

Original Article

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Between Legal Formalism and Wartime Pragmatism: Recognition and the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Finland and the Independent State of Croatia (1941–1942)

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Summary

This paper examines Finland's de jure recognition of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and the establishment of diplomatic relations during 1941–1942, analysing the interplay between international legal norms and pragmatic wartime interests. Based on archival materials and other relevant sources, it has been determined that Helsinki, despite formally adhering to the Montevideo Convention criteria, primarily sought to strengthen the anti-Soviet coalition under German dominance. Diplomatic practices highlighted the symbolic significance of recognition for the NDH, while practical cooperation remained limited by logistical and personnel difficulties of the Croatian diplomatic mission. The findings confirm that Finland's decision was conditioned by a combination of legal formalism and wartime pragmatism, where each new diplomatic recognition represented an important step toward international legitimacy for the NDH.

Keywords: Finland, Independent State of Croatia, Recognition, Diplomatic Relations, Diplomatic Mission

Introduction

Precisely during the period of deep turmoil in the Second World War, when the boundaries and sovereignty of states were being reassessed in the light of geopolitical interests, one formal yet significant diplomatic issue went almost unnoticed: how and why did the Republic of Finland grant de jure recognition to the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in 1941? Despite the geographical distance and lack of previous historical ties, this recognition carried multilayered significance, from affirming ideological alliances to pragmatically accepting the new European order

dominated by Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. This paper addresses this gap by offering the first analysis of bilateral relations between Finland and the NDH, emphasizing the legal and political mechanisms and norms that decisively influenced the recognition process. The research does not confine itself to a superficial chronological overview of the motives of the two states; instead, it examines in greater detail the legal criteria and political decisions that led the Finnish government to recognize the NDH.

The existing historiography on the foreign policy of the NDH has been comprehensively and competently developed. Foundational syntheses by Fikreta Jelić-Butić and Hrvoje Matković, together with the classic works of Bogdan Krizman on the Ustaša regime's relations with the Third Reich and Italy, firmly established the view of the NDH as a satellite state whose international position was shaped primarily in Berlin and Rome (Jelić Butić, 1977; Matković, 2002; Krizman, 1983; 1986). Building on this line of scholarship, specialised studies have examined the NDH's bilateral relations with other states, most notably the monograph by Nada Kisić Kolanović on NDH–Italy relations, her book on ties between “Zagreb and Sofia”, which offers a detailed analysis of Croatian-Bulgarian relations, as well as her article on the NDH's relations with the countries of Southeast Europe, Turkey, and Japan (Kisić Kolanović, 2001; 2003; 2006). For relations with Switzerland, the key study is Tomislav Jonjić's work on the question of the NDH's recognition by the Swiss Confederation (Jonjić, 1999). The Central European dimension is further enriched, among others, by Jan Rychlík's study on Slovakia–NDH relations, while separate works have analysed relations with Spain (a documentary collection) and Japan–NDH relations (Rychlík, 2004; Budor, 2013; Križe, 2005). The structure and functioning of NDH diplomacy have been presented in Jonjić's extensive study of Croatian foreign policy from 1939 to 1942 and in the more recent review article by Bruno Korea Gajski on NDH diplomacy (Jonjić, 2000; Korea Gajski, 2020). Within this broader historiographical framework, Finnish–Croatian relations during the NDH period remain strikingly under-researched. In general syntheses of NDH foreign policy, Finland is usually mentioned only as one of the states that recognised the NDH in 1941, without any deeper analysis of the substance of these relations. A comprehensive analytical study of relations between the NDH and Finland has not yet been produced. The only publication directly focused on this bilateral relationship is the valuable volume edited by Ante Delić (2021), *Tajni dokumenti o NDH. Izvešća finskih diplomatskih predstavnika u Zagrebu 1941.–1944.*, issued as an edition of Finnish diplomatic documents and accompanied by an extensive, detailed editorial introduction, but lacking a more comprehensive interpretative synthesis of relations between the two states. This limited state of research in the Croatian historiography likely stems from several factors. Compared with the NDH's relations with Italy, Germany, or neighbouring states, its connection with Finland had only

a modest direct impact on everyday life in the NDH and on key wartime developments. Furthermore, Finnish archival material is linguistically demanding and geographically less accessible to Croatian researchers. Finally, the principal corpus of sources available in Croatian was published only in 2021, that is, relatively late in comparison with the already established scholarship on NDH diplomacy. It should also not be overlooked that the largest portion of the archival holdings of the NDH Ministry of Foreign Affairs is preserved in Belgrade.

Methodological Approach and Research Objective

The research is conceived as a qualitative case study, structured across three interconnected analytical levels. On the first, normative level, the study reconstructs international legal criteria of statehood and recognition, aiming to establish a legal framework within which Finland's decision on the *de jure* recognition of the NDH was formulated. Thus, the issue of NDH sovereignty is positioned within a precise and comparable reference framework. The second analytical level is based on the process-tracing method. At this level, the steps in the recognition process are chronologically reconstructed, from the Croatian diplomatic notification sent in June 1941, to the official Finnish diplomatic note of July 31, 1941. Particular emphasis is placed on the context in which Finland, already an ally of Germany against the USSR since June 25, 1941, used recognition of the NDH as an instrument to strengthen the anti-Soviet coalition. The third level of research focuses on the operationalization of recognition through everyday diplomatic practices of the two missions during the 1941–1942 period. This analysis is based on content analysis of primary sources, primarily unpublished reports from the records of the NDH Legation in Helsinki (HR-HDA-231), as well as published diplomatic reports from the Finnish Legation in Zagreb. The aim of this analytical level is to clarify how the formal legal act of recognition was transformed into actual protocol practice. The reliability of results is ensured through source triangulation: (1) unpublished archival materials stored in the Croatian State Archives (HDA), which currently constitute the only fully accessible diplomatic correspondence between Zagreb and Helsinki during the Second World War; (2) official diplomatic correspondence of the Finnish legation in Zagreb, translated into Croatian; and (3) relevant secondary literature concerning the international legal status of the NDH and Finnish foreign policy.

The primary objective of this paper is to investigate how international legal criteria of statehood, politico-strategic interests, and diplomatic practices influenced Finland's decision in 1941 to recognize the NDH and how that recognition was operationalized in practice. The research question guiding this paper is as follows: How did normative (international legal) frameworks and contemporary geopoliti-

cal factors shape Finland's decision to recognize the NDH, and in what manner was this decision translated into the establishment and conduct of diplomatic relations?

Since the bulk of the archival materials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the NDH are stored in the Archives of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, the author has chosen to limit this research to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Finland and the NDH. It is important to emphasize that this is the first systematic study analysing relations between these two states.

Historical and Political Framework of Finland and Croatia

Finland and NDH did not share a common border, thus direct territorial or boundary disputes between them were impossible. Similarly, reviewing the history of Finnish-Croatian relations reveals that their mutual contacts were not burdened by unresolved issues or historical conflicts.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Finland underwent a complex process of political change that ultimately led to its independence. As a result of the Russo-Swedish War of 1809, it was incorporated into the Russian Empire and established as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland (Suchoples, 2022, pp. 12–13). The Russian Revolution of 1917 stimulated Finnish demands for independence, and the collapse of the imperial regime enabled the restoration of self-government. Although the Provisional Government in Petrograd abolished earlier restrictions and recognised Finnish autonomy, disagreements over sovereignty led to the declaration of independence on December 6, 1917. The President of the Senate, Pehr E. Svinhufvud, requested recognition from the Bolshevik government, which Lenin granted in accordance with the principle of national self-determination. Contrary to Lenin's expectations, Finland did not return to the Soviet sphere, and the outcome of the Civil War confirmed its independence and its political distancing from Bolshevik Russia (Wuorinen, 1965, p. 211; Hamalainen, 1974, p. 117; Suchoples, 2022, pp. 17–18).

In the interwar period, following independence and a brief civil war, Finland sought to maintain neutrality while simultaneously safeguarding itself against the Soviet Union. Despite the Non-Aggression Pact of 1932, Finnish foreign policy continued to be marked by deep mistrust toward Moscow; in 1935, together with the other Scandinavian states, Finland further emphasised its neutrality, in spite of Stalin's warning in 1939 that the great powers might not allow it (Chubaryan and Shukman, 2013; Engle and Paananen, 2019). Negotiations in 1938–1939 concerning military cooperation and territorial concessions intended to shift the border west of Leningrad proved unsuccessful (Wuorinen, 2015). After the staged shelling of Soviet territory on November 26, 1939, the Soviet Union attacked Finland, initiating the Winter War (1939–1940) (Engle and Paananen, 2019). Although numerically

superior and technically better equipped, the Red Army, which anticipated a swift victory, was significantly slowed by determined Finnish resistance and effective defensive tactics. The peace treaty signed in Moscow on March 13, 1940 required Finland to cede approximately 22,000 km² of territory, but the country preserved its independence (Gilmour, 2011, pp. 40–41). A long-term consequence of the conflict was Finland's gradual rapprochement with Germany and its decision, in May and June 1941, on the eve of the German attack on the Soviet Union, to align itself with the Third Reich and resume hostilities against its eastern neighbour (Suchopoles, 2022, pp. 22–23).

It is important to note that Finland remained an independent state with its own political and military leadership and was not a signatory to the Tripartite Pact. Most importantly, Finland preserved its democratic system and never fully abandoned the principle of the rule of law on which the republic was founded, even when it became the only democratic state fighting¹ alongside Nazi Germany (Silvennoinen, 2023, p. 321).

Croatia, as part of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, severed all ties with the Empire in 1918 and, together with the Slovenian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian territories, entered the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs. Owing to complex political circumstances, this state united with the Kingdom of Serbia on December 1, 1918 to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Čulinović, 1953, pp. 339–341; Bilandžić, 1999, pp. 54–55; Goldstein, 2008, pp. 15–16). Croatia's position within the new monarchy quickly became the subject of political and national controversy due to its centralised structure, especially after the Vidovdan Constitution of 1921, which proved unfavourable to Croatian interests. The January 6 Dictatorship of 1929, through which King Alexander suspended the Constitution and dissolved the Parliament, as well as the renaming of the state to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, further entrenched centralist and unitarist policies and intensified Croatian dissatisfaction (Čepulo, 2012, pp. 272–274; Ramet, 2009, pp. 121–123; Petranović, 1988, p. 95).

¹ From 1941 onward, when Finland fought alongside Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, the nature of this alignment was difficult for the Finns themselves to accept. In the geopolitical circumstances of the time, Germany was the only European power capable of offering protection against the Soviet Union, and the Finns, confronted with a persistent threat to their sovereignty, viewed cooperation with the Nazis as the only available means of balancing the Soviet threat. To explain why Finland was fighting on the same side as Nazi Germany, while at the same time mitigating negative perceptions in the West and presenting Finland as part of the Western democratic community, the so-called "separate war thesis" was formulated. As President Risto Ryti explained to American journalist Henry J. Taylor in 1941, "Finland is fighting its own separate war, and our army will not cross the pre-agreed defensive line" (Holmila and Tilli, 2016, pp. 123–124).

To mitigate these tensions, the government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Croatian Peasant Party concluded the Cvetković–Maček Agreement on August 26, 1939, establishing the Banovina of Croatia. It encompassed most of the territories with a Croatian majority population and enjoyed extensive executive, administrative, and judicial competences in internal affairs, while foreign policy, defence, and customs remained under the jurisdiction of Belgrade (Čepulo, 2012, pp. 276–277; Čulinović, 1961, pp. 147–148; Calic, 2019, p. 120).

Despite attempts at internal reform, the foreign policy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was, by early 1941, increasingly shaped by the influence of the Axis powers. Under German pressure, and in an effort to preserve territorial integrity and avoid war, the government negotiated accession to the Tripartite Pact, and the Act of Accession was signed in Vienna on March 25, 1941 (Krizman, 1975, pp. 128–129; Čepulo, 2012, p. 285; Ramet, 2009, pp. 157–158; Janjetović, 2006, p. 1015). The decision provoked mass protests and a coup d'état formally led by General Dušan Simović, with the accession serving as the immediate pretext for the German attack; Yugoslavia capitulated on April 17, 1941. Although Berlin had favoured preserving a unified Yugoslavia² as late as the end of March, the coup altered the German position, an outcome readily accepted by Fascist Italy, which harboured open territorial ambitions toward Croatian lands. After Croatian Peasant Party leader Vladko Maček rejected the German offer to assume power in Croatia, Mussolini proposed Ante Pavelić, the leader of the Ustaša movement headquartered in Italy, as the new head of state (Matković, 2002, p. 56).

The new state, the Independent State of Croatia, was proclaimed on April 10, 1941, and encompassed most of present-day Croatia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, a significant portion of the territory was soon ceded to Italy under the Treaties of Rome, undermining its territorial integrity. The NDH was established without democratic legitimacy, and the regime rapidly instituted a highly

² From the German perspective, the Ustaša movement remained hopelessly marginal until March 1941. German politician and diplomat Siegfried Kasche, later German diplomatic representative in the NDH, thus concluded that “there would have been no reason to create the NDH had relations between Germany and Yugoslavia remained as they were before the coup, that is, before the war in 1941”. Indeed, at the end of March 1941 Kasche was informed to prepare himself for a diplomatic posting in Belgrade. For this reason, he rejected the existence of any “official” or “semi-official” link between Germany and the Ustaša movement, or any other Croatian political group with which Germany might have been “developing or encouraging plans to break up Yugoslavia”. Kasche characterised German policy toward Belgrade up to March 1941 as “decisively friendly”. He further stressed that Germany “had no interest in waging war in Yugoslavia or Croatia, all the more so because it needed its troops urgently on both major fronts”. It is important to emphasise that these statements rely primarily on Kasche’s post-war testimony given during the investigative proceedings (Kisić Kolanović, 2011, p. 777).

repressive policy of terror and mass persecution targeting Serbs, Jews, Roma, and political opponents (Ramet, 2009, pp. 161–162; Krizman, 1986, p. 11; Matković, 2002, p. 59).

The NDH was a puppet regime in the sense that its authority was a gift from a foreign conqueror and remained under foreign occupation throughout its existence, initially by German and Italian forces, and later, after the collapse of Fascism, solely by German troops. It was never fully sovereign “in its own house”, and for most of its brief duration it may be regarded as something between a puppet and a satellite state,³ possessing greater autonomy than any other regime in German-occupied Europe. By comparison, the Slovak Republic was a satellite rather than a puppet. Although its independence stemmed from Germany’s destruction of Czechoslovakia, it was autonomously organised by the principal Slovak political forces and did not live under direct occupation. Its status therefore resembled that of Vichy France (Payne, 2006).

The report of the Finnish diplomatic mission in Rome dated May 10, 1941, provides valuable insight into how Finnish diplomats perceived the breakup of Yugoslavia and the establishment of the NDH. According to the report, the disintegration of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, triggered by Simović’s “criminal and unbelievably foolish” coup d’état in March 1941, was a “natural consequence” of profound internal instability within a state described as an unnatural political entity, in which numerous peoples had been oppressed. The collapse of the Kingdom, as the same report noted, enabled the Axis powers to achieve their strategic goals in the Balkans, with Italy surpassing even its own expectations by occupying Dalmatia and annexing the Province of Ljubljana. Finnish diplomats believed that the NDH was formally established as an independent state but was, in practice, directly dependent on Germany. They particularly emphasized Croatia’s complicated position in the context of the Italian occupation of the Dalmatian coast, which prevented the newly established state from having direct access to the Adriatic Sea (Report No. 11, May 10, 1941, in: Delić, 2021, pp. 36–38).

In his report of May 21, 1941, drafted three days after the signing the Treaties of Rome, the Finnish envoy in Rome, Onni Talas⁴, provided the Finnish government

³ When discussing the policies of the NDH, Kisić Kolanović (2003, p. 50) emphasises that, as a German satellite, it was unable to establish its own system of collective security and was instead compelled to support the broader Axis system.

⁴ Onni Talas was born on June 15, 1877, in Lappeenranta (South Karelia), into a prosperous merchant family. He earned his doctorate in law as early as 1905, subsequently embarking on a successful academic career spanning several decades. At the same time, he served for many years as chairman of the supervisory board of a bank primarily owned by his family. This background influenced him to pay particular attention to economic matters within the NDH in his

with a detailed account of the position of the NDH in relation to Italy. He emphasised that the resolution of the Croatian question was regarded as one of the ultimate objectives of Italian foreign policy. In his assessment, the war in the Adriatic had effectively come to an end, and Italy had achieved its aims. The Adriatic Sea was treated as an Italian sea, and the newly established Croatian state was viewed by the Italian public as a new political entity within the Italian empire, an impression in which, Talas concluded, the Italian public “was not wrong”. Talas noted that the military restrictions to which Croatia had agreed were not particularly extensive. Croatia committed itself not to arm the islands and coastal areas ceded to Italy, nor to construct factories producing military supplies or build military depots in those regions. Furthermore, Croatia declared that it would not establish a navy, except for vessels intended for police and customs purposes. Since the Croatian part of the Dalmatian coast divided the Italian littoral into two separate sections, Talas considered it logical that Croatia was obliged to allow the transit of Italian troops through these areas. At the same time, he assessed that the limitations imposed on Croatian autonomy were considerable. Italy guaranteed not only the territorial inviolability of Croatia but also its political independence, although, according to Talas, it was difficult to determine precisely what should be included within the scope of political independence. He believed that the danger arising from the Italian guarantees could increase if Croatia were to commit itself to concluding an international agreement that would contradict the Italian guarantee or the spirit of the contractual relationship between Italy and Croatia. These constraints on self-determination, Talas concluded, indicated that the NDH could not be regarded as a fully independent state (Report No. 15, May 10, 1941, in: Delić, 2021, pp. 39–40).

In his report to the Finnish government of July 25, 1941, Onni Talas highlighted the Hungarian occupation of Međimurje and Croatia’s inability to establish control over this part of its territory, as well as Zagreb’s consistent refusal to accept

diplomatic reports. During critical moments in Finland’s modern history, Talas was politically active, initially supporting K. J. Ståhlberg’s left wing, but following the October Revolution, aligning with P. E. Svinhufvud’s right-wing faction, firmly believing that Finland must become an independent state. In November 1917, he became a member of the Senate for Independence. During this pivotal period of Finnish history (1917–1918), he “represented the traditional constitutionalism of the Young Finns’ right wing, where adherence to legal formalism was the highest virtue in itself, and respect for the law a moral principle that could never be compromised”. Afterwards, Talas embarked on his diplomatic career, to which he dedicated most of his life. He served as Finland’s envoy in Lisbon, Madrid, Copenhagen, Budapest, Vienna, Ankara, Belgrade, Sofia, Zagreb, and Rome. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Talas became closely familiar with the circumstances in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, especially Croatian-Serbian relations, visiting prominent political figures in Belgrade and Zagreb. After the Second World War, he published several memoirs. Talas died on May 3, 1958 (Delić, 2021, pp. 17-18).

Hungarian administration over this Croatian region. He noted that he had discussed the matter with the Hungarian envoy in Rome, who acknowledged that the Hungarian language had not been used at all in the Međimurje area, but claimed that the population was not Croatian but Slavic, suggesting that they might be considered Slovenes, “although they are not that either”. The envoy asserted that this population regarded itself as Hungarian and had rejoiced at being reunited with Hungary. Talas also recorded the Hungarian envoy’s very firm position: Hungary would never relinquish this territory, which, according to him, had “undoubtedly” belonged to Hungary before the Treaty of Trianon and had never been considered part of Croatia. Talas concluded that the question of the border would, of course, be decided by Germany and Italy and assessed, given the circumstances at the time, that Hungary appeared to have a greater chance of achieving its goals (Report No. 18, July 25, 1941, in: Delić, 2021, pp. 42–43).

International Legal Status of the NDH

One of the key issues in determining the international legal status of the NDH concerned its recognition by other states. The significance of this question is confirmed by the fact that immediately after the NDH was proclaimed, recognition requests were sent to Germany and Italy. According to the declarative theory, the Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, signed in Montevideo in 1933, most clearly summarized previous attempts to specify the conditions required for state formation: (1) a permanent population, (2) a defined territory, (3) an effective government, and (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other states (Degan, 2011, pp. 212–214; Jonjić, 2011, p. 674). In formal terms, the Montevideo Convention represents particular rather than universal international law, yet it essentially codified what had already become a prevailing understanding (Jonjić, 2011, p. 674). If one follows the sequence of criteria from Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention, it can be concluded that the first two requirements, permanent population and defined territory, generally pose no significant problem when viewed independently, separate from the third element, which pertains to the existence of a government. Difficulties arise, however, in assessing precisely this third element, the existence of an effective government. This constitutive element involves two aspects: firstly, the existence of a state apparatus, and secondly, the capacity to effectively control or govern the relevant territory. Regarding the first aspect, the NDH undoubtedly possessed a structured state apparatus enabling it to implement internal governance and pursue foreign policy. Concerning the second aspect, the necessity of establishing actual control over the entire territory, it must be concluded that this control was never fully effective. Two fundamental reasons explain this situation. Firstly, a substantial portion of NDH territory remained occupied by Axis military forces, who also assumed civilian administration, often contrary to the wishes of Zagreb.

Secondly, in addition to foreign occupation forces, extensive territories formally under NDH sovereignty, inhabited by thousands of residents, were from the summer of 1941 intermittently under rebel control.⁵ Consequently, one cannot speak of effective NDH governance over its entire territory. This becomes even more evident when applying a stricter criterion of effectiveness. In assessing the third constitutive element of statehood, international doctrine differentiates between the effective exercise of authority and a mere right to exercise authority. The right to govern territory may sometimes suffice for international recognition, for example, when statehood is undisputed. However, in the case of the NDH, its statehood was undeniably disputed by the Western Allies, given that the Yugoslav government-in-exile in London was recognized by most Allied states. In this context, evaluating NDH statehood requires applying a stricter approach, specifically demanding proof of effective territorial control, an element clearly not fulfilled in this instance. The fourth constitutive element, the capacity to establish relations with other states is also problematic, and it is typically interpreted in international legal doctrine as an expression of independence. The NDH undoubtedly possessed some degree of foreign-policy autonomy, yet it is difficult to equate this with full sovereignty, as such autonomy was severely limited in practice by Rome and Berlin. This was most evident in matters of territorial delimitation with neighbouring states, and Italy's role as guarantor of the so-called "political independence of the Kingdom of Croatia" (Krstić and Jovanović, 2018, pp. 212–213).

During 1941 and 1943, a series of *de jure* recognitions followed, yet almost all states recognizing the NDH were members of the Tripartite or Anti-Comintern Pact,⁶ thus associated with the Axis powers. Interestingly, the first formal recognition did not come from Berlin or Rome, but from Hungary on April 10, 1941, the very day the NDH was proclaimed. With this act, Hungary sought to challenge the validity of the Treaty of Eternal Friendship signed with the Kingdom of Yugosla-

⁵ In the paper, therefore, the author refers to "rebellions" and "internal conflicts" already at the time of Finland's recognition of the NDH, not in the sense that the entire territory of the state was engulfed by a general uprising, but rather that armed clashes were already occurring in its territory, raising serious doubts about the third Montevideo criterion (the existence of an effective government exercising authority over its territory). In addition to the establishment of the Sisak Partisan Detachment on June 22, 1941, it is also important to note the localized uprising in Eastern Herzegovina from June 24 to early July 1941 (see Marijan, 2003).

⁶ Hitler used the doctrine of *debellatio* as a legal basis for the establishment and recognition of the NDH. According to certain interpretations, this meant that a state's sovereignty ceased upon its conquest, and therefore the proclamation of another state on parts of its territory was legally valid and conferred full sovereignty upon the new entity. However, this represented a peculiar interpretation of the concept of conquest, one that international law experts never accepted and which state practice in the West never supported (Tomasevich, 2010, p. 221).

via in December 1940, arguing that Yugoslavia no longer existed. Shortly thereafter, recognition by Germany and Italy followed (on April 15, 1941). In their acts of recognition, both countries emphasized that the NDH was “independent and free”, although the exact borders of the new state were to be determined through subsequent agreements between its representatives and the Axis powers. In the following weeks, the NDH received recognition from other Tripartite Pact members: Slovakia (April 15), Bulgaria (April 21), and Romania (May 8). Shortly afterward, the Treaties of Rome were signed on May 18, 1941, by which Italy gained parts of the Croatian coastline, which attracted special criticism. U.S. Secretary of State Sumner Welles publicly expressed his dismay regarding the territorial fragmentation of Yugoslavia carried out by the Axis powers. Additional recognitions followed during the summer of 1941 from Japan (June 7), Spain (June 27), and several other states politically or ideologically linked to the Axis powers. Thus, the international network of formal recognitions of the NDH expanded, though it remained almost exclusively limited to states under the political or military influence of Berlin and Rome (Krstić and Jovanović, 2018, pp. 201–202). There is a very justifiable reason for this. Namely, most countries worldwide viewed the subjugation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia,⁷ and thus the establishment of the NDH in its territory, as a blatant violation of the Kellogg–Briand Pact of August 27, 1928. This Pact definitively banned war as a means of resolving international disputes in international law. From 1931 onward, this prohibition was increasingly violated by the three states that, in 1936, formed the Anti-Comintern Pact. When, in early 1932, the United States announced the Stimson Doctrine, which declared non-recognition of all situations, treaties, or agreements achieved in violation of the Kellogg–Briand Pact, this policy of non-recognition was initially applied to the Japanese satellite entity, the “Manchukuo”. Subsequently, leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, numerous other unlawful acts contravening the Kellogg–Briand Pact occurred, to which the Stimson Doctrine of non-recognition was also applied. Consequently, the NDH could not realistically expect formal recognition from neutral states, especially not from countries of the Anti-Fascist coalition, at least until the end of World War II. Another negative factor impacting the country’s international reputation was the figure of its leader, Ante Pavelić. Due to the organized assassination in Marseille on October 9, 1934, in which Yugoslav King Alexander I and French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou were killed, France demanded Pavelić’s extradition from Italy.

⁷ On May 8, 1941, the Yugoslav government-in-exile circulated a protest note to Yugoslav diplomatic missions regarding the proclamation of the NDH. The note emphasized that, according to all principles of international law, military occupation does not alter the public-law status of the occupied territory, nor can it provide a legal foundation for establishing a new political order in that area (Krizman, 1981, p. 13).

The Italian police arrested Pavelić and held him in solitary confinement. However, the Court of Appeals in Turin refused the extradition request, ruling that the assassination was “a political crime, motivated by political reasons, harming the political interests of Yugoslavia”, and thus not subject to extradition under the Italian Criminal Code. Thus, the NDH acquired additional notoriety due to being headed by a person accused of international terrorism, who, moreover, exercised unlimited authority by the will of occupying forces. All these factors resulted in the NDH receiving international recognition from a very limited number of states. Additionally, the NDH was a party to certain bilateral and multilateral confidential treaties with some other European states, from which one could infer an intention of mutual recognition, at least *de facto* (Degan, 2002, pp. 170–172).

Switzerland did not recognize the NDH, despite Zagreb’s efforts to secure *de jure* recognition. Official Bern rejected these requests, partly due to its policy of neutrality and partly because of British diplomatic pressure. Instead of formal recognition, Switzerland established *de facto* economic relations with the NDH, allowing the latter to conduct limited consular activities within its Permanent Trade Delegation in Zurich (Jonjić, 1999, p. 261). Ustaša authorities also attempted to obtain recognition from the Holy See and develop close relations; however, formal recognition was never granted. Although the Holy See did not sever diplomatic ties with the Yugoslav government-in-exile, a mutual exchange of permanent representatives was established in the summer of 1941. Apostolic Legate Abbot Giuseppe Ramiro Marcone was sent to Zagreb, while the NDH opened an office of extraordinary envoy to the Holy See. Marcone’s high-level status was reflected by his inclusion in the list of the diplomatic corps accredited to the NDH, and he regularly participated in official ceremonies (Korea Gajski, 2020, pp. 17–18).

The Process of Finnish Recognition of the NDH and the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

The preparation and delivery of Finland’s recognition of the NDH in 1941 unfolded through several carefully coordinated steps, with Zagreb and Helsinki relying on Italian mediation due to the absence of direct bilateral contacts. The diplomatic notification regarding the existence of the NDH, composed in French and dated June 14, was initially withheld in Zagreb, as Foreign Minister Mladen Lorković needed to request instructions from Berlin on how to proceed with its delivery to Finland. Only after German diplomacy recommended approaching Rome for mediation did Lorković, on June 16, instruct that the note be delivered via the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. State Secretary Vjekoslav Vrančić personally brought the note to the Italian capital on June 21 (Krizman, 1983). The Italian envoy in Zagreb, Casertano, informed Zagreb on July 9 that the Finnish government had notified Rome of

its decision, reached during a session held on July 3, to grant the NDH *de jure* recognition.⁸ The following day, Casertano handed Lorković the Italian note, confirming that the Croatian notification had indeed been delivered to Helsinki. According to the official Finnish diplomatic note dated July 31, the President of the Republic of Finland, Risto Ryti, had already made the decision to grant *de jure* recognition to the NDH on July 2, one day before the government session.⁹ The same note emphasized that Helsinki “highly appreciates” the Croatian desire to develop bilateral relations and expressed the wish to “always strengthen and deepen them”. Immediately upon receiving this information, Lorković sent his thanks to Finnish Foreign Minister Rolf Witting, stressing that the “Finnish and Croatian peoples are fighting together against a common enemy” (Krizman, 1983; Jonjić, 2000, p. 497). However, the first tensions between Zagreb and Helsinki emerged due to the Ustaša Legal Provision on Racial Affiliation and Citizenship of April 30, 1941, which targeted everyone of Jewish origin¹⁰ in Croatia, irrespective of religious con-

⁸ The NDH was not the only satellite state recognized by the Republic of Finland. Helsinki granted Slovakia *de jure* recognition on June 21, 1940, after delaying for nearly a year and a half its response to Bratislava’s repeated requests. The decision was made at a session of the State Council, with the justification that “the Slovak government had fulfilled the necessary conditions of statehood”, a formulation that masked the reality that the new republic was entirely dependent on Germany. Finland’s leadership agreed to the recognition only after the Wehrmacht had occupied the northern coasts of the Baltic Sea, and it appeared that Berlin would soon become the sole guarantor of Finland’s supply routes in the anticipated war against the USSR. With this decision, Helsinki openly embraced for the first time since the Winter War the political order dictated by the Third Reich, although bilateral relations remained modest, no permanent diplomatic mission was established, and diplomatic affairs were managed by envoy Toivo Kivimäki from Berlin (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, n.d.).

⁹ The honorary Finnish consulate in Zagreb was established as early as 1934, when Dr. Pavle Berkeš, previously General Director of Hrvatska banka d.d. in Zagreb, was appointed as honorary consul (in 1936 becoming consul general). That same year, Dr. Onni Talas was appointed as Finnish envoy in Belgrade (Delić, 2021, p. 17).

¹⁰ The Jewish population of Finland numbered around 1,700 persons in 1939. In the summer of 1941, the Continuation War against the Soviet Union broke out, during which Finland became a co-belligerent of Germany; Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS units were stationed in its territory, but no standard Einsatzgruppe was ever deployed to Finland. The co-belligerent relationship with Germany during the Continuation War did not alter the status of Jews in Finland or in its armed forces. Finland did not enact antisemitic legislation comparable to the Nuremberg Laws, and the Finnish constitution itself guaranteed equality before the law. Jewish citizens served in the Finnish army, in the women’s voluntary defence organisation, and in other capacities alongside other Finns.

A striking example is shown in the well-known photograph of a makeshift cardboard tent with an iron stove and chimney on the left, in front of which a group of soldiers is posing: it depicts a field synagogue, “Scholka’s shul”, established by Jewish soldiers at the front near the Svir River in Eastern Karelia. A field synagogue with a Torah was, without doubt, an exceptionally rare phenomenon in an army fighting on the German side during the war.

version, as objects of repression. Among those affected was Finland's consul general Pavle Berkeš, despite having converted to Catholicism in 1932. On May 19, 1941, Berkeš was detained by the Ustaša police, with his file noting he was taken "by order of German authorities". Berkeš remained silent about the circumstances of his arrest, merely noting that no physical violence had occurred, although he later described the episode as a form of suffering. On the same day, consulate secretary Hannes Markkula urgently telegraphed the Finnish legation in Budapest; this dispatch was promptly forwarded to the desks of the Finnish president and foreign minister. Following Finnish diplomatic pressure and likely Pavelić's desire to avoid an international scandal, Berkeš was released on the morning of May 21. On May 27, Markkula informed Budapest that "things are back to normal", but simultaneously described Zagreb as a city where Jews were already forced to wear the Star of David on their sleeves. Berkeš refused to wear this sign, instead pinning on his lapel a large, enamelled Finnish flag and a small badge denoting his Italian commendatore status, a discreet yet effective protection against street harassment. The Finns soon realized that Berkeš, due to his heritage, could no longer carry out his consular functions. Consequently, the future Finnish envoy to the NDH, Onni Talas, was instructed to encourage Berkeš to resign voluntarily, and Markkula was temporarily recognized as acting head of the consulate. On July 21, 1941, Berkeš personally signed his resignation addressed to Minister Rolf Witting, writing: "I assure you I have considered serving Finland an honor..." Although dignified, this act deeply affected him, he later described it as one of the most difficult moments of his life. On July 19, the Ustaša authorities issued NDH passports to Berkeš and his family, who soon obtained Italian visas. The Ustaša police detained him once more (this time without confiscating his passport), likely as part of a broader counterintelligence operation targeting the American consulate headed by his friend John J. Meily. Meanwhile, on September 2, 1941, his wife Lily, together with their daughters Eva Maria and Daisy, managed to escape to Rome with Italian diplomatic assistance, their possessions having been shipped as diplomatic cargo a week earlier, including gold jewellery sewn inside a child's doll, undetected. Finnish envoy Onni Talas intervened for Berkeš's release, and Pavelić eventually granted it. Under the cover of darkness, Berkeš was driven to the Italian demarcation line near Zagreb by a senior officer of the Italian legation, likely General Oxilia¹¹ himself (Bašić, 2022).

Finnish public opinion largely held that "we have no Jewish question", a sentiment explicitly expressed by Finnish Prime Minister J. W. Rangell to Heinrich Himmler in July 1942 (Harvainen, 2000, pp. 161–162).

¹¹ General Giovanni Battista Oxilia (1887–1953) was head of the Italian Military Mission in the NDH from June 1941 to August 1942 (Tomasevich, 2010).

The first concrete step in establishing diplomatic relations occurred only a few weeks later, when Finnish envoy Onni Talas arrived in Zagreb on September 22, 1941. The following morning, he presented copies of his credentials to Foreign Minister Mladen Lorković. The official accreditation ceremony took place at 5 p.m. on September 23 in Pavelić's office, accompanied by all military honours required by protocol. In his greeting, Talas emphasized his happiness at representing his homeland in a country with which he saw a "common destiny", noting that the Finns had followed the Croatian desire for independence "with interest and great admiration". Pavelić, in his response, recalled Finland's defence during 1939–1940, described it as an example for Croatian soldiers, and stressed that Croatian and Finnish forces were now fighting "side by side" within a European community led by Germany and Italy. After presenting his credentials, Pavelić took Talas to his office for a half-hour conversation. He repeatedly expressed admiration for the Finnish nation, its armed forces, and Marshal Mannerheim¹², voicing his genuine delight at the anticipated Finnish recovery of Karelia and acquisition of more defensible borders. The discussion spontaneously turned to the Soviet Union, with Pavelić asserting that Bolshevism needed to be entirely destroyed, and the USSR subsequently partitioned, as he believed Europe could not be peaceful as long as the Soviet state remained intact. He reinforced this stance by asserting that Croatia had no territorial ambitions toward the Soviet Union, but participated in the war as part of a shared European task. Talas's report shows that the Finnish mission in Zagreb enjoyed an exceptionally privileged status. Instead of the customary practice of leaving calling cards, all members of the Croatian government requested personal audiences with the Finnish envoy, and several ceremonial gatherings were held in his honour, including a luncheon hosted by the Pavelić family (Report No. 1, October 25, 1941, in: Delić, 2021, pp. 44–49).

Three days later, on September 26, Finnish Minister of Trade Väinö Tanner arrived in Zagreb on an official visit. The Minister conveyed greetings from the Finnish people, expressed his joy at personally congratulating the Croatian authorities on their liberation and establishment of the NDH. Pavelić reciprocated Tanner's warm words with thanks, engaging him in lengthy discussions (*Novi list*, 1941, no. 151).

The most impressive public appearance by the Finnish envoy occurred at a ceremonial luncheon held in early October, where Talas addressed members of the

¹² Baron Carl Gustav Mannerheim (1867–1951) served as Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish armed forces during the Winter War of 1939–1940 and again from 1941 to 1944, when Finland fought the Soviet Union as a co-belligerent alongside Germany. He was appointed Marshal of Finland in 1942. After the German collapse on the Eastern Front, Mannerheim was selected, though never democratically elected, to assume the Finnish presidency in August 1944, in order to negotiate a separate peace with the Soviet Union (Liukkonen, 2008, pp. 5–6).

government and senior state officials. Beginning his speech with “Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen”, Talas expressed gratitude for the “open reception that only a friendly nation can offer”, stating that 1941 was “a great year in which strong men and brave women saved the homeland”. He reminded listeners that previous generations had “carried their stones” for centuries to build the foundations of independence, but the actual building of the state had fallen upon the shoulders of the current generation. Comparing the positions of the two nations, he emphasized that Finland, as a nation which had “struggled so much for its freedom”, particularly valued the sacrifices that had first paved the way toward independence. He concluded with a toast “to a beautiful and happy future for the Independent State of Croatia”, reminding the audience that the Croatian government would hold in history the title Finland’s government had earned in 1917, namely the “government of independence” (Report No. 1, October 25, 1941, in: Delić, 2021, pp. 44–49).

Following the protocol ceremonies, the Finnish mission sought to gain deeper insight into how the NDH truly functioned. Report No. 2, sent by Talas from Rome on October 25, 1941, records a series of candid conversations with Foreign Minister Mladen Lorković. In a private tone, the minister admitted that the Italian military occupation of Dalmatia was “unpleasant” for Croatia but justified it by citing Italian fears of a possible British invasion of the Adriatic while the Wehrmacht was engaged on the Eastern Front. According to Lorković, Mussolini had provided written assurances that Italian troops would withdraw as soon as the danger passed, leaving civil administration in Croatian hands. Regarding the security situation in Serbia, Lorković stated that the Germans were engaged in a “real war” against remnants of the former Yugoslav army, still armed and motivated by illusions of an imminent Soviet breakthrough. In Bosnia, he claimed, the rebellion was led “exclusively by Serbs”, while Muslims remained “loyal to Zagreb”. He anticipated pacification with the assistance of German and Italian troops. When asked by Talas about Vladko Maček, Lorković asserted that the Croatian Peasant Party had “solemnly placed the party under Pavelić’s leadership”. Nevertheless, the Finnish envoy noted rumours that Maček had been placed under “protection” on his estate at the end of September, suggesting the regime’s continuing suspicion toward potential civilian opposition. On foreign-policy matters, the minister reiterated that the NDH “had no illusions” about British support following its experience with King Alexander’s dictatorship. Relations with Germany were described as “sincerely friendly”, while attitudes toward Italy remained “reserved” despite the formal alliance. The arrival of King Tomislav II was postponed “until relations with Rome stabilized”. Finally, Lorković emphasized his belief that war between Bulgaria and the USSR was imminent, and compared Turkey’s neutrality to that of Sweden (Report No. 2, October 25, 1941, in: Delić, 2021, pp. 49–53).

Dr. Ferdo Bošnjaković¹³, an attorney from Osijek and supporter of the Croatian Peasant Party, was appointed Croatian envoy in Helsinki. He presented his credentials on January 14, 1942 (Jonjić, 2000, p. 497). At the outset, it should be noted that official reports of the NDH Legation in Helsinki contain no details regarding the presentation of credentials or the formal assumption of office by Ferdo Bošnjaković as Croatian envoy. The first available report by Ferdo Bošnjaković, dated February 13, 1942, confirms that the Croatian mission had already established contact with senior Finnish government and military officials a month after presenting his credentials. The envoy reported that an audience with the wife of President Risto Ryti had been scheduled for February 17. At the same time, he noted a visit on February 11 to a military hospital, where Bošnjaković donated two thousand cigarettes to wounded Finnish soldiers. In the same dispatch, the envoy also referred to logistical and administrative challenges faced by the diplomatic mission. Specifically, he was still awaiting occupancy of his apartment, while the work of the mission was hindered by the absence of a qualified secretary and a lack of instructions from Zagreb (HR-HDA-231, V.T. 8/42, February 13, 1942).

The legation's report dated March 1, 1942, reveals the initial steps undertaken by the newly established mission to strengthen bilateral contacts with the host country. Bošnjaković noted the first public event at the Harjavalta sanatorium on February 6, 1942, during which a children's choir spontaneously performed the Croatian national anthem in the Finnish language. Additionally, the envoy's wife delivered a lecture about Croatia in Finnish, accompanied by a projection of 120 photographs depicting the country. The report also emphasizes the mission's reliance on the personal engagement of Bošnjaković's wife, prompting him to propose to Minister Lorković to grant her the official status of "honorary cultural envoy" as institutional acknowledgment of her contribution to the mission. This detail highlights the legation's limited personnel and administrative capacities and underscores the need for

¹³ Ferdo Bošnjaković was a lawyer and diplomat (born in Podcrkavlje near Slavonski Brod on October 10, 1900 – died on Ibiza, Spain, on September 18, 1984). He graduated from the General Gymnasium in Osijek and completed his law degree at the University of Zagreb in 1925. From 1929, he operated a law office in Osijek. He was one of the defence attorneys in the trial of HSS leader Vladko Maček and his associates in 1930. In the 1935 elections, he was a candidate on the HSS electoral list. In October 1941, Bošnjaković was appointed envoy of the NDH to Finland. In September 1944, he moved to Sweden and subsequently joined the NDH Legation in Berlin. On October 14, 1944, he was relieved of his position as envoy and transferred to the Sub-Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Zagreb. He soon returned to Berlin, from where he departed to Copenhagen. In mid-January 1945, he was appointed senior counsellor at the NDH Legation in Berlin. He was dismissed from state service on February 21, 1945, and secretly travelled to Sweden in early April 1945, where he received a residence permit and remained for several years. He later moved to Argentina and eventually settled in Spain (Šakić and Dobrovšak, 2020, p. 145).

institutional formalization of informal diplomatic cooperation (HR-HDA-231, V.T. 39/43, March 1, 1942).

Further insights into the initial development of Croatian-Finnish relations are provided by a legation report dated July 8, 1942. In it, Bošnjaković first notes his arrival in Helsinki on June 30, after an eleven-day journey hindered by wartime restrictions in Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. This observation illustrates the logistical challenges faced by the NDH legation in maintaining regular communication with Zagreb, and it also indicates that, during its initial months, the mission operated without the continuous presence of its head. Upon reviewing the office mail, Bošnjaković noted that numerous instructions regarding internal administration had arrived between January and June, but due to a lack of qualified personnel, there was “no one to manage them”. This confirms the previously identified issue of insufficient staffing capacity within the diplomatic mission. The most significant part of the report addresses the protocol activities immediately following Bošnjaković’s arrival. Already on July 1, the envoy requested protocol approval for presenting Croatian state decorations to Finland’s highest officials, receiving a positive response the next day. The formal award ceremony took place on July 4, 1942, at the summer residence of Finnish President Risto Ryti. In attendance alongside the president were Foreign Minister Rolf Witting and an official photographer. Following a brief speech by the envoy, the Finnish president expressed his gratitude to Pavelić and the Croatian nation through a toast. The local press reported the event the very same day. Bošnjaković noted that the appearance and craftsmanship of the decorations made a “good impression” on the Finnish hosts, thereby marking the symbolic signs of Croatian statehood formally entering Finland’s highest state protocol for the first time. On the following day, July 5, the envoy, accompanied by legation secretary Dr. Andrašević, visited the Finnish Army headquarters in Mikkeli, where he was received at 6:30 p.m. by Marshal Mannerheim in the presence of six Finnish generals. Mannerheim expressed gratitude for the decoration, emphasizing “that he sees it as recognition for his army, which is fighting on the same front alongside the renowned, courageous Croatian troops”. The report also briefly describes a field trip to war-torn Karelia (Viipuri), where the envoy witnessed devastation caused by Soviet forces. By emphasizing the extent of destruction, Bošnjaković implicitly linked Finland’s wartime fate with the Croatian experience on the Eastern Front (HR-HDA-231, V.T. 86/42, July 8, 1942).

Conclusion

Finland’s de jure recognition of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941, as well as the establishment of diplomatic missions in Zagreb and Helsinki, resulted from a complex interaction between international legal formalism and pragmatic wartime

interests, analysed across three distinct research levels in this paper. On the first, normative level, the analysis revealed that Finnish decision-makers, at least nominally, adhered to the prevailing international legal criteria outlined in the Montevideo Convention: permanent population, defined territory, effective government, and capacity to engage in international relations. However, a detailed reconstruction of the recognition process (process tracing) demonstrated that, in the case of the NDH, the third and fourth criteria were only partially fulfilled. Specifically, the NDH suffered from foreign military presence in its territory, internal conflicts and rebellions, and extremely limited autonomy in foreign-policy matters. Despite these shortcomings, the Finnish government decided on July 3, 1941, to recognize the NDH, justifying the decision diplomatically by stating that “Croatia’s desire for bilateral cooperation deserves respect”. This indicates that legal arguments regarding statehood primarily served as rhetorical justification, while Finland’s true motives derived from its ambition to strengthen the anti-Soviet coalition under the aegis of the Third Reich, which Finland had joined after the Winter War.

The second analytical level, focusing on a chronological reconstruction of the recognition process itself, showed that formal diplomatic steps, such as the NDH’s diplomatic notification of June 1941, Italian mediation, and Finland’s official diplomatic note of July 31, 1941, represented brief, procedural actions confirming a previously reached political decision. Leveraging its previous diplomatic experience in balancing among major powers, Finland used the recognition of the NDH to further reinforce its political alignment with Germany, simultaneously exploring the boundaries of its own diplomatic agency during wartime against the Soviet Union. For the NDH, whose sovereignty remained limited and disputed, each new diplomatic recognition held primarily symbolic value in combating international isolation and reinforcing its legitimacy under international law.

The third analytical level, examining everyday diplomatic practices between the two states during 1941–1942, revealed how the formal legal act of recognition translated into concrete but markedly asymmetric diplomatic cooperation. Although Finnish envoy Onni Talas was received with the highest state honours, his mission faced harsh reality stemming from NDH racial legislation, which directly affected Consul Pavle Berkeš. This incident clearly illustrated the limits of diplomatic closeness between the two states. Conversely, the Croatian diplomatic mission in Helsinki experienced staffing and logistical difficulties, struggling to achieve significant visibility in Finnish society. The awarding of Croatian decorations to President Risto Ryti and Marshal Mannerheim, though symbolically important, did not result, according to available sources, in tangible economic or military commitments from Finland toward the NDH, nor was the NDH capable of providing real support for Finland’s war effort on the Eastern Front.

Returning to the research question regarding how international legal criteria and geopolitical factors shaped Finland's decision to recognize the NDH and how this decision was realized in diplomatic practice, it can be concluded that international legal formalism provided a necessary but insufficient basis for recognition. It was only through the addition of pragmatic wartime interests, particularly the need to strengthen the anti-Soviet alliance, that Finland's decision became viable. Both states approached recognition instrumentally: Finland viewed it primarily as a diplomatic signal to Germany, while the NDH regarded it as a means to overcome international isolation. This resulted in a relationship rich in ceremonial events but limited in substantive material content, highlighting a clear asymmetry of interests between the two states.

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