

Dr Nevenko Bartulin, Teacher
 Guilford Young College, Hobart, Australia
 nbartuli@hotmail.com

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THE OLD GERMAN-CROATIAN BROTHERHOOD-IN-ARMS: HISTORY, MYTH AND THE 'BLOOD-BOND' BETWEEN THE THIRD REICH AND THE NDH

Abstract: This article examines how the idea of a historical German-Croatian brotherhood-in-arms played a significant ideological role in strengthening the alliance between the Third Reich and the Independent State of Croatia. The 'blood-bond' between the two states was not only forged on the battlefield – above all on the Eastern front where Croatian volunteers fought in the Wehrmacht – but also through the convergence of their racial policies directed against Jews, Gypsies and Serbs. While the traditional image of the loyal and brave Croatian soldier reinforced Adolf Hitler's sympathy for the NDH, it also fortified the determination of Ante Pavelić to stand by the side of Germany until the end.

Keywords: Germany, Croatia, Third Reich, NDH, brotherhood-in-arms, blood-bond, National Socialism, Ustaša.

At the conclusion of his first meeting with Adolf Hitler at the Berghof on 6 June 1941, the Poglavnik of the newly Independent State of Croatia (NDH), Ante Pavelić, presented the Führer with two gifts – historical German artefacts long stored in Croatia: a Prussian flag and a chessboard with pieces made of ivory which had belonged to King Frederick II and were captured from the King's tent by Croatian soldiers serving in the Austrian army during the Seven Years War (1756-1763).⁴⁷⁶ By presenting these gifts, Pavelić hoped to impress upon the

⁴⁷⁶ See the photograph (plate 13) in Andreas Hillgruber ed., *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler: Vertrauliche Aufzeichnungen über Unterredungen mit Vertretern des Auslandes 1939-1941* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1967), 561 and Nada Kisić Kolanović, *NDH i Italija: Političke veze i diplomatski odnosi* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2001), 161.

Germans the splendid soldierly tradition of the Croats,⁴⁷⁷ who had clearly proved themselves equal to the army of one of the Führer's historical heroes, Frederick the Great, while Hitler the Austrian was also reminded of the Croats' traditional reputation as one of the most loyal and bravest troops of the Habsburg emperor.⁴⁷⁸ The gifts offered by Pavelić thus symbolized the martial virtues of the Croats and their historical link to the German lands. Furthermore, as Pavelić told Hitler at their meeting, 'the Führer and the German people were assured of Croatia's highest gratitude' for their help in the 'liberation' of the Croatian people, and this 'gratitude would never die, for the loyalty of the Croats was proverbial', to which Hitler replied that this was 'very well' known to him.⁴⁷⁹

Ironically, the anti-German coup d'état carried out in Belgrade on 27 March 1941 by Serbian officers opposed to Yugoslavia's accession to the Tripartite Pact had made the Führer the 'unintentional instrument of the liberation of Croatia' – as Hitler described himself to Pavelić – since Germany had not originally intended to destroy the Yugoslav state.⁴⁸⁰ Indeed, the Third Reich had enjoyed good relations with the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia; by upholding Yugoslavia's territorial integrity, Berlin had directly opposed the Ustaša aim of an independent Croatian state. But the cordial German-Yugoslav relationship was based primarily on mutually beneficial economic interests,⁴⁸¹ and not on what was central to Hitler's *Weltanschauung*, which was a shared sense of historical destiny and racial struggle.⁴⁸² In contrast, the NDH quickly proved to be a much more 'natural' ally of the Reich – the racial ideas and policies of the National Socialists and Ustaše were able to converge very rapidly after the German defeat of Yugo-

⁴⁷⁷ Kisić Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 161.

⁴⁷⁸ As AJP Taylor noted, 'Croatia had never been overrun by the Turks and, as the frontier kingdom, had taken an active part in the struggle against them. The Croat gentry had a tradition of military service, and for generation after generation supplied a large proportion of the regimental officers to the Habsburg army. They had a loyalty to the dynasty...' AJP Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary* ([1948] London: Penguin Books, 1990), 32. On Hitler and Frederick II, see Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*. Trans. Richard R. Nybakken (California: University of California Press, 2016), 315, 371, 377-378.

⁴⁷⁹ Cited in *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945. Series D (1937-1945), Vol. XII: The War Years, February 1-June 22, 1941* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 977-978.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 977.

⁴⁸¹ Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 47, 611. The Third Reich developed important economic relations with all southeastern European states, which provided it with key raw materials, including the NDH. For more on economic relations between the Reich and the NDH, see *ibid.*, 620-622.

⁴⁸² See the chapter, 'History as Racial Struggle', in Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, 287-323.

slavia in April 1941.⁴⁸³ As this article highlights, the historical myth of the German-Croatian 'brotherhood-in-arms' and/or military 'blood-bond' was one of the crucial ideological factors linking the Ustaša aim of Croatian state independence, the alliance between the NDH and the Third Reich and the racial policies of both Axis states. This factor helps to explain why the NDH proved to be the ideologically closest, and the last standing, ally of the German Reich.⁴⁸⁴

It also highlights the importance of the ideologically-shaped historical thinking in Hitler's worldview, or to be more precise, the way contemporary political events and phenomena were supposed to reflect historical and racial truths (myths). As Johann Chapoutot has argued, in the Third Reich 'history made itself the servant of a myth', with National Socialism creating 'a fable that recounted the history of a group, the race, according to the dictates of its own ideological principles'. The National Socialist 'philosophy of history', Chapoutot explains, 'constituted a mythologizing of history', based on 'the quest...for deeper meaning', 'Manichaeism' and 'narrative structures built around archetypes', including 'idols (the savior, the hero) or foils (the traitor, the devil), and seminal events (origins, the rise and fall, decadence, catastrophe, redemption, resurrection), as well as 'the pronouncement of moral judgments'.⁴⁸⁵ In particular, 'the idea of a millenary struggle between East and West – the East, parasitic and destructive, the Indo-Germanic West, the creator of all culture, beauty, and valor – was constantly reiterated in the Nazi historiography of the period'.⁴⁸⁶

In Hitler's Manichaean worldview, the Serbian 'betrayal' of 27 March 1941 simply represented the atavistic tendencies of an inherently rebellious and uncivilized people, or in the Führer's words, the typical work of a 'Serbian pack of conspirators'. Immediately ordering the invasion of Yugoslavia, Hitler predicted that the Croats would take the side of Germany, while

⁴⁸³ Initially, Berlin would have preferred that Vladko Maček, the leader of the popular Croatian Peasant Party, take the helm of an independent Croatian state in order to ensure stability. But since he refused to do so, Germany turned to the small but ideologically similar Ustaša movement. This led to the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia (in the name of Ante Pavelić, who was still based in Italy) by one of the leaders of the Ustaša movement in Croatia, Slavko Kvaternik, on 10 April 1941. See Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 49-53.

⁴⁸⁴ The topic of German-Croatian brotherhood-in-arms as a historical-political myth in National-Socialist-Ustaša relations has not previously been the subject of a specific historiographical study or analysis. Rory Yeomans mentions it twice, but only when citing Pavelić from 1941, in his otherwise detailed discussion of how the Croatian Legion on the Eastern front contributed to the NDH's ideological self-image as a bulwark of European civilization. Rory Yeomans, 'Croatia'. In David Stahel ed. *Joining Hitler's Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 161, 163.

⁴⁸⁵ Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, 46, 408 (109n). Chapoutot notes cautiously that 'there is a fine line between history and mythology, and the science of history...can sometimes lend mythmaking a helping hand'. (ibid, 45).

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 292.

the Serbs (and Slovenes) had never been pro-German.⁴⁸⁷ In his speech to the German people justifying the invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April, Hitler spoke of the 'Serbian criminal clique,' the 'same creatures who had already plunged the world into an unspeakable disaster in 1914 through the assassination in Sarajevo.'⁴⁸⁸ Hitler's anti-Serb view was shared by German army commanders in occupied Serbia (and elsewhere in the Balkans), many of whom were also Austrian, such as General Franz Böhme, who told his soldiers on 25 September 1941 that their task was 'to be carried out in a country in which in 1914 rivers of German blood flowed because of the treachery of the Serbs... You are the avengers of the dead.'⁴⁸⁹ It seemed obvious to the Führer that history was only repeating itself in the Balkans. The Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, for his part, warned Harald Turner, the chief of the German military administration staff in Serbia, not to trust the Serbs, a people 'practised and experienced in revolt for centuries'; opposing Turner's efforts to enlist the support of anti-communist Serbs, Himmler maintained that 'the Serb remains a Serb.'⁴⁹⁰

In order to examine how the concept of a blood-bond between brothers-in-arms not only strengthened the German-Croatian alliance but also influenced the dynamics of the relations between the Axis states in a broader sense, it is first necessary to explain its importance to Hitler's understanding of war, comradeship, racial struggle and history. In his article, 'Hitler and Genghis Khan' (1990), Richard Breitman explored the Führer's use of the specific concept of *Blutkitt* ('blood-cement'), which Hitler seems to have adopted from a book on the Mongol leader written by the Russian-born German writer Michael Prawdin and published in Germany in 1938.⁴⁹¹ The book was held in high regard by Himmler, who bestowed copies of it as Christmas gifts to leading SS officers. The book's depiction of Genghis Khan as a great conqueror and empire-builder made a deep impression on Himmler and, it appears, on Hitler himself.⁴⁹² Although the word 'Blutkitt' was not specifically employed in Prawdin's book, the idea behind it was explained; *Blutkitt* thus described how Genghis Khan welded 'together into his armies men from various nomadic tribes and peoples. Fighting side-by-side, suffering casualties in a

⁴⁸⁷ Ladislaus Hory and Martin Broszat, *Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat, 1941-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1964), 39-40.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁸⁹ Cited in Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis Led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 237.

⁴⁹⁰ Cited in Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 241.

⁴⁹¹ Richard Breitman, 'Hitler and Genghis Khan,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, No. 2/3 (1990): 337-351. Prawdin wrote two books on the subject of Genghis Khan, published in the German Reich in 1934 and 1935. At the request of the SS, a one-volume edition of Prawdin's two books was published in 1938. *Ibid.*, 339.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 337-40, 343-44.

common cause they became one people.' Hitler himself was well acquainted 'with the camaraderie of the front-line from his own experience,' but he of course (like Himmler) rejected the 'racial blending of different peoples into a whole'.⁴⁹³ Consequently, as Breitman points out, the 'concept of „blood-cement” helps to explain Hitler's otherwise curious orders in January 1942 barring the use of native collaborators in the eastern territories as front-line troops in the campaign against the Soviet Union.' Although the National Socialist leadership would eventually allow the use of Eastern auxiliaries on the front line, due to Germany's worsening military situation and its increasing need for manpower, it is also fairly evident that Hitler 'did not want his soldiers to develop bonds with the „inferior” races in the east'.⁴⁹⁴ According to Hitler, it was precisely their purported Mongol racial origins that made the peoples of the East such a dangerous racial enemy of Europe.⁴⁹⁵

Hitler made this clear, as Breitman notes, in conversation with the Commander-in-Chief of the Croatian army, Field Marshal Slavko Kvaternik, at the Wolf's Lair on 21 July 1941. Despite his admiration for Genghis Khan as a conquering empire-builder, Hitler regarded the 'Mongolian race' as an enemy; he described 70-80% of the Russian people as racially Mongolian (an estimate based on available photographs of Russian prisoners of war).⁴⁹⁶ Breitman went into further detail on this meeting in his book on *Himmler and the Final Solution* (1991), adding that Hitler had also advised Kvaternik that the only way to deal with 'criminal and asocial elements' was 'to destroy them' or 'shut them up in a concentration camp'.⁴⁹⁷ Hitler spoke of the Jews 'as a center of pestilence for humanity' who 'would be removed from Europe,' perhaps to Madagascar or Siberia. As Breitman points out, the references to distant settlements 'merely veiled the thrust of his argument: since the Jews were inherently criminal and parasitical, they had to be destroyed or shut up in concentration camps from which they would not emerge.' The Führer's comments in this case are noteworthy: 'Considering that Kvaternik was a foreigner, Hitler was surprisingly candid; only a little of what he said was designed to deceive'.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 345-46.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 346-47. Recent studies of German military policy in the East have continued to emphasize that the Nazi leadership remained hostile toward the very idea of enabling the conquered Eastern peoples the right to bear arms, even when grudgingly allowing or tolerating it in practice. See, for example, the chapter on 'Eastern Helpers' in Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 446-470.

⁴⁹⁵ For Himmler, the 'Mongol' East (Asia) was an even bigger long-term threat than the Jews. Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*. Trans. Jeremy Noakes and Lesley Sharpe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 261-265.

⁴⁹⁶ Breitman, 'Hitler and Genghis Khan', 340-41.

⁴⁹⁷ Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* ([1991] London: Pimlico, 2004), 179, 186-187. In this book, Breitman noted that a more accurate English translation of *Blutkitt* could be 'blood that serves as a bond'. Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 187. Kershaw also mentions Hitler's 'remarkable openness' in his discussion of the Jews with Kvaternik. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 470-71.

Hitler's candidness can be explained by the fact that Kvaternik (a former Austro-Hungarian colonel)⁴⁹⁹ was a representative of a people Hitler considered racially worthy of having a close bond with German soldiers. Breitman neglected to point out that Hitler had described the Croats in this meeting as a true *Soldatenvolk* ('people of soldiers'), and, as such, Croats training in Germany would feel quite at home among German soldiers.⁵⁰⁰ In his letter to the Führer from 23 June 1941, offering Croatian volunteers in the war against the Soviet Union, Pavelić underscored that, through this military contribution, 'the German-Croatian brotherhood-in-arms, which had been confirmed for centuries on all the battlefields of Europe, could once again come to life.'⁵⁰¹ In view of the 'old brotherhood-in-arms' (*Waffenbrüderschaft*), the Führer was only too happy to oblige the Poglavnik.⁵⁰² Although both Hitler and Pavelić rejected the political legacy of the multi-national Habsburg empire,⁵⁰³ they were keen to stress the centuries-old martial bond between Austro-German and Croatian soldiers. As Hitler stated to the NDH's envoy in Berlin, Mile Budak, on 14 February 1942, 'for him as an old Austrian, Croatia had always been a household name and indeed one of the strongest and most loyal members of the Reich.'⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁹ The commander of the Second German Army that invaded Yugoslavia, Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs, described Kvaternik in the following manner: 'He was an old k.u.k [*kaiserlich und königlich*] colonel, the type of former Austrian officer, of good military appearance, with a firm soldierly demeanour and great eloquence'. Cited in Karl Hnilicka, *Das Ende auf dem Balkan 1944/45: Die militärische Räumung Jugoslawiens durch die deutsche Wehrmacht* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1970), 38.

⁵⁰⁰ See 'Unterredung des Führers mit Marschall Kvaternik im Führerhauptquartier am 21. Juli 1941'. In Hillgruber ed., *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler*, 612.

⁵⁰¹ Cited in Bogdan Krizman, *Ante Pavelić i ustaše* (Zagreb: Globus, 1978), 491.

⁵⁰² For Hitler's positive reply on 1 July 1941, see *ibid.*, 493.

⁵⁰³ As Mark Mazower observes, Hitler's 'worldview presupposed a vision of order and nationality in eastern Europe which was not so much post- as *anti*-Habsburg, based on ethnic purity not intermingling, on loyalty to the nation rather than to any supra-national dynasty'. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 30. This attitude toward the Habsburgs was shared by Pavelić. As a memorandum of the NDH's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 10 February 1944 noted, the Habsburg Monarchy had 'nurtured and supported regionalism and religious antagonism' amongst the Croats and was opposed to 'the idea of national unity'. Cited in Bogdan Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich*, Vol. 1 (Zagreb: Globus, 1983), 293-294.

⁵⁰⁴ Cited in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*. Serie E: 1941-1945, Band 1: 12: Dezember 1941 bis 28. Februar 1942 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 476. In his unpublished transcript on foreign policy from 1928, the future Führer had written disparagingly of the 'Croatian regiments and Hungarian foot soldiers' who had fought in northern Italy under the Habsburg flag. The Austrian state, which was only 'externally disguised as German', had tarnished the 'German name' in Italy by using 'a mob of coarse and brutish soldiers who were viewed as a true divine scourge' even within Austria itself. Gerhard L. Weinberg ed., *Hitler's Second Book: The*

By the time of Hitler's meeting with Kvaternik in July 1941, the NDH had also already been tying itself closely to the Reich through, what one might term, a 'criminal blood-bond',⁵⁰⁵ based on the expulsion or eradication of undesirable (i.e. 'criminal and asocial') ethnic-racial minorities, including Serbs, Jews and Gypsies.⁵⁰⁶ For Hitler, apparently inspired by the example of Genghis Khan, it was not only the blood shed on the battlefield that 'bound warriors together and tied them permanently to their leader';⁵⁰⁷ the 'collective killing of highly prized animals', performed during the ceremonial swearing of binding oaths, was 'a crime by normal standards' in Mongol culture, but in this specific case 'served as a means to prevent any of the warriors from abandoning their leader'. Hitler and Himmler employed 'a similar technique' in relation to the Final Solution: 'Subordinates with bloodstained hands were most unlikely to desert their Führer and their cause. Except this time, the blood was not that of animals.'⁵⁰⁸ Breitman concludes that Hitler did not sanction the mass murder of Jews (and other groups) 'merely to solidify his support and commit Germans to an all-or-nothing war', but also because 'the astute politician in him was aware of the psychological repercussions of ideologically-driven programmes of mass murder', and 'blood-cement was in that sense a useful by-product of nazi crimes'.⁵⁰⁹ Although both Wehrmacht and SS officers often criticized the Ustaše for their radical anti-Serb policies (because of their destabilizing effects on the state), 'Hitler knew instinctively', as Martin Broszat pointed out, 'why he allowed the Ustaša regime to continue to hold office: no other government would have been more compliant and – not least because of its own crimes – so dependent on standing by the side of National Socialist Germany until the end'.⁵¹⁰

The NDH provides the principal example of how a 'blood-bond' between the German Reich and (certain of) its allies strengthened the 'establishment of the Nazi *Neuordnung Europas*

Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler. Trans. Krista Smith (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), 72. But the events of April 1941 led Hitler to adopt a much more positive, 'Austrian' view of the Croats. In conversation with the newly-appointed German Plenipotentiary General in the NDH, his fellow Austrian Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, on 14 April 1941, Hitler commented that the Croats were 'racially much, much better than their western neighbours', the Italians. See Peter Broucek ed. *Ein General im Zwielicht: Die Erinnerungen Edmund Glaises von Horstenau*. Vol. 3 (Wien-Köln-Graz: Böhlau Verlag, 1988), 82.

⁵⁰⁵ Breitman uses this term in his article, 'Hitler and Genghis Khan', 347.

⁵⁰⁶ Hitler explained to Kvaternik that there were 'situations in which one has to [act] energetically right from the very beginning in order to avoid a much greater bloodbath later on'. See 'Unterredung des Führers mit Marschall Kvaternik', 611.

⁵⁰⁷ Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide*, 43.

⁵⁰⁸ Breitman, 'Hitler and Genghis Khan', 347.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁵¹⁰ Hory and Broszat, *Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat*, 149.

in East Central Europe as a hierarchically-structured racial world ruled by „the Aryans.”⁵¹¹ This area ‘was pivotal to the implementation of the Nazi ideological project, since it provided the Third Reich a vast terrain of territorial expansion and social-political experimentation’;⁵¹² the Ustaša state was able to engage in its own ‘social-political experimentation’ under the guidance of the Reich. The interwar Ustaše had already developed a fairly coherent race theory which would be further elaborated and refined during the NDH; on 11 October 1944, just months away from the collapse of the Third Reich, the Ustaša government established the Croatian State Anthropological Institute in Zagreb, highlighting the NDH’s serious commitment to racial politics.⁵¹³ The Ustaše defined the Croats – also including the Bosnian Muslims – as an Aryan people chiefly characterized by their core ‘Nordic-Dinaric’ racial component, which was mainly descended from an early medieval, Slavic-Gothic-Iranian warrior ruling class. The racial counter-type of the Aryan Croats was represented collectively by the ‘Near Eastern-Oriental’ Jews, Gypsies and the greater part of the ‘Serb-Vlachs.’⁵¹⁴ The specific Gothic theory of Croat origins helped further increase German sympathies for the NDH; for Hitler, the Croats were ‘certainly more Germanic than Slav.’⁵¹⁵ He was also pleased that his Croatian brothers-in-arms adhered to the tenets of racial nationalism. As the Führer explained to the NDH’s Foreign Minister Mladen Lorković on 27 November 1941, he had ‘gotten to know the Mohammedan Croats as excellent soldiers’ and was therefore ‘particularly happy to learn that the Croats were able to shift their development away from denominations and toward the racial idea, for after all the Christian and Mohammedan Croats were one race.’⁵¹⁶

⁵¹¹ Constantin Iordachi and Ottmar Trașcă, ‘Ideological Transfers and Bureaucratic Entanglements: Nazi “Experts” on the “Jewish Question” and the Romanian-German Relations, 1940-1944’, *Fascism*, Vol. 4 (2015): 49-50.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵¹³ The Institute’s director was the Croat anthropologist and Ustaša Franjo Ivaniček, a doctoral student of one of the Third Reich’s leading racial anthropologists, Eugen Fischer. ‘The fate of the nation’, as Ivaniček explained in reference to the Institute’s aims, ‘depends on the number of healthy offspring capable of cultural creation’, and ‘this goal is achieved by the biological study of the nation’. He praised ‘Germany as an example of good practice’. Ana Solter, ‘Franjo Ivaniček – Physician, Anthropologist and Racial Hygienist’, *Vjesnik Arheološkog muzeja u Zagrebu*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2021): 571-576.

⁵¹⁴ For more on Ustaša race theory, see Nevenko Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia: Origins and Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁵¹⁵ *Hitler’s Table Talk 1941-1944*. Trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 8.

⁵¹⁶ Cited in *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945. Series D (1937-1945), Vol. XIII: The War Years, June 23-December 11, 1941* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 866.

With regard to the question of the NDH's racial 'counter-type', the Führer had already encouraged the Poglavnik to pursue an intolerant policy toward ethnic minorities at their first meeting on 6 June 1941.⁵¹⁷ Two days earlier a German-Croatian agreement had sanctioned the mass expulsion of 170,000 Slovenes from German-occupied Slovenia to the NDH and the simultaneous mass deportation of an equal number of Serbs from the NDH to German-occupied Serbia (as the Ustaše requested).⁵¹⁸ Hitler's approval of this agreement, as Lovro Kralj points out, 'reveals that the Ustashe were not merely the executioners of a foreign power, but actually succeeded in implementing their own agenda of ethnic cleansing which ultimately altered Germany's plans in South Eastern Europe'.⁵¹⁹ When the German commander-in-chief in southeast Europe, General Alexander Löhr, criticized the Ustaše for their inefficient system of rule and anti-Serb actions in a meeting with the Führer in early September 1942, 'all of this Hitler dismissed with a wave of the hand, and cynically remarked that the *Ustašas* should be allowed „to let their steam off” with the Serbs, that Pavelić was faithful to him, and that he did not want to be in the way of his none-too-numerous friends'.⁵²⁰ In line with such an attitude, Hitler once again greeted the Poglavnik with cordiality at their second meeting held on 23 September 1942, and, according to Pavelić's postwar account of the meeting, praised the Ustaša party troops as *erstklassig* ('first-class').⁵²¹

Pavelić was also able to appeal to Hitler's anti-Semitism during the meeting, stating that the 'Jewish question was practically solved in a great part of Croatia'. But the Ustaše were unable to fully implement anti-Jewish measures in the so-called Italian zone of the NDH (where a large number of Italian troops were stationed); the Italians were reluctant to solve this question as the NDH had done, Pavelić explained, because of their 'respect' for the Vatican and the 'honour' of the Italian army.⁵²² Fighting alongside Germany thus also required partaking

⁵¹⁷ Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 398.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 393, 395.

⁵¹⁹ Lovro Kralj, 'Photography, Collaboration and the Holocaust: Looking at the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945) through the Frame of the "Hooded Man"', *Journal of Perpetrator Research* Vol. 2, No. 2 (2019): 53.

⁵²⁰ Srdjan Trifković, 'Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia, 1942-1943', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1993): 889.

⁵²¹ Ante Pavelić, *Doživljaji: Kako sam osnovao Nezavisnu Državu Hrvatsku* (Zagreb: Despot Infinitus, 2015), 173. A German naval report on the political-military situation in the NDH from February 1944 stated that the soldiers of the Ustaša militia were the 'best element' and 'most reliable troops' of the Croatian armed forces and state security, fighting 'for principles, which mostly agree with our National Socialist [ones]', such as the 'totalitarian state' and 'race questions'. See 'Lagebeurteilung und Tätigkeitsbericht des Marineverbindungsstabes Kroatien für die Zeit von Anfang Dezember 1943 bis Ende Januar 1944 (7. Februar 1944)'. In Hnilicka, *Das Ende auf dem Balkan*, 277.

⁵²² Bogdan Krizman, *Pavelić između Hitlera i Mussolinija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1980), 412.

in the National Socialist 'war' against the Jews. Consequently, participation in the Final Solution became a litmus test of loyalty to the alliance with the German Reich, particularly from late 1942 onwards when Germany's allies started to halt deportations of their Jews to the East after 'it became clear that the Germans' 1942 offensive had failed to knock out the Russians' and 'unease, reservations and even outright opposition to German policy began to make itself felt'.⁵²³ Such attitudes applied above all to Hungary (under the government of Miklós Horthy), but also to Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria, along with the particularly 'uncooperative attitude' of Germany's leading ally, Italy.⁵²⁴ But one country was conspicuously absent from the list of uncooperative allies – Croatia, which (under the supervision of the SS) carried out the last mass deportations of its Jews to Auschwitz in May 1943.⁵²⁵

To be sure, the NDH's contribution to the Final Solution did not entirely satisfy the high expectations of the National Socialists. Specifically, the so-called 'honorary Aryan' paragraph of the NDH's second race law from 30 April 1941 granted a very small number of Jews the legal status of Aryan citizens. But though these 'exceptions to the rule' were not ideologically acceptable to the Nazis (particularly the SS), they formed part of a uniquely Ustaša racial policy still aimed at eradicating Jewry in Croatia; the NDH's 'honorary Aryans' were thus said to

⁵²³ Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 395. Although Ion Antonescu's government was responsible 'for the largest number of deaths of Jews after Hitler's Germany' in the areas of the Soviet Union occupied by the Romanian army, Antonescu also made the decision in October 1942 not to deport the Jews from the old Kingdom of Romania (i.e. Wallachia and Moldavia). He was probably starting to entertain serious doubts about the prospects of a German victory in the war and realized that any possibility of an armistice with the Western Allies would require a fundamental change in Romanian policy toward the Jews. Dennis Deletant, 'Ion Antonescu and the Holocaust in Romania', *East Central Europe*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2012): 63, 75, 95-96.

⁵²⁴ Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 394-405. Slovakia introduced anti-Jewish laws only a month after gaining independence in March 1939 and deported the majority of its Jews to the East in 1942. But the clericalist Slovak government proved to be less than enthusiastic in emulating Nazi racial policy, taking more than two years to introduce anti-Jewish laws on a racial basis; in September 1941 a racial definition of a 'Jew' was adopted only to be dropped by the Slovakian parliament in May 1942 with the re-introduction of a definition of Jewishness based primarily on religious affiliation, similar to the original decree of 18 April 1939. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Vol. II, Third Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 768-769, 782.

⁵²⁵ The details of these last deportations had been arranged during a meeting held on 19 January 1943 between the Reich's police attaché in the NDH, SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Helm (accompanied by SS-Hauptsturmführer Franz Abromeit), and the director of the NDH's Main Directorate for Public Order and Security (GRAVSIGUR), Filip Crvenković. This meeting reached a 'complete agreement' on the need to arrest all remaining Jews in the NDH 'without regard to age, sex and religious affiliation' (only the small number of Jewish 'honorary Aryans' and *Mischlinge* were spared). See HDA (Hrvatski Državni Arhiv), fond 1521, Arhiva Helm, kutija 34: Abromeit, 1-2 and Nevenko Bartulin, 'The Question of the "Honorary Aryans" in the NDH', *Historiografija.hr*, 23 February 2018: <http://www.historiografija.hr/?p=8534>, 7-8.

possess Aryan mental (and probably some biological) characteristics and were to be subject to complete biological assimilation through successive interbreeding with Aryan Croats over a few generations.⁵²⁶ According to the estimates of the Reich's embassy in the NDH, only 500-600 Jews, out of the approximately 4,000 Croatian Jews who had requested honorary Aryan status, were granted this exemption (the total Jewish population of the NDH numbered at least 36,000 in April 1941).⁵²⁷ In April 1944, the German envoy to the NDH, Siegfried Kasche, was able to report to Berlin that the Jewish question had been solved in Croatia apart from the exceptional cases of the honorary Aryans, Jews in mixed marriages and *Mischlinge* (half- and quarter-Jews).⁵²⁸

While the question of the Jewish honorary Aryans remained an irritant to the Germans, even the Reich's SS police attaché in Zagreb, Hans Helm, had to admit (in the same report) that the specific problem of Jews in mixed marriages and *Mischlinge* had not been solved in Germany either.⁵²⁹ Thus, even the National Socialists were not always as strict in the implementation of anti-Semitic policy as they could have been (though the SS was always inclined toward the most radical solution – either deportation to camps or sterilization – in the case of the *Mischlinge*⁵³⁰). The Ustaše were self-evidently less strict than the Nazis, but the reverse was arguably the case in relation to the 'Gypsy question'.⁵³¹ The only other country in which the Jewish and Gypsy 'questions' had been 'solved' (in mid-1942), according to Harald Turner,

⁵²⁶ Bartulin, "The Question of the "Honorary Aryans" in the NDH", 5-6.

⁵²⁷ Mark Biondich, 'Nazi Germany and the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945'. In Mirna Zakić and Christopher A. Molnar eds., *German-Balkan Entangled Histories in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 102. As Raul Hilberg pointed out (in specific reference to the anti-Jewish economic quotas introduced in Hungary in 1938-39), 'the effect of a quota is to be measured not in a count of people that such a system accommodates but in the number it excludes'. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Vol. II, 861.

⁵²⁸ Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 765.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ For more on the discussion of the unresolved subject of *Mischlinge* and mixed Jewish-Aryan marriages at the Wannsee Conference, chaired by SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich on 20 January 1942, see Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 214-217.

⁵³¹ The Germans did not play a role in the NDH's anti-Gypsy policies. While Gypsies in the Reich were gradually deprived of their rights under National Socialist rule, they retained their official status as Reich citizens (*Reichsbürger*) until April 1943, but Gypsies in the NDH were already legally defined as 'state nationals' (not citizens) of non-Aryan origin with the promulgation of the NDH's race laws on 30 April 1941. See Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia*, 149, 151, 154, 213 and Gilad Margalit, 'The Uniqueness of the Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies', *Romani Studies* 5, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2000): 195.

was German-occupied Serbia.⁵³² But though the puppet Serbian government of Milan Nedić dutifully cooperated with the Wehrmacht and German police in carrying out the Final Solution, the operation to eradicate the Jews and Gypsies of Serbia was initiated and directed by the Germans, and not the Serbs,⁵³³ who were also never afforded the status of ‘ruling Aryans’ enjoyed by the Croats (at least within their own formally independent state).

The SS also managed to recruit a considerable number of Eastern auxiliaries who would play ‘a pivotal role in the most murderous policies of the Nazi regime, particularly the annihilation of the European Jews’,⁵³⁴ but most Eastern peoples of the former Soviet Union, like the Serbs, would never be able to join the ranks of the ruling Aryan elite.⁵³⁵ Both Hitler and Himmler regarded the Russians in particular as ‘racially inferior, unable to produce culture, and lacking in military capacity by genetic heritage.’⁵³⁶ To be sure, the policy of exterminating the Jews might have created a type of ‘criminal blood-bond’ between Germans in the SS and the Eastern auxiliaries, who were directly involved, as Peter Black and Martin Gutmann note, in ‘the violent and lethal dirty work implicit in German policing in the occupied Soviet Union.’⁵³⁷ But the Eastern auxiliaries were never considered true brothers-in-arms bound by the idea of *Blutkitt*, a position symbolized by the fact that Eastern volunteers were, as a rule, ‘not entitled to wear the Hoheitsabzeichen – the German eagle and swastika breast badge – as this was a strictly German national honour.’⁵³⁸ In contrast, Himmler could openly declare to the officers of the Croatian-Bosnian Waffen-SS Handschar Division in January 1944 that, ‘with the comradeship, there is to be no difference between a German from the Reich, a Bosnian, Croa-

⁵³² Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 241.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 239-241.

⁵³⁴ Peter Black and Martin Gutmann, ‘Racial theory and realities of conquest in the occupied east: The Nazi leadership and non-German nationals in the SS and police’. In Jochen Böhrer and Robert Gerwarth eds., *The Waffen-SS: A European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41.

⁵³⁵ The National Socialists had a much more positive opinion of the racial value of the Estonians and Latvians. A meeting of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories on 4 February 1942 stated that these two peoples would, in future, fulfil the role of a middle class (*perioikoi*) in the Spartan-inspired German new order in the East: above them would stand the Germans as Spartans and below them the Russians as helots. Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*. Trans. Allan Blunden (London: Phoenix, 2003), 261-262.

⁵³⁶ Black and Gutmann, ‘Racial theory and realities of conquest in the occupied east’, 37.

⁵³⁷ For example, men of the Eastern Trawniki auxiliary units, which played a major role in the extermination centres of Operation ‘Reinhard’ (Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka) were given special recognition by SS officers for their services. See *ibid.*, 30-34. Black and Gutmann do not use the term *Blutkitt*.

⁵³⁸ Carlos Caballero Jurado, *Foreign Volunteers of the Wehrmacht 1941-45: Men-at-Arms*, 147 (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001), 13.

tian, or a German from the southeast. We wear the same tunic, the same belt buckle, and the same national emblem.⁵³⁹

Such comradery was best exemplified in the Wehrmacht's Croatian Legion or the 369th Reinforced Croatian Infantry Regiment, which fought on the Eastern front.⁵⁴⁰ The high-level military bearing and performance of the Croatian Legion – fighting as part of the German army at Stalingrad until the very end – confirmed Hitler's confidence in the loyalty and bravery of the Croatian soldier. In late February 1942, the Führer sent the Poglavnik a custom-made Mercedes-Benz as a gift in recognition of the bravery of the Croatian Legionaries on the Eastern front.⁵⁴¹ In his report on 'Various [German] statements on the virtues of our Legionaries on the Eastern front', from 25 January 1943, Croatian colonel Adolf Sabljak noted the observation of a German lieutenant-colonel who had seen the 369th regiment in action: he was 'witness to a magnificent scene, namely how the Croatian infantry attacked, like the Frederickian army, heroically and unusually cold-bloodedly without regard to enemy fire.'⁵⁴² It was the 'frequent accentuation of the Croats in military reports' that largely contributed to the generally 'very friendly disposition' of Reich state officials and the wider German population toward Croatia, as reported by the NDH's envoy in Berlin, Mile Budak, in August 1942.⁵⁴³

Neither the German surrender at Stalingrad in February 1943 nor the capitulation of Fascist Italy in September of the same year led to any change in the NDH's foreign policy. Indeed, Italy's surrender only had the effect of reinforcing the political and military bond between the NDH and the Third Reich. Although Pavelić had been an Italian political protégé from 1929-1941, and the core of the interwar Ustaša movement was based in Italy, relations between Fascist Italy and the NDH quickly soured from an early period. Due to its position as Germany's main ally (and with the Germans reluctant to intervene at the time), Italy was able to annex a large part of Croatia's Dalmatian coast with the Rome Agreements of 18 May 1941. While the Croat population of the annexed territory was subject to a brutal policy of Italianization, Rome

⁵³⁹ Cited in George Lepre, *Himmler's Bosnian Division: The Waffen-SS Handschar Division 1943-1945* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1997), 129. For more on SS policy toward the Croats, see Nevenko Bartulin, 'Race Theory versus a Religious World-View: SS-Ustaša Relations and Islam in the Independent State of Croatia', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 138, No. 590-591 (2023): 222-250.

⁵⁴⁰ For a detailed military history of the Legion, see Amir Obhodaš and Jason D. Mark, *Croatian Legion: The 369th Reinforced (Croatian) Infantry Regiment on the Eastern Front 1941-1943* (Sydney: Leaping Horseman Books, 2010).

⁵⁴¹ 'Vodja njemačkog naroda Adolf Hitler izrazio posebno priznanje hrvatskoj legiji na istočnom bojištu', *Hrvatski narod*, 26 February 1942, 1.

⁵⁴² Cited in Milan Pojić, *Hrvatska pukovnija 369. na istočnom bojištu 1941.-1943.: Ratni dnevnik* (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2007), 289.

⁵⁴³ Nada Kisić Kolanović, *Mladen Lorković: Ministar urotnik* (Zagreb: Golden marketing, 1998), 226.

also did everything possible to weaken the NDH and turn it into a virtual Italian colony; all of this made the NDH move even closer to Berlin.⁵⁴⁴ After Italy's capitulation, the Ustaše were keen to emphasize their loyalty to Germany in comparison to the betrayal of the 'disloyal' Italians, who were subsequently described by Reich Minister Joseph Goebbels as 'a gypsy people' that had 'gone to rot'.⁵⁴⁵ In contrast, Goebbels noted with admiration in his diary in September 1943 that 'the Poglavnik has issued a sharp declaration against Italy', and was now 'in a position to create a free Croatian state, together with Dalmatia; the Fuehrer had already promised him that... What a pity that one doesn't observe that kind of spirit... in other European nations!'⁵⁴⁶ During his interrogation by the Yugoslav Communist authorities after the defeat of the Third Reich, Siegfried Kasche stated that, 'in contrast to faithless Italy, all Croats linked to the NDH were inspired by the utmost loyalty' to the alliance with Germany, which was the only guarantee of Croatian statehood; Kasche added that the Croatian people had always been loyal throughout their history.⁵⁴⁷

Even the increasing number of atrocities committed against Croatian civilians by the Wehrmacht and (especially) the SS in 1944 as part of their anti-Partisan operations,⁵⁴⁸ could not manage to break the German-Croatian brotherhood-in-arms. When asked by Yugoslav Communist prosecutors at his trial in 1946 to explain how the Ustaše were able to silently watch the German killings of their own people, the last chief of the Ustaša police, Colonel Erih Lisak,

⁵⁴⁴ For more on Croatian-Italian-German relations, see Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 240-245.

⁵⁴⁵ As 'the last Roman', Goebbels made Benito Mussolini an exception among the Italians. Louis P. Lochner ed. (trans.) *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970), 437. Himmler also claimed that only Mussolini had 'upheld and incarnated the great Roman tradition', unlike the Italian people, whose betrayal and cowardice was the result of a 'defect in the blood and the race'. See Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, 79.

⁵⁴⁶ *The Goebbels Diaries*, 431.

⁵⁴⁷ Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich*, 134.

⁵⁴⁸ The worst case was the massacre of (at least) a few hundred Croatian civilians in the Dalmatian hinterland in March 1944 by units of the Waffen-SS Prinz Eugen Division, made up mainly of *Volksdeutsche* from the Banat region. This atrocity led the NDH's Foreign Ministry to make a protest to Berlin (without any effect). Tito's Yugoslav Partisans enjoyed strong support in Dalmatia, which, though formally part of the NDH in its entirety (apart from Zadar) after Italy's capitulation, proved to be mostly enemy territory for German soldiers. See Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 322-323. Such atrocities against the civilian population, which were part of the German military's policy of reprisals, and which were common in German-occupied areas of eastern Europe, became more frequent after Italy's surrender in western and southern Europe, which had previously been spared the worst of Nazi occupation policies. The Italians suffered particularly badly at the hands of German officers and soldiers who 'felt furious with their former allies for their "betrayal" and took their revenge on civilians at the slightest provocation'. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 499.

responded by stating that 'hundreds and hundreds, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Germans suffered casualties on the borders of Croatia fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Croats. Therefore, certain moral obligations existed...'⁵⁴⁹ Admittedly, the Ustaše had no other choice than to remain at the side of the Reich, for the Allies were committed to the restoration of the Yugoslav state,⁵⁵⁰ but Pavelić also seemed convinced that Germany could never lose the war, particularly after the development and use of the V-1 missile and V-2 rocket against Great Britain.⁵⁵¹ The Poglavnik made sure to quell any attempt to arrange an armistice with the Western Allies; in August 1944 he quashed the so-called Lorković-Vokić plot planned in the hope of bringing the NDH over to the Allied side.⁵⁵² A month earlier, Pavelić had expressed his satisfaction at the failure of the plot led by Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944. In a telegram sent to the German leader, the Poglavnik avowed that 'Providence has preserved you, Führer, to gain victory for all of us. For that the Croatian people and I are personally thankful to the Creator.'⁵⁵³ In a new year telegram sent to Himmler on the last day of 1944, Pavelić reasserted that 'Croatia's soldiers will remain at the side and under the leadership of the Greater German Reich without hesitation, faithfully until the final victory.'⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁴⁹ Cited in Kisić Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 429.

⁵⁵⁰ For the Allies, the NDH 'was not a state under international law'. See Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 268-274.

⁵⁵¹ In conversation with the Papal legate in the NDH, Ramiro Marcone, in August 1944, Pavelić affirmed his belief that 'the war will be finished in two years with a German victory' and that not a 'stone' would remain of England. Cited in *ibid.*, 328-329.

⁵⁵² For more on this topic, see Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia*, 15-16 and Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 325, 422-423.

⁵⁵³ Cited in Kisić Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 421. Mazower therefore states incorrectly that 'the handful of heads of state or prime ministers who sent the Führer telegrams following his lucky escape from the 20 July bomb plot did not include the Romanians, the Finns or even the Croats'. He also repeats the fanciful (and patently false) story told by the Italian journalist Curzio Malaparte, who claimed that he saw a wicker basket full of human eyes on Pavelić's desk during a wartime interview with the Poglavnik (this story has never been corroborated by anyone else). Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 346, 365.

⁵⁵⁴ Cited in Uki Goñi, *The Real Odessa: How Perón Brought the Nazi War Criminals to Argentina* (London and New York: Granta Books, 2003), 206. By December 1944 Pavelić had evacuated his wife Mara and two daughters to the Reich (in Austria) for safety, where 'Frau Pavelitsch' was greeted 'with a bouquet of flowers in Himmler's name'. See *ibid* and Branimir Kovačević, 'Mara Pavelić' in Darko Stuparić ed. *Tko je tko u NDH: Hrvatska 1941.-1945.* (Zagreb: Minerva, 1997), 311. In a memorandum to Berlin, on 15 November 1944, the Ustaša government proposed the mass evacuation (if necessary) of NDH state officials along with a larger number of Croatian officers, soldiers and administrative staff to the territory of the Reich. The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded with a positive reply to the Ustaša proposal on 25 January 1945. Slaven Ravlić, 'Kronologija političkih događaja u NDH 1941.-1945. in Stuparić ed. *Tko je tko u NDH*, 445.

The fear of 'Asiatic' or 'Mongol' Bolshevism, which had animated Hitler's conversation with Kvaternik in July 1941, continued to impel the unbending war effort of the German and Croatian brothers-in-arms until the bitter end. An editorial entitled, 'In the War for Europe and Croatia', published in the party journal *Ustaša* on 28 January 1945, declared that two principal forces – nationalism and communism – were left to fight for final control of the European continent:

'...for either nationalism will defend the traditions of old Europe and rejuvenate it with the powerful awakened forces of its followers, or the idea of Europe will fall to dust and the half-primitive hordes will break down the Gates of the peoples and subject our continent to the Asiatics.'

This 'war for the continent, the war of the white race, eternal values and expansive traditions' also involved the 'chivalrous and martial' Croatian people fighting in the ranks of the European nations.⁵⁵⁵ But only Croatia would remain steadfastly loyal until the end. Another editorial published in the same journal a month later stressed the harshness of the struggle Germany was experiencing, while those countries which 'had jumped onto the German side' when the German army was victorious on all fronts had now 'dropped off like weaklings under the first enemy bombs'. But the Croats 'remain the same, loyal and warlike', fully aware of what they owed the German Reich:

'Four years ago, the leadership of the Reich unselfishly recognized and helped the reestablishment of the thousand-year-old Croatian state...At that time the Poglavnik promised the German soldiers loyalty for loyalty. We don't trample upon our words... We are soldiers and know the value of honourable words. And the Germans know it too.'⁵⁵⁶

Hitler himself appeared to know it only too well. The Führer's reading of history and the self-certainty of his judgements about the moral (racial) character of other peoples convinced him early on that the Croats would not break their word; in a private monologue delivered to his entourage in late October 1941, the Führer had stated the following:

'If the Croats were part of the Reich, we'd have them serving as faithful auxiliaries of the German Fuehrer... Whatever happens, one shouldn't treat them as Italy is doing at present. The Croats are a proud people. They should be bound directly to the Fuehrer by an oath of loyalty. Like that, one could rely upon them absolutely. When I have Kvaternik standing in front of me, I behold the very type of the Croat as I've always known him, unshakeable in his friendships, a man whose oath is eternally binding.'⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁵ The failure of the Treaty of Versailles to secure peace and security in Europe had also marked the failure of Western democracy. 'U ratu za Europu i Hrvatsku, *Ustaša*, XV, No. 4, 28 January 1945, 1.

⁵⁵⁶ 'Savez bez ucjene', *Ustaša*, XV, No. 7, 18 February 1945, 1.

⁵⁵⁷ *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944*, 95.

Pavelić, for his part, remained a faithful *Gefolgsmann* of the Führer,⁵⁵⁸ even if he ultimately proved to be more like Himmler than Hitler in his desire not to perish in the *Götterdämmerung* of the Third Reich.⁵⁵⁹ The NDH's steadfast commitment to the alliance with the Reich only confirmed Hitler's confidence in the legend of Croatian loyalty and the firmness of the German-Croatian brotherhood-in-arms, something generally lacking or of weaker substance when it came to Germany's relations with its other allies, such as Hungary. In describing the key differences between German and Hungarian conceptions of their key war aims, Raul Hilberg noted that 'Germany fought for all or nothing; Hungary had more limited aims. The Germans wanted to make history; the Hungarians wanted only to annex territory. The Germans wanted to fight to the end; the Hungarians wanted to quit when the end was in sight.'⁵⁶⁰

The Ustaše also had a rather limited political aim, namely to establish an independent Croatian state, albeit a racial state modelled on the Third Reich. But, unlike Hungary for example, the fate of the Ustaša state was inextricably tied to the fortunes of Nazi Germany. The German 'gift' of independence to the Croats in April 1941 strengthened the sense of *Blutkitt* on the Ustaša side, helping to ensure that the NDH would remain the last standing ally of the German Reich in May 1945. An alliance with the Reich also meant fighting for the 'new

⁵⁵⁸ The aforementioned German naval report from the NDH in February 1944 concluded that the Poglavnik fought 'as a representative of the new European order and honest follower [*Gefolgsmann*] of our Führer against Soviet and British strategic efforts and simultaneously against pan-Slavic and democratic cliques'. Cited in 'Lagebeurteilung und Tätigkeitsbericht des Marineverbandsstabes Kroatien', 278-279.

⁵⁵⁹ As part of his attempt (without Hitler's knowledge) to surrender to the Western Allies, Himmler met – through the facilitation of his Finnish masseur Felix Kersten – with a representative of the World Jewish Congress from Sweden, Norbert Masur, near Berlin on 21 April 1945 to arrange the release of a thousand Jewish female inmates from the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 406-408. In a similar manner, the Poglavnik sought to present a more acceptable face to the Western Allies (but only after the Führer's death) by annulling the NDH's race laws on 3 May 1945; the Ustaša government also sent a memorandum to the Allied supreme commander in the Mediterranean in Italy on 4 May seeking the protection of the Western Allies against the approaching Yugoslav Communist Partisans. See Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia*, 157-158 and Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 752-753. Unlike Himmler, Pavelić was able to survive the war and found sanctuary in Argentina under Juan Perón in 1948. Tens of thousands of the NDH's soldiers, who retreated to the Austrian-Slovenian border in mid-May 1945 in an attempt to surrender to British forces, were not as fortunate as their leader; they were disarmed and summarily executed by units of the Yugoslav army. Kisić Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 441.

⁵⁶⁰ Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 855. This characterization of Hungarian war aims applies to Horthy's government. In contrast, the Arrow Cross government of Ferenc Szálasi, which was installed in Budapest in October 1944, proved to be much more ideologically sound, i.e. strongly pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic, but its rule only lasted for a few months. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 365-366.

Europe' in an ideological war primarily directed against what the National Socialists defined as Jewish-led Asiatic Communism.⁵⁶¹ This provided the Ustaše with the opportunity to also 'make history', particularly evident in the Croatian participation in the war on the Eastern front – 'the greatest struggle of all ages' -- where Croat soldiers 'heroically fought shoulder to shoulder with the German armed forces in the fight against Bolshevism, the deadly enemy of European culture.'⁵⁶² The Ustaše believed it was through such feats of 'Frederickian' military valour, staying true to their 'innate' sense of loyal duty and remaining on the side of the Greater German Reich, that the Croats would earn a glorious place in European history.

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⁵⁶¹ Himmler initially viewed the National Socialist war in the East as a 'racial war' against 'an Asian-Bolshevik bloc under Jewish leadership'; by late 1942, he was beginning to view the 'Asian masses subordinated to strong leader figures' as the greater long-term racial-political threat. See Longerich, *Himmler*, 262-263.

⁵⁶² Cited in the 'Decree on the Decoration of the 369th Reinforced Croatian Infantry Regiment with the Gold Medal of the Poglavnik Ante Pavelić for Bravery', issued on 13 March 1943. Pojić, *Hrvatska pukovnija 369. na istočnom bojištu 1941.-1943.*, 72.

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SAŽETAK

STARO NJEMAČKO-HRVATSKO BRATSTVO U ORUŽJU: POVIJEST, MIT I 'KRVNA VEZA' IZMEĐU TREĆEG REICHA I NDH

Sažetak: Ovaj članak ispituje kako je ideja povijesnog njemačko-hrvatskog bratstva u oružju odigrala značajnu ideološku ulogu u jačanju saveza između Trećeg Reicha i Nezavisne Države Hrvatske. 'Krvna veza' između dviju država nije se stvarala samo na bojnopolju – prije svega na Istočnom frontu gdje su se hrvatski dobrovoljci borili u Wehrmachtu – već i kroz usklađenja njihove rasne politike usmjerene protiv Židova, Cigana i Srba. Dok je tradicionalna slika vjernog i hrabrog hrvatskog vojnika pojačavala simpatiju Adolfa Hitlera za NDH, ona je također učvrstila odlučnost Ante Pavelića da stoji na strani Njemačke do kraja.

Ključne riječi: Njemačka, Hrvatska, Treći Reich, NDH, bratstvo u oružju, krvna veza, nacionalsocijalizam, Ustaša.