time they would be going all the way on foot, taking a different route, through Caprag.⁸⁸

Prisoners were made to walk all day without food or water, tied to each other in groups of four. Those who struggled to keep up were beaten and abused. Upon arrival in Sisak around midnight, prisoners were taken to the building known as Staklana, a former glass factory built in the 1930s by the local industrialist, Petar Teslić.⁸⁹ For most of the war, the building housed a

Fig 6: Section of an aerial photograph of Sisak taken by the Allies in early April 1945. The image shows the Staklana glass factory and the surrounding area (National Collection of Aerial Photography [NCAF], ncap.org.uk, image reference NCAF_MA-PRW_15SG_1430_5026)



88 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.3.

89 Between 1932 and 1938 the factory manufactured bottles for the nearby liquor and mineral water production plants, both of which were also owned by the Teslić family. The factory went bankrupt in 1938. See Mira Kolar-Dimitrijević, 'Društveno-ekonomski razvoj Siska 1919 — 1941. godine', *Radovi – Zavod za hrvatsku povjest* 27, 1994, pp.271–288; Gradski muzej Sisak, *Industrijska baština grada Siska* (Gradski Muzej Sisak, n.d.).

concentration and transit camp, mainly for civilians destined for forced labour in Germany and Austria.⁹⁰ The camp was disbanded in January 1945, when the building was turned into an Ustasha army barracks.

The Staklana building comprised two connected structures: a large factory hall to the west, which housed the barracks, and the smaller extension to the east, where the prisoners were taken (Fig. 5).⁹¹ There is very little information about life in the Staklana over the next three days, except that prisoners were crammed into a small, narrow room with sealed windows and vents, and kept there without much food and water.⁹² In the days leading up to the massacre, new prisoners were brought in, among them local Serbs, but also a group of five Domobrani soldiers, members of an anti-aircraft battery.⁹³ Press reports from late May 1945 stated, incorrectly, that the latter were killed by the Ustasha in the ensuing massacre because they were witnesses to Ustasha crimes in Jasenovac.⁹⁴ There is no evidence that the men were ever in Jasenovac, and what is more, they survived: they were among a group of prisoners released from the Staklana shortly before the massacre.⁹⁵ How many other inmates were released at the same time, and according to what criteria, is unclear. What is certain is that not all the arrested Domobrani were freed: three officers of the river flotilla who had been arrested in mid-April – Branko Vrbanić, Franjo Novak and Franjo Čić – were later executed with the other prisoners, as was Eugen Dugan, a Domobrani soldier who was brought to Sunja from Jasenovac.

In the late afternoon of 4 April, when Partisan artillery was already within earshot, the Ustasha started liquidating various detention facilities in Sisak.⁹⁶ As the sun was setting over the city, around 25 Ustasha soldiers

90 see Dizdar, 'Logori' also Nataša Mataušić, *Diana Budisavljević*, pp.164–176.

91 Testimony of Hrvojević Anton (13 May 1945), AJ 110, k.487, d.280. Hrvojević was a local man and employee of the city administration who had access to the factory.

92 Testimony of Marjan Kolak, p.3, see also AJ-110, F-25101.

93 Testimony of Mato Idžojić, p.1.

94 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', p.3.

95 Testimony of Mato Idžojić, p.1.

96 Most of the remaining inmates incarcerated in the Ustasha prison located in the former headquarters of the Posavska Savings Bank were freed, but some, including two suspected communists, Josip Herljević and Ante Lovreković, were executed at the back of the building and their bodies thrown into River Kupa. Testimony of Marija Herljević (1 December 1945), AJ 110, k.487, d.200; Testimony of Josip Kockar (20 March 1946), AJ 110, k.487, d.304.

formed a semi-circle around the entrance to the Staklana.⁹⁷ Prisoners were led out into the courtyard, where their hands were tied behind their backs. They were then forced to walk in smaller groups some 400 meters to the bank of the Sava. Fig. 6 is a segment from an aerial photograph of Sisak taken by Allied reconnaissance on 3 April 1945. It shows the area around the glass factory and the site of the massacre.⁹⁸ On their way to the riverbank, prisoners passed the football training ground at the back of the Staklana, and then also the building of a fertiliser factory (marked 2 and 3 in Fig. 6).⁹⁹ Next, they crossed the raised embankment to reach the open field leading to the river. This part of the victims' final journey was observed from a house several hundred meters away by two local residents, Anton Hrvojić and Nikola Ličina, who witnessed one of the inmates, later identified as Vladimir Jelašin, break away and make an escape across the open ground. The Ustasha fired a few shots at him but missed.¹⁰⁰ They then led the other prisoners to the water's edge (location 4 on the photo), where in a reprise of the scene from Gradusa a few weeks earlier, they executed them and tossed their bodies down the riverbank.¹⁰¹

An intriguing aspect of this crime is that the Ustasha, who were about to leave Sisak, could have killed the prisoners in the courtyard of the Staklana and left the bodies there. Yet they chose to walk them to the riverbank and kill them in a well-rehearsed, bloody ritual. They probably did this out of habit, but likely also because the execution was never just about getting rid of the prisoners. Ustasha violence always had a pronounced demonstrative element. For the killers, their trademark iconography of death – including the horrific sight of bodies in the river with slit throats and bashed heads – was an inherent part of the terror they inflicted on the population. The crime scene

97 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', p.3.

98 National Collection of Aerial Photography, Edinburg, Scotland, NCAP_MA-PRW_15SG_1430_5026.

99 The construction of the chemical factory began in early 1943. It is unclear if the factory was ever completed, or if it ever opened. 'Pripreme za gradnju kemične tvornice u Sisku', *Hrvatske novine*, 6 February 1943, p.3.

100 Testimony of Anton Hrvojić.

101 The precise location of the massacre was established by cross referencing the information from the aerial photograph in Figure 6, with that from images taken during the recovery of the bodies, especially those in which some of the surrounding buildings (including the fertiliser factory) are visible.

they left on the bank of the Sava was in some ways the parting message to the residents of Sisak, the perpetrators' calling card.¹⁰²

Early press reports on the Sisak executions mentioned that 'between 350 and 400' persons were killed in the massacre.¹⁰³ An official memorandum which Branko Drezga, the public prosecutor, sent to his superiors in Zagreb on 15 May 1945 cited the figure of around 150 victims.¹⁰⁴ The real number was almost certainly lower. According to the database of Yugoslav victims of the Second World War compiled by the Museum of Genocide Victims in Belgrade, around 100 residents of the city of Sisak lost their life during the war months of 1945, while in the same period the number of victims from the Sisak district was less than 500.¹⁰⁵ Although these figures are likely to be an underestimate, they nevertheless suggest that the claim about 150, let alone 400 victims in a single massacre is an exaggeration, especially if we take into account the scale of military operations in the area in early 1945.

The effort to establish the exact number and identity of the victims of the Sisak massacre has been fraught with difficulties. First, the fluctuation in the number of inmates – up to the very last moment prisoners were being released while others were brought in – makes it impossible to ascertain how many people were incarcerated in the Staklana at the time of the execution. Second, the local branches of the war crimes commission, including the one

102 For an examination of the symbolic aspects of the Ustasha killing methods see John Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), Chapter 13; Radu Harald Dinu, 'Honor, shame and warrior values: the anthropology of Ustasha violence' in *Utopia of Terror: Life and Death in Wartime Croatia*, ed. Rory Yeomans (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015), pp.119–141; Goldstein, *Jasenovac*, Chapter VI, Alexander Korb, 'The disposal of corpses in an ethnicized civil war', in Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Élisabeth Anstett (eds) *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2014), pp.106–128.

103 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', p.3; 'Dan pre oslobođenja Siska, Ustaše su pobile 400 zatvorenika iz logora u staklani Teslić', p.3.

104 'Izveštaj javnom tužiocu Hrvatske, 15-V-1945', Javno tužilaštvo Republike Hrvatske, HR-H-DA-421, k.5. The reports on the execution published in *Borba* and *Vjesnik* reconciled the two figures by stating that the number of those killed was 400, but that 150 or 180 bodies were recovered from the river. The suggestion that most of the bodies were washed away by the river is implausible however, given that victims were killed on the inside bend of the river, where the water is relatively slow; and the photographs of the crime scene show that most of the bodies ended up caught in the thick vegetation on the riverbank or in the mud.

105 'Victims of War 1941 — 1945' database, Archive of the Museum of Genocide Victims, Belgrade.

in Sisak, worked under very difficult conditions, mainly due to the chronic shortage of funds, equipment, and qualified personnel. This affected their ability to devote enough time and resources to the painstaking task of compiling detailed lists of victims. Third, the chaos of the final weeks of the war meant that relatives of the deceased often did not know what happened to their loved ones after they were apprehended by the Ustasha. As a result, some of those who perished in the massacre were later recorded simply as having 'disappeared in the Sisak camp', and, conversely, because the massacre was so well known, those killed in other, unknown locations were recorded as having been killed at the Sava riverbank. And finally, in some registers of victims, individuals are simply recorded as having been killed by the Ustasha in Sisak on 4 or 5 May 1945, but without stipulating if this was in the massacre on the Sava or elsewhere.

The 57 names provided in Appendix B represent the best effort to compile a credible, but inevitably incomplete list of victims, based on available evidence. To manage uncertainty stemming from imperfect records, the list is divided into two parts. List 1 contains the names of 24 individuals for whom it can be said, with relative certainty, and based on multiple archival sources (witness testimonies, press reports, records of the municipal authorities, and so on) that they perished in the 4 May 1945 massacre. List 2 contains further 33 names which appear in a register of victims which war crimes investigators in Sisak compiled at some point in the summer of 1945. This register comprised 125 names, of whom the first 55 were accompanied by the description of the cause of death ('died of a stab wound to the back of the head', 'killed with a blunt instrument', etc.).¹⁰⁶ Among the 55 names are the majority of those features in List 1, so it can be assumed that these were victims whose bodies were discovered and identified in Sisak in the days following the arrival of the Partisans. However, not all victims recorded in this list were found on the banks of the Sava. For instance, the list includes the names of several persons whose bodies were uncovered near the Ustasha prison by the River Kupa on the other side of the city. More interestingly, the list featured the name of none other than the 'Ustasha first lieutenant Klarić'. Klarić was one of the guards and interrogators from Sunja and the main orchestrator of the mas-

106 The remaining 70 names were either of individuals believed to have 'disappeared' in various concentration camps (including in Sunja), or survivors who testified before the commission.

sacre in Gradusa, who later accompanied the prisoners on their march to Sisak on 1 May. How and where Klarić met his death, and how his name erroneously ended up on the 'list of victims' is a mystery. So, the 33 names included in List 2 are of individuals recorded in the war crimes commission's document who were *probably* killed on the banks of the Sava on 4 May, but it is possible that some were killed elsewhere in the city.¹⁰⁷

Notably, among the names featured in List 2 is that of Rudolf Biermann, a 52-year-old Jewish businessman from Kostajnica.¹⁰⁸ Biermann, the only Jew among the victims, was probably in the group of inmates arrested in Kostajnica and taken to Sunja in late April 1945, before being transferred to Sisak on 1 May. In his seminal book *1941: The Year That Keeps Returning*, Slavko Goldstein noted that the last victim of the Holocaust in Croatia was probably Oto Eisler, a Viennese violinist killed by a German soldier in Draganić near Karlovac at some point in late April 1945.¹⁰⁹ Rudolf Biermann, whose fate was largely unknown until now, was killed with a 'blow to the head with a blunt instrument' in Sisak on 4 May.¹¹⁰ He is, therefore, very likely the last Jew to be killed in the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia.

The list of names provided in Appendix B excludes, by definition, any victims who were not identified during the recovery of the bodies or subsequent investigations. However, the number of unidentified bodies is unlikely to have been large, especially as most of the victims were local. The total number (including those who could not be identified) can be estimated to have been between 60 and 80. This is evidenced by the fact that on 12 May 1945, authorities in Sisak paid the municipal funeral directors the sum of 2.116.600 Kuna for coffins needed for the burial of the Sava victims. Considering the fixed price of coffins prescribed at the time by the same authorities, this sum was enough for around 70 coffins, not including the cost of wooden crosses which were also purchased.¹¹¹ Even if we take into consideration the possibil-

107 This list includes nine residents from Kostajnica, probably prisoners from that town who were brought to Sunja in late April and were transported from there to Sisak on 1 May 1945.

108 See entry for Rudolf Biermann, The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names, Yad Vashem, Item ID 584513, available at <https://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=584513&ind=1>

109 Slavko Goldstein, *1941: The Year That Keeps Returning* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), pp. 185–9.

110 'Spisak žrtava', A-SPJ-2332 (Originalni izvor: HR-HDA-306, Zkrz-Zh, br. 12264-12267).

111 'Račun za izradu lijesova za žrtve pokolja po ustašama', 12 May 1945, Kazalo općih spisa, 1945,

ity that the authorities procured the coffins at a discount, and that remains of some of the victims were claimed by the families and buried elsewhere, the overall number of bodies recovered at the banks of the Sava is unlikely to have exceeded the proposed higher estimate of 80.

Finally, one mystery remains about the Sava victims. Initial press reports mentioned that among the prisoners taken to the execution was a group of boys aged 10 to 14.¹¹² Indeed, some of the photographs taken at the scene appear to show half a dozen smaller bodies that look as if they might belong to boys of that age.¹¹³ And yet, no victims fitting this profile feature in any of the lists, which suggests that these bodies were never identified or claimed.

We will probably never find out who these children were, but evidence from elsewhere points to a particularly disturbing possibility. In the final weeks of the war, in what can only be described as an act of unimaginable, calculated cruelty, the Ustasha in and around Sisak targeted Serbian children – many of them orphans – who were looked after by Croatian families. Between July 1942 and January 1943, thousands of Serbian children mainly from Kozara, but also Kordun, Banija, Moslavina and Slavonia, whose parents were either killed or sent to concentration or labour camps, were brought to Sisak, and were kept in squalor in what was effectively a concentration camp for children. Hundreds of these children died of starvation, disease, and exposure, but others were saved thanks to various rescue operations including, most famously, by Diana Budisavljević.¹¹⁴ Many of the rescued children – according to one report as many as 1,000 – found safety in the homes of Croatian families living in Sisak and the surrounding area.¹¹⁵ In the last month of the war these children became the target of Ustasha manhunts. In early April 1945, while carrying out arrests of suspected Partisan sympathizers in the village of Lukevec Posavski, Ustasha from Sunja picked up 14-year-old Milo Đaniš, originally from Pakrački Batinjani, who was fostered by a local woman, Mara Žindarić.¹¹⁶

HR-DASK-028, k.51; 'Lijesovi za mrtvace: cijenik', Obrtni zbor za grad i kotar Sisak, HR-DA-SK-168, k.19 (1945).

112 'Dan pre oslobođenja Siska', p.3; 'Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka', p.3

113 See HR-HDA-1422, Album ratni zločini 1, Z-172, Z-173, Z-182, Z-186, Z-189.

114 See Nataša Mataušić, *Diana Budisavljević: Prešućena heroína Drugog svjetskog rata*, p. 164–176. The children's camp was disbanded on 8 January 1943.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

116 Testimony of Žindarić Mara (15 April 1946), HR-HDA-306, k.690.

The boy was deported to Jasenovac, from where he never returned. On 12 April, on the first day of the arrests in Sisak, one of the persons detained was a girl rescued from the Sisak camp, Marica Kotor, who was cared for by a local woman, Stanka Desnica.¹¹⁷ Marica was probably the ‘ten-year-old girl’ whom Danica Cvijanović mentioned in her testimony as being among the Serbs and Jews taken from Sunja to the execution site near Gradusa.¹¹⁸ On 1 May, Ustaša in Sisak tracked down fourteen-year-old Trifun Vujasin and detained him alongside his carer Stjepan Kovač. Kovač was released, but the boy’s dead body was discovered, with the throat slit, on the banks of the River Kupa the day after liberation.¹¹⁹ Thus, it is possible that the bodies of unidentified minors among the Sava victims were also of fostered Serbian children arrested in the final days of the war, children whose existence the Ustaša remained determined to extinguish, until the very end.

/ Conclusion

Existing literature on the final weeks and months of the Independent State of Croatia tends to focus on military and political developments, rather than on Ustaša atrocities perpetrated during this period. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that violence at this time was less systematic, especially when compared to the first two years of the war.

The history of the massacre in Sisak and the events that preceded it offers a valuable reminder why Ustaša atrocities at the end of the war warrant attention. The Ustaša movement’s most radical elements led by Vjekoslav Max Luburić were using the chaos of the last days of the Independent State of Croatia as a cover for the pursuit of their murderous agenda. The targets were not just political enemies, as is often acknowledged, but also Serbs, Jews and, according to recent research on the activity of Luburić’s men in the Zaprešić region, also Roma and Sinti.¹²⁰ Evidence from Sunja and Sisak clearly shows

117 ‘Podaci porodica žrtava fašističkog teorora: Marica Kotor’, GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.242.

118 Testimony of Danica Cvijanović, p.1.

119 Testimony of Stjepan Kovač (14 November 1945), AJ 110, k. 487, d.289. See also ‘Prijava ratne štete: Vujasin Jove Trifun’, GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.242.

120 Mario Šimunković and Đorđe Mihovilović, *Masakr nad Romima i Sintima u Hrastini 1945. godine – zločini luburićevaca u zaprešićkom kraju* (Jasenovac: JUSP Jasenovac, 2021).

that segregating prisoners along ethno-religious lines, singling out Serbs and Jews for execution, even targeting Serbian children, came just as naturally to Luburić's men in 1945 as it had done in the early years of the war. The sanguinary methods of killing also followed the well-established pattern. The thread of continuity running through Ustasha violence is captured clearly in the fate men and women murdered in Gradusa Posavska. They were among the last victims of the genocide of Serbs and Jews in the Independent State of Croatia, yet their fate was remarkably like that of the first.

Better appreciation of the crimes committed in Sisak in the final weeks of the war is important for another reason. For too long, those killed in Gradusa have been confined to oblivion, while the Sava victims existed as an object of memory only as a subject of controversy, whether about the (mis)use of images taken during the recovery of the bodies, or about the identity of the perpetrators and the victims. Greater clarity about the interconnected events that culminated in the massacre on the banks of the Sava on 4 May 1945, and the attempt to identify the victims, are important first steps towards rescuing the victims of both crimes from oblivion and revisionist exploitation. They are also the necessary, although by no means sufficient condition for the creation of a new, better-informed culture of remembrance of the Sava victims, one that now must include victims from both Gradusa Posavska and Sisak.

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Appendix A: Names of 40 Serbs and 7 Jews executed at Gradusa Posavska in the night of 17/18 April 1945

The list is based on post-war sources and may not include the names of all those killed. Age at the time of death is provided, where available.

1. Abt Nadežda (46)
2. Alaica Dušan (34)
3. Alaica Julija (56)
4. Badrić Saveta (46)
5. Badrić Nevenka (19)
6. Bajić Miladin (70)
7. Berger Leo (Ladislav) (39)
8. Biermann Iso (48)
9. Biškupović Kata (40)
10. Biškupović Danica (25)
11. Biuković Jovo (46)
12. Bobsija Dragica (45)
13. Budimirović Đuro (53)
14. Bunčić Dragica (45)
15. Cimeša Angelija (52)
16. Čanković Petar (24)
17. Čučković Milka (35)
18. Čulibrk Mihailo (40)
19. Divić Mile (40)
20. Dokmanović Rade (56)
21. Dokmanović Stanko (59)
22. Dražić Marija (37)
23. Dražić Milan (70)
24. Dražić Katarina (63)
25. Đaković Stana
26. Đukić Ilija (43)
27. Egić-Eckstein David (65)
28. Fried Rudolf (Zvonimir) (48)
29. Golubović Miloš (65)
30. Golubović Janja (55)
31. Jović Dragica (38)
32. Karapandža Nikola (31)
33. Kotur Marica (10)
34. Lieberman Marko (44)
35. Majer Ferdinand (55)
36. Mileusnić Miloš (55)
37. Mraković Marija (52)
38. Mraković Stojan (54)
39. Pejnović Dušan (50)
40. Popović Petar (52)
41. Spitzer (Šiljković) Ljudevit (49)
42. Stanić Katica (34)
43. Stojić Milka (56)
44. Stojnić Miroslava (34)
45. Stojnić Dragica (61)
46. Šikman Sime (65)
47. Vranešević Milan (34)

Appendix B: List of victims executed in Sisak on 4 May 1945

List 1: Names of 24 individuals for whom it can be said, with relative certainty, and based on multiple archival and other sources (witness testimonies, press reports, registers of war dead, compensation claims, etc) that they perished in the 4 May 1945 massacre.¹²¹ Age at the time of death is provided, where available.

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Bifl Ivan (40) | 13. Grubić Nikola (34) |
| 2. Biškupović Jana | 14. Jovanović Augustin (32) |
| 3. Biuković Dragica (45) | 15. Marić Gojko (34) |
| 4. Brkljačić Josip (35) | 16. Matijašec Jakob (43) |
| 5. Čanković Vida (17) | 17. Mihaljević Mirko (29) |
| 6. Čić Franjo (43) | 18. Novak Franjo (56) |
| 7. Dejanović Slava (44) | 19. Prosenjak Mirko (30) |
| 8. Dugan Eugen (25) | 20. Rukavina Roža (32) |
| 9. Đukić Milka (35) | 21. Šmigmator Stevo (60) |
| 10. Fišćur Matko (41) | 22. Trenk Antun (33) |
| 11. Fraj Ivan (23) | 23. Turk Viktor (35) |
| 12. Fraj Regina (21) | 24. Vrbanić Branko (39) |

List 2: Names of 33 victims featured in a register of victims which war crimes investigators in Sisak compiled at some point in the summer of 1945.¹²² The list includes individuals whose bodies were discovered and identified in Sisak in the days following the arrival of the Partisans. Persons listed here were *probably* killed on the banks of the Sava on 4 May, but it is possible that some were killed elsewhere in the city¹²³.

121 'Spisak žrtava', A-SPJ-2332 (Original source: HR-HDA-306, Zkrz-Zh, br. 12264-12267), 'Popis žrtava fašističkog terora iz Siska' and 'Podaci porodica žrtava fašističkog terora' both in GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.242, 'Spisak poginulih boraca i žrtava fašističkog terora' *Jedinstvo*, no. 610, 10 April 1965; 'Prijave ratne štete', GNO Sisak, HR-DASK-028, k.209; 'Spisak žrtava', Zkrz OK Banija, HR-HDA-306, k.690; 'Kartoteka žrtava', HR-HDA-306, microfilms Z-3007 and Z-3012.

122 'Spisak žrtava', A-SPJ-2332; original source: HR-HDA-306, Zkrz-Zh, br. 12264-12267.

123 The register of victims for Sisak and Sunja compiled later by the Country Commission for the

1. Alavuk Radoslava
2. Balas Andro
3. Berak Mato (50)
4. Biermann Rudolf
5. Bobić Ljubica
6. Božičević Mato
7. Čanković Marija
8. Dananić Stjepan
9. Delas Maho
10. Dužić Marica
11. Džafić Rifat
12. Ferhatović Maho
13. Ferhatović Rasim
14. Golić Adil (49)
15. Gračan Ruža (25)
16. Hrem Slavica (25)
17. Juričić Stevo (51)
18. Jurčević Juraj
19. Klajić Nikola (20)
20. Kostanjšek Jagoda
21. Kusturica Rasim
22. Ličina Danica
23. Lipak Đuro
24. Maržan Marijan (35)
25. Pavelić Mijo
26. Pavelić Milka (20)
27. Pavičić Roza (52)
28. Rogan Ivan
29. Savić Anka
30. Sever Elza (25)
31. Titorić Asim (20)
32. Valentić Marija (26)
33. Zuhan Agan

Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Accomplices for Croatia recorded another nine individuals as having been killed in Sisak on 4 or 5 May 1945. It is possible that they too were among the Sava victims, but further research is needed to ascertain if that was the case. The individuals in question are Belec, Mato (30), Bozakić, Ljubica (23), Dugac, Slavica (33), Horvat, Mate (16), Janković, Marica (20), Kalek, Sime, Skolčić, Pavao (41), Šmigomotor, Slava (23), and Vrtarić, Vikica (23).

About the author

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