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A Microcosmos of Fascism in the Age of Genocide

German Nazis, Croatian Ustašas, and the Hungarian Arrow Cross in the City of Osijek

Abstract

By combining microhistorical and regional approaches with theoretical findings from fascism, Holocaust, and genocide studies, this chapter examines the interaction between the Nazi, Ustaša and Arrow Cross movements in the city of Osijek. By analyzing the ideologies and praxis of the three fascist movements, this paper demonstrates that the future they wanted to build remained vague, contested, and contradictory despite many shared goals and enemies. Instead of bringing the three fascist movements together, antisemitism became a tool of competitive nation-building which contributed to the failure to create a genuinely transnational fascist front in a single city. Determining the pace of genocidal destruction became an instrument in the competitive fascist-elite-building. By relying on the concept of “genocidal consolidation”, this chapter argues that the Holocaust in Osijek became one of the primary means in the attempted consolidation of power by one fascist group at the expense of the other. Attempts to neutralize rival fascist elites in the struggle for political dominance on the regional level brought unintended consequences of significantly delaying the deportations of Jews of Osijek compared to the cities in the Independent State of Croatia.

During the summer of 1941, a wave of antisemitic demonstrations swept the streets of Osijek, one of the largest cities in World War Two Croatia. Fascists, political activists, and ordinary citizens of the Croatian, German, and Hungarian ethnicities joined together in their demands that the city be “cleansed” of Jews. The seemingly harmonious scenes of fascists marching side by side, unified by antisemitism, suggests a triumph of transnational fascist ideas, which were to unite fascists of different national colours in their joint advance towards the “New Order”. However, this article argues that a closer examination of the relationship between the Croatian Ustaša, German Nazi and Hungarian Arrow Cross movements paints a far more convoluted picture that raises several questions regarding the history of fascism, antisemitism, genocide, and the Holocaust, which are relevant not only for national, but also international, historiographies.

Historian Arnd Bauerkämper has warned his colleagues dealing with the history of fascism not to “exaggerate harmony between the national movements and groups”. He has invited scholars to pay greater attention to and integrate conflicts within, and among, various fascist movements into contemporary historiography.¹ Others, such as historian Aron Brouwer, have criticised the contemporary approaches to transna-

1 Arnd Bauerkämper, “Between Cooperation and Conflict: Perspectives of Historical Research on Transnational Fascism,” in *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*, eds. Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 356.

tional fascism by arguing that the term is “at least partially – paradoxical” because fascists gave precedence to the core idea of *nationalism* and there was not much room left for the *trans* part. Brower has further noted that “the current theoretical frameworks for understanding cross-border collaboration and interaction between fascists is limited” in contemporary scholarship, and he suggests a novel analytical concept of the “pan-fascist paradox.”²

While the field of fascism studies is increasingly employing a transnational approach that tackles various methodological and conceptual questions, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the dynamics of fascist interactions between different movements on the regional and local levels.³ By applying approaches from studies of fascism, the Holocaust, and antisemitism to a regional case study of Osijek, this paper examines the multifaceted interaction among different fascist movements on a local level with regards to the Holocaust. How did the cooperation and hostilities among different fascist movements impact the implementation of antisemitic measures, violence, and the decision-making behind the Holocaust on the local level?

Osijek is a particularly suitable subject for such a study because various fascist movements in the city espoused virulent antisemitism. However, the Holocaust survivor Aleksandar Goldstajn noted after the war that “the massive tragedy of the Jewish people was delayed in Osijek in comparison to other locations in Croatia.”⁴ Indeed, while parts of the community were deported in August 1941, most Jews remained in the city of Osijek for the next twelve months. Thus, the comprehensive deportations of Jews from Osijek were implemented significantly later than in some other cities and towns across the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska*, NDH), such as Varaždin, Križevci, Bijeljina, or Sarajevo, as will be discussed later. Holocaust survivors such as Vlado and Nada Salzberger tackled the question of the “long gap” regarding the deportations of Jews from Osijek, ascribing it to the specific “ethnic make-up” of the city. The Salzbergers argued that the decision-making regarding the deportation of Jews from Osijek was slowed because of the power struggle between Germans and Croats on the local level. Determining the tempo of the persecution of Jews, including the requisition of their property, as well as their deportations, became a means of asserting power over the entire city. Thus, the Jewish Religious Community – an institution which performed a similar role to the Jewish Council in Nazi-occupied Europe – became a battleground for the struggle between the local German and Croatian fascists.⁵

The history of the Holocaust in Osijek is therefore ridden with contradictions. While no less than three fascist movements were active in the city, it was also one of the last places in the NDH where large-scale deportations occurred. With the aim of addressing this seeming paradox, this article examines how different ethnic groups and fascist movements interpreted antisemitic ideologies and policies, as well as how

2 Aron Brouwer, “The Pan-Fascist Paradox,” *Fascism* 11, no. 1 (2022): 2, 29.

3 For a regional approach, see Samuel Huston Goodfellow, “Fascism as a Transnational Movement: The Case of Inter-War Alsace,” *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 1 (2013): 87–106. For examples of studies dealing with the transnational history of fascism, see Jordan Kuck, “Renewed Latvia: A Case Study of the Transnational Fascism Model,” *Fascism* 2, no. 2 (2013): 183–204; Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without Borders*; Johannes Dalfinger and Dieter Pohl, eds., *A New National Europe under Hitler: Concepts of Europe and Transnational Networks in the National Socialist Sphere of Influence, 1933–1945* (New York: Routledge: 2019); Ángel Alcalde, “The Transnational Consensus: Fascism and Nazism in Current Research,” *Contemporary European History* 29, no. 2 (2020): 243–252; Brouwer, “The Pan-Fascist Paradox,” 1–30.

4 Goldstajn, Aleksandar, Interview 6204, Segments 42–43, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1995. Accessed 30 March 2021.

5 Aleksandar Gaon, ed., *We Survived ...: Yugoslav Jews on the Holocaust*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: The Jewish Historical Museum, Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, 2005), 145–146.

they adapted antisemitism and tailored it to serve their specific ideological aims. This article argues that each fascist movement in Osijek instrumentalised antisemitism in service of its own national agenda, with these national agendas differing from each other significantly. While the antisemitism of each movement maintained certain universal and transnational elements, it was also increasingly tailored to the needs of particularistic national projects. Therefore, instead of bringing the three fascist movements together, antisemitism became a tool of competitive nation-building. Fascists in Osijek thus instrumentalised genocide not only to eliminate the outgroups identified as Serbs, Jews, and Roma, but also to reduce the power of rival political organisations.

The Making of a Microcosmos of Fascism

Located on the southern bank of the Drava River, between the Danube River in the east and the Sava River to the south, the city of Osijek has held an important strategic position since its founding. Geographically part of the Pannonian basin, its fertile land was attractive to various peoples who migrated through the region. After the Habsburg monarchy took over the city in the seventeenth century, a migration wave thoroughly changed its social fabric. Expelled Muslims were replaced with waves of German, Hungarian, and South Slavic-speaking populations.

The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes brought substantial political, economic, and demographic changes. Much like in the rest of southeastern Europe, the Hungarian and German-speaking populations were shaken by the severance of economic and political ties with the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as the emergence of new nation-states in which they became a minority. Up to 25 per cent of ethnic Hungarians, as well as almost 3,000 German speakers, left the regions surrounding Osijek after World War One. In their stead, approximately 40,000 “Serbian volunteers” who served in the army of the Kingdom of Serbia received fertile plots of land to settle in the regions of Slavonia and Sylvania.⁶

The interwar history of Osijek was marked by a series of political conflicts between Serbian, Croatian, and Yugoslav nationalist organisations. However, political violence was sometimes also applied on an intra-ethnic axis, against members of the ethnic community who diverged in their political beliefs.⁷ Even though anti-Jewish sentiments were on the rise in the 1930s, which led to antisemitic incidents in Osijek, those concerning themselves with the “Jewish question” remained on the margins of city politics.⁸

After 1933, the German minority in Yugoslavia witnessed the arrival of a new generation of leaders, the so-called “Rejuvenators” (*Erneuerer*), who argued for a re-

6 Filip Škiljan, *Organizirana prisilna iseljavanja Srba iz NDH* [The Forced Expulsions of Serbs from the Independent State of Croatia] (Zagreb: Srpsko narodno vijeće, 2014), 115.

7 Zdravko Dizdar, “Osnivanje i djelatnost četničkih udruženja na području grada i kotara Osijek u monarhističkoj Jugoslaviji (1918.–1941.) (Drugi dio)” [The Founding of Chetnik Associations and Their Activities in the City and District of Osijek during the Yugoslav Monarchy], *Scrinia Slavonica: godišnjak Podružnice za povijest Slavonije, Srijema i Baranje Hrvatskog instituta za povijest* 6, no. 1 (2006): 342–401. See also Željko Karaula, *HANAO – Hrvatska nacionalna omladina: teroristička organizacija mladih u Kraljevini Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca (1921.–1925.)* [HANAO – Croatian Nationalist Youth Organisation: Terrorist Organisation of Youth in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes 1921–1925] (Zagreb: Naklada Breza, 2011), 107–108.

8 Croatian State Archives, The National Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the Occupiers and their Collaborators, HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 187, The Vinski Report.

awakening of a stronger German identity based on Nazi ideology. The leader of the Rejuvenators in Osijek, Branimir Altgayer, denounced the previous leaders of the German community as “clerical” and insufficiently nationalistic.⁹ He managed to establish himself as one of the key leaders of the Osijek *Kulturbund* (Cultural Federation) – one of the main ethnic German organisations in Yugoslavia.¹⁰ The increasing alignment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia’s diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany in the second half of the 1930s made the German minority an important political power broker. Altgayer received instructions from Berlin to support the Yugoslav government. He considered that cooperation with the dominant Serbian parties could be more beneficial than with the Croatian parties, which he described as “powerless in every regard”.¹¹

In the 1938 elections, approximately 120,000 Germans voted for Milan Stojadinović, a Serbian politician who was dedicated to forging closer ties with Germany.¹² Leaders of the dominant Croatian Peasant Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*, HSS), who counted on the votes of German peasants, considered this a stab in the back by the leadership of the *Kulturbund*. One of the leaders of the HSS in Slavonia, Stjepan Hefer, himself of German origin, accused Branimir Altgayer and the Rejuvenators of collaborating with the regime in Belgrade. He warned German leaders to rethink their political steps, because “nobody knows what might happen tomorrow” when Croats win their liberty.

In 1939, the HSS managed to negotiate an autonomous Croatian entity called the “Banovina of Croatia”. Seeing that the HSS was now in charge of large swaths of land populated by ethnic Germans, Altgayer demanded a meeting with Hefer due to rumours that the German minority would be “liquidated” and to fears that there would be attempts to assimilate Germans into the Slavic majority.¹³ Members of the HSS were in turn frustrated with the *Kulturbund*’s relentless attempts at the national homogenisation of real and alleged ethnic Germans. *Kulturbund* members were known to come into various villages and threaten Croats with German-sounding last names to either join the organisation or be blacklisted as “traitors” who “would be deported to concentration camps” once Hitler would conquer these lands.¹⁴ When various members of the HSS complained against such practices, Altgayer responded that the “Croats should be careful. Otherwise, they will end up like the Czechs.”¹⁵

9 Vladimir Geiger, “Saslušanje Branimira Altgayera vođe Njemačke narodne skupine u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj u Upravi državne bezbjednosti za Narodnu Republiku Hrvatsku 1949. godine” [The Interrogation of Branimir Altgayer, the Leader of the German National Group in the Independent State of Croatia, in the Office for National Security of the People’s Republic of Croatia in 1949] *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 31, no. 3 (1999): 579.

10 For a detailed elaboration of the history of the *Kulturbund* and a *longue durée* analysis of interethnic relations in Slavonia, see Carl Bethke, *(K)eine gemeinsame Sprache? Aspekte deutsch-jüdischer Beziehungsgeschichte in Slawonien, 1900–1945* (Berlin: LIT, 2013).

11 Zdravko Krnić and Martin Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji* [Sources on the History of the National Liberation Struggle in Slavonia], vol 1 (Slavonski Brod: Historijski arhiv u Slavonskom Brodu, 1962): 127–128; Main Security Office in Zagreb (RAVSIGUR) to Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the NDH, 28 August 1941.

12 Suzana Leček, “Hrvatska seljačka stranka i Nijemci u Hrvatskoj (1918.–1941.)” [The Croatian Peasant Party and Germans in Croatia (1918–1941)], in *Nijemci u Hrvatskoj i Bosni i Hercegovini: nova istraživanja i perspektive* [Germans in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina: New Research and Perspectives], ed. Enes Omerović (Sarajevo and Zagreb: Institut za istoriju i Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2015), 259.

13 State Archives in Osijek, HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943., Document number AP-XXII/H – 8/14, Letter of Branimir Altgayer to Stjepan Hefer, 31 August 1939.

14 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943., Letter from Čačinci to Stjepan Hefer, 15 January 1941.

15 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943. Letter of Mirko Vulanac to Stjepan Hefer, 16 March 1940.

After the coup d'état in Belgrade on 27 March 1941 deposed the pro-German government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, representatives of the Nazified Kulturbund from across the country were invited to an urgent meeting in Novi Sad.¹⁶ Leaders of the Kulturbund, Altgayer included, met on 1 April 1941 and awaited the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, which began on 6 April 1941. The attack on Yugoslavia was considered an opportunity for the leaders of the Kulturbund to flex their muscles and assert themselves as the future political elite in the region. They entertained a vague idea of carving out parts of Yugoslavia populated with ethnic Germans and of creating an autonomous region under their control, or a new *Gau* – a regional political and administrative unit attached directly to the Third Reich. To their disappointment, such proposals were rejected by Berlin, and they were instead informed that the regions of Slavonia and Syrmia would be incorporated into the newly established NDH.¹⁷ A small concession was made in creating a semi-autonomous territory in Banat where the local ethnic Germans took the position of a decision-making elite. Even though the proposition of a German state in the Lower Danube was a “wild political fantasy”, as the historian Mirna Zakić has put it,¹⁸ it continued to feed the fears of some Croats that ethnic Germans would agitate for similar ideas in the future.

While Altgayer was in Novi Sad, Wehrmacht units entered the city of Osijek, where they were greeted by cheering crowds waving Nazi flags. They encountered a multi-ethnic city with more than 40,000 residents. The relative majority was held by Croats, followed by Germans who made up roughly a third of population. Other ethnic groups included Serbs who constituted about 15 per cent, Hungarians 7 per cent, and Jews 6 per cent of the city's population.¹⁹ In the months following the occupation, the coexistence between these ethnic groups started to fragment as the city came under the increasing pressure of quickly emerging fascist organisations which competed for control over Jewish and Serbian property, government buildings, and other important resources in the city.

The Croatian fascist Ustaša movement, which did not have a significant following in the interwar period, emerged as nominally the only permitted political organisation in the newly formed NDH. The Ustaša programme considered the multiethnic nature of the NDH a threat. Reducing the number of minorities through ethnic cleansing and social engineering was of utmost importance to the Ustaša leadership

16 Geiger, “Saslušanje Banimira Altgayera,” 584–585.

17 Krnić and Kaminski, *Građa za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 329, German National Group in Croatia: Current Situation and Development from April to November 1941, 5 December 1941.

18 Mirna Zakić, *Ethnic Germans and National Socialism in Yugoslavia in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 77.

19 According to the 1931 census, the total population of the city of Osijek was 40,337. There was no ethnic census and only religion and language were included as criteria. There were 30,330 Roman Catholics, followed by 5,884 Orthodox Christians, 2,445 Jews, and 1,049 Protestants. According to language, 26,382 opted for Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue, followed by 9,731 who spoke German, and 2,839 Hungarian speakers. An approximation of the ethnic composition can be made through the imprecise method of considering all Orthodox Christians as Serbs, and then by deducting the Hungarian and German speakers and Jews to arrive at the number of Croats. *Definitivni rezultat popisa stanovništva od marta 1931 godine* (Beograd: Državna štamparija, 1938), X. According to Pavle Vinski, who made an extensive report about the persecution of Jews in Osijek, the number of Germans just before the war was 18,000 out of the entire city population of 42,000. This would set the percentage of Germans at almost 43 per cent. Even though it is quite possible that there were more people who identified themselves as ethnic Germans than was captured by the census of 1931, because it only acknowledged the language that an individual considered as their mother tongue, I find Vinski's number too inflated for the interwar period. However, it is possible that Vinski used this number to refer to 1941, when a significant number of Serbs and Croats decided to declare themselves as ethnic Germans in order to reap the benefits offered by being a member of the German National Community, a political organisation. See HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 187.

and it became an integral part of the regime's policies.²⁰ In Osijek, which was in the northeast of the NDH, the Ustašas together with members of the Kulturbund (re-branded as the *Deutsche Volksgruppe in Kroatien* (German National Group in Croatia)²¹ immediately unleashed terror against Serbs, Jews, and political enemies. In the first days after the occupation, the Volksgruppe spearheaded the persecution of Jews and the takeover of their property, while the Ustašas focused on the persecution of Serbs.²²

The Arrow Cross in Osijek

The Hungarian Arrow Cross was the least numerous of the three fascist movements in Osijek. Yet, its members were ambitious and active, aspiring to turn Osijek into a breeding ground for political agitation outside of Hungary. It was Arrow Cross members who organised one of the first antisemitic demonstrations in the city in early May 1941.²³ Dressed in their green uniforms and waving flags with party symbolism, they bore standards with trilingual inscriptions in Hungarian, German, and Croatian declaring "victory persists".²⁴



Members of the Arrow Cross marching through the streets of Osijek in 1941.

Source: *Zsidó Kérdés? Židovsko Pitanje? Die Judenfrage?* (Osijek: Hungarian National Group, September 1942), 11. HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 149.

20 Lovro Kralj, "The Evolution of Ustasha Mass Violence: Nation-Statism, Paramilitarism, Structure, and Agency in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941," in *Fascist Warfare, 1922–1945: Aggression, Occupation, Annihilation*, eds. Miguel Alonso, Alan Kramer, and Javier Rodrigo (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 241–268.

21 The German National Group was formed in May 1941 as the main institution which was supposed to represent the interests of ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) in Croatia. It was modelled on a similar organisation in Romania. The seat of the German National Group, or *Volksgruppe*, in Croatia was in Osijek, and it was led by the *Volksgruppenführer* Branimir Altgayer. In this paper, when I use the term "*Volksgruppe*" I refer to the organisation, and when I use the term "*Volksdeutsche*" I refer to ethnic Germans. *Volksdeutsche* took the oath of allegiance to Hitler, and they had their own military formations in the form of the *Einsatzstaffel der Deutschen Mannschaft* [Action Corps of the German National Group], which by 1942 had around 1,500 men.

22 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number, 193, The Vinski Report.

23 Bethke, (*K)eine gemeinsame Sprache?*, 291.

24 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 149, Hungarian National Group, *Zsidó Kérdés? Židovsko Pitanje? Die Juden Frage?*, Osijek 1942, 10–11.

The sights of marching columns of Ustaša, Nazi, and Arrow Cross members side by side in Osijek invoke the image of the ideal “New European Order”, propagated at the time by various fascist intellectuals across the continent. Like many other fascist movements in Europe, all three groups shared a belief in the “history-making” project to bring about a new civilisation, one based on a radically transformed society. They saw themselves as the avant-garde of the “New Man”, acting in the name of an “all-encompassing, regenerated nation-state”. This was to be achieved through “creative destruction” which was supposed to annihilate the old world of perceived “decadence” and purify the nation in order to give birth to a new civilisation accomplished through anthropological revolution.²⁵

Fascists shared a hostility against common enemies, primarily identified as communists, democrats, conservatives, and liberals.²⁶ In the minds of the Ustašas, Nazis, and the Arrow Cross, Jews epitomised everything they opposed. Antisemitism became a cultural code which projected all the wrongs of a “decadent” society onto Jews.²⁷ In Osijek, too, antisemitism was supposed to be a unifying force which would bring various agents together and harmonise life in a microcosmos of fascism. In 1942, the Ustaša regime, in cooperation with the German embassy in Zagreb, organised a joint “anti-Masonic” exhibition in Osijek. The exhibition was supposed to demonstrate a unified German-Croatian effort in a shared struggle against Jewry.²⁸ Members of the Arrow Cross visited the exhibition wearing uniforms and armbands and carrying flags with party symbolism. While little is known about their number, according to the Arrow Cross’ own propaganda three thousand of its members visited the exhibition.²⁹ This number might have been inflated for propaganda purposes, and it certainly included members of the Arrow Cross from across the NDH, since the number of attendees exceeded the total number of Hungarians in Osijek according to the 1931 census. Nonetheless, the Arrow Cross’ activism and propaganda efforts demonstrate its disproportionate visibility, as well as its ability to mobilise a significant number of Hungarians in Croatia around its ideology.

In 1942, the Arrow Cross in Osijek published a propaganda booklet written in Hungarian, Croatian, and German titled “The Jewish Question?” In it they showed admiration for Adolf Hitler, Ante Pavelić, and Ferenc Szálasi as the fascist triumvirate united in their struggle against Jews. The Osijek branch of the Arrow Cross lauded Hitler as “the great liberator of Europe from the Jewish-Bolshevik invasion”. The leader of the Ustaša movement, Ante Pavelić, was praised as the one who “managed to solve the Jewish and Masonic question” within a year after coming to power. Finally, the leader of the Arrow Cross, Ferenc Szálasi, was depicted as a victim of Horthy’s regime which, it was alleged, had imprisoned him because of his “opposi-

25 Aristotle Kallis, “Transnational Fascism: The Fascist New Order, Violence, and Creative Destruction,” in *Fascism without Borders*, eds. Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe, 41.

26 Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, “Introduction: Fascism without Borders. Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe, 1918–1945,” in *Fascism without Borders*, eds. Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe, 3.

27 The idea of antisemitism as a cultural code was developed by Shulamit Volkov in the end of the 1970s by building upon and further developing the ideas of Clifford Geertz. She applied her interpretative model primarily to a case study of the German Empire. Yet, the concept of antisemitism as a cultural code is transferrable to other periods as well. For further elaboration, see Shulamit Volkov, “Antisemitism as a Cultural Code: Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 23, no. 1 (1978): 25–46.

28 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan (Esteban) Hefer, odvjetnik političar, veliki župan župe Baranjske [Stjepan (Esteban) Hefer, Lawyer, Politician, and the Head of the Baranya County], box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno [German National Group – Various Files], 1937–1943, document number 8-588, Letter of the German Embassy in Zagreb sent to Veliki Župan Stjepan Hefer, 24 February 1942.

29 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 173, Hungarian National Group. *Zsidó Kérdés?*, 35.



Members of the Arrow Cross visiting the “anti-masonic” exhibition in Osijek in 1942.

Source: Zsidó Kérdés? Židovsko Pitanje? Die Judenfrage? (Osijek: Hungarian National Group, September 1942), 12. HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 150.

tion to Jewish plutocracy”. Osijek’s Arrow Cross members announced that Szálasi “will solve the racial question and bring harmony for all working nations so that they can earn their daily bread. He will cleanse this beautiful homeland of ours of Jews.”³⁰ While the Arrow Cross, as well as the other two fascist movements, used antisemitism as a consensus-building tool which could transcend political and other divisions in the city, it becomes clear upon a closer examination that the differences between Osijek’s fascists persisted.

Where did the “homeland of ours” that Osijek’s Arrow Cross members referred to in their propaganda begin and where did it end? They supported the ideal of a Greater Hungary or, as Szálasi put it, a Hungarian state which is territorially “circumscribed by the Carpathians and stretching out to the Adriatic”. According to this perspective, the Croatian lands were supposed to be a part of the *Hungária Egyesült Földek* (United Lands of Hungary). Moreover, Szálasi considered only the Germans, Italians, and Hungarians to be among the “leading” nations of Europe. Therefore, the Croats were supposed to be subjugated to the Hungarian “masterclass”.³¹ This stood in clear contradiction to the Ustaša’s territorial and ideological aspirations. According to the *Načela Hrvatskog ustaškog pokreta* (Principles of the Croatian Ustaša Movement), one of its founding documents, the Croats could be the only sovereign nation in the NDH. Moreover, the Ustašas argued that “only those who are descendants of Croats by blood can govern [odlučuju] in Croatia”.³² Despite the fact that Arrow Cross members in Osijek toned down their Greater Hungarian rhetoric, their overall ideology could not coexist on an equal footing in the NDH with that of the Ustaša.

30 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 172, Hungarian National Group. *Zsidó Kérdés?*, 34.

31 Áron Szele, “The Arrow Cross: The Ideology of Hungarian Fascism – A Conceptual Approach” (PhD dissertation, Central European University, 2015), 99, 106.

32 Danijel Crljen, *Načela Hrvatskog ustaškog pokreta* [The Principles of the Croatian Ustaša Movement] (Zagreb, 1942), 60, 63.

The Ustašas viewed the Arrow Cross with suspicion. According to their own reports, most Hungarians in Croatia would have preferred to live under Hungarian sovereignty.³³ The presence of ethnic Hungarians in the region around Osijek was considerable as they populated fifty-eight different villages and towns and amounted to almost 10 per cent of the entire population in the region.³⁴ The feeling of a threatening Hungarian irredentism was especially felt in Osijek since the city was located right on the border with Hungary. The Ministry of the Interior of the NDH concluded in December 1941 that Hungarian agents were infiltrating Croatia and “spreading the news that Syrmia and Slavonia will be annexed to the Hungarian crown”.³⁵

Ethnic Hungarians, much like Croats and Germans, did not single-heartedly support the fascist movements which claimed to represent them. Hungarians were deeply divided between supporting the Hungarian Cultural Community (*Horvát-országi Magyar Közművelődési Közösség/Madžarska kulturna zajednica*) with its seat in Zagreb, and the Arrow Cross with its seat in Osijek. However, the tensions between the Hungarian Cultural Community and the Arrow Cross ran so high that they often applied physical violence against each other.³⁶

Osijek’s Arrow Cross members travelled across the NDH in a relentless effort to recruit as many ethnic Hungarians as possible. They weaponised antisemitism in an attempt to discredit the rival Hungarian Cultural Community by arguing that the latter’s members were covertly helping Jews to migrate from Croatia to Hungary. The Arrow Cross stressed that such actions ran contrary to the principle of “national socialism” and that they were a stain on all Hungarians in the NDH.³⁷ In a subsequent investigation, the Croatian authorities completely rejected these Arrow Cross claims, concluding that there was no evidence to support their accusations against fellow Hungarians from a rival organisation.³⁸

The Arrow Cross members attempted to create a Hungarian National Community that would be modelled on the German Volksguppe, aiming to monopolise the political representation of ethnic Hungarians in Croatia. Despite their energetic activism in seeking to mobilise new members, the majority of ethnic Hungarians in Croatia refused to join the Arrow Cross.³⁹ Available evidence suggests that the Arrow Cross could perhaps muster the sympathy of, at best, up to a third of all Hungarians living in the NDH.⁴⁰ Further efforts of the Arrow Cross to increase its power were “obstructed” by the Ustaša authorities in Osijek. The Ustašas blocked the Arrow Cross’ efforts to formalise its organisation and therefore denied it legitimacy. The Croatian authorities argued that Hungarians could organise themselves on cultural

33 Davor Kovačić, “Pitanje Međimurja u redarstveno-obavještajnim odnosima Nezavisne Države Hrvatske i Kraljevine Mađarske u Drugom svjetskom ratu” [The Međimurje Question as a Security and Intelligence Concern in the Relationship between the Independent State of Croatia and the Kingdom of Hungary during the Second World War], *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira* [Polemos: Journal for Interdisciplinary Research on War and Peace] 13, no. 26 (2010): 69.

34 HR-DAOS-1281, box 1, Stjepan Brlošić, *Osijek i okolina u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi* [Osijek and its Surroundings during the National Liberation Struggle], Chapter III, unpublished manuscript, 21–22.

35 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada*, vol. 1, 399, Report of the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 18 December 1941.

36 Marica Karakaš Obradov, “Dobrovoljna i prisilna preseljenja u Hrvatskoj tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata i poraća” [Voluntary and Forced Resettlement in Croatia during the Second World War and Post-war Period] (PhD dissertation, Hrvatski studiji 2011), 236–237.

37 HR-HDA-1521, box 36, book XIV, 272, Hungarian National Group (Affiliated with the Arrow Cross) to Gospodarsko redarstvo pri državnoj riznici [Economic Inspection of the State Treasury], 20 July 1941.

38 HR-HDA-1521, box 36, book XIV, 275, Ministry of the Interior of the NDH to the German Embassy, 18 March 1944.

39 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG-61.030, HR-DABJ 20-7, 90, District of Grubišno Polje to Velika Župa Bilogora, 21 October 1941.

40 Bethke. (*K)eine gemeinsame Sprache?*, 336.

grounds but concluded that nationalist activism should be avoided. The leader of the Arrow Cross in Osijek, Antun Kovač, did his best to secure the support of the Croatian authorities by relying on arguments about shared fascist values. In October 1941, he wrote a letter to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH in which he argued that Arrow Cross members

consider it our duty, to respect and defend this homeland of ours in which we live together. Therefore, we think that we have the same right to rally our brethren around us and prepare them for the new order. Through this, we can only affirm the brotherhood between our two nations [...] we ask to be protected and to be allowed to continue with our work which we began among our brethren because we are all fighting for the same idea, here in the homeland as well as at the front, the creation of a new and more optimistic future of Europe.⁴¹

This Arrow Cross plea fell on deaf ears, as the organisation was closely monitored by the Ustaša secret service. In June 1942, the police arrested Kovač and his secretary under the suspicion that they were conducting espionage for the Hungarian authorities.⁴² Soon afterwards, in September 1942, the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH declared that all the activities of the Arrow Cross in Croatia were “illegal”, including the public display of any party symbols or flags associated with the organisation.⁴³ The goal of the Arrow Cross to create the Hungarian National Group inspired by the German Volksgruppe was thus a failure. Despite its ambition, the Arrow Cross could not rely on the institutional, diplomatic, and political capital of Hungary in comparison to the Volksgruppe, which skilfully used the Third Reich as leverage in Croatia. Nor did the Arrow Cross ever establish its political dominance over the majority of ethnic Hungarians in Croatia, unlike the Volksgruppe over the ethnic Germans. The Arrow Cross’ relationship with the Ustašas was further strained by the question of Međimurje, a region in the north of Croatia which was annexed by Hungary after the occupation of Yugoslavia even though it was overwhelmingly populated by Croats. When Szálasi, the leader of the Arrow Cross, took power in Hungary in 1944, there were attempts to establish closer relations between the Ustašas and the Arrow Cross. For this purpose, the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs, Gábor Kemény, visited Pavelić, and they discussed the possibility of allowing Croats in Međimurje to form Ustaša party organisations, as well as of giving Hungary privileged access to the port city of Rijeka. The agreements were supposed to be finalised in a meeting between Szálasi and Pavelić that was being planned. However, upon Kemény’s return from Zagreb, he gave a speech in which he proclaimed Hungary to be the dominant state in the Danube basin. This did not sit well with Pavelić, who saw this as a continuation of Hungarian imperialism and territorial expansion. Thus, all plans for another meeting between Pavelić and Szálasi were abandoned.⁴⁴

41 Zdravko Krnić and Martin Kaminski, eds., *Grada*, vol. 1, 218–219, Antun Kovač to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 17 October 1941.

42 History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HM), fond UNS, box 2, file number 364, document number 1492, High Command of the 3rd Gendarmes Regiment to RAVSIGUR, 6 September 1942.

43 State Archives in Zagreb, HR-DAZG-26, Redarstvena oblast za grad Zagreb [Police District for Zagreb], box 874, file: Povjerljivi spisi/dnevne zapovijedi 1942 [Secret Files and Daily Orders 1942] (21/68), Order no. 47, 11 September 1942.

44 Hrvatski državni arhiv [Croatian State Archives], Služba državne sigurnosti [State Security Service], Republički sekretarijat za unutrašnje poslove Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske [Republican Secretariat for Internal Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Croatia], HR-HDA-1561, 013.5.50, 22, Testimony of Mehmed Alajbegović, the last Minister of Foreign Affairs of the NDH.

The German Volksgruppe in Osijek

Even though the differences with the Arrow Cross and the fears of the Hungarian occupation of Osijek and its surroundings were considerable among the Ustaša, they were only secondary compared to the conflicts with the German Volksgruppe. The local Nazis were put into a contradictory position ever since the occupation of Yugoslavia. They were encouraged to perceive themselves as members of the “master race” destined to lead the new Europe as the continent’s foremost elite. Yet, they were supposed to subjugate themselves to the decision-making of the de facto Slavic-led, second-tier fascist state of the NDH. Nevertheless, considering that the Third Reich was in their minds going to be the primary arbiter in international relations after the war, some members of the Volksgruppe in Osijek still fantasised about creating a German-led state in southeastern Europe. Paying homage to Eugen of Savoy, after whose conquests the intensive German settlement of southeastern Europe started, and who was idealised and refashioned as the champion of Germandom, the imagined state was referred to as “Prinz Eugenland”.⁴⁵

Ever since the occupation of Yugoslavia in April 1941, local Volksgruppe members took decisively independent steps in Osijek. They conducted mass arrests of Jews, confiscated the Jews’ property, and took over the control of the Jewish Religious Community – an institution which served a similar role to the “Jewish councils” in Nazi-occupied Europe. Most of these actions were conducted independently from the Ustaša as the Croatian authorities were only being formed in April 1941. The independent actions of the Volksgruppe were seen as disruptive and potentially undermining of the monopoly over the force that the Ustaša and the local police wanted to establish for themselves. Upon intervention from the German embassy in Zagreb, they were brought into line. On 7 May 1941, representatives of the Volksgruppe in Osijek met with Wehrmacht and SS Security Service officials, as well as the newly appointed German ambassador in Croatia, Siegfried Kasche. He insisted that the Volksgruppe could not act in an independent way anymore. Kasche demanded that they submit to his will and pledge that they would cooperate with the new Croatian authorities. Volksgruppe members tried to legitimise their actions by arguing that Croats were too lenient towards Jews, but the ambassador insisted on a stop to any independent Volksgruppe action against Jews. He also demanded that the Volksgruppe hand over all of the Jewish valuables which it had confiscated so far, in order for the German embassy to mediate the redistribution of this property with the Ustaša regime.⁴⁶

The issue of Jewish property heavily burdened the relationship between the Ustašas and the Volksgruppe in Osijek. The Ustašas feared that sharing any sign of an equitable financial “opportunity” with others (that is, the local German community) could result in the emergence of a new “foreign” economic elite. According to Ustaša ideology, this position was to be reserved exclusively for Croats. In other words, the Ustašas thought that replacing one “foreign” financial elite with another did not accomplish their promise of an ethnically homogenous state. Osijek’s Ustašas were not exceptional in this line of argumentation; similar incidents were registered in Romania. As one leader of the Romanian fascist Iron Guard put it:

45 Slavica Hrečkovski et al., eds. *Građa za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 2 (Slavonski Brod: Historijski arhiv u Slavonskom Brodu, 1963), 264, Report of the High Command of the II. Domobran Group to the Chief of Staff of Domobrans, 5 July 1942.

46 HR-HDA-1521, Hans Helm – policijski izaslanik pri Poslanstvu Trećeg Reicha u Zagrebu, box 37, book XIX, 132, report titled “Dogovor u Osijeku” [An Agreement in Osijek], 8 May 1941.

[w]hen Antonescu and Horia Sima came to power [...], many Jews started to sell their companies. They felt threatened and tried to sell their businesses. To whom did they sell? In general, they sold to the Saxons [local ethnic Germans] and to German citizens. They had money. Very few ethnic Romanians possessed the necessary capital for investment [...] In this way, these businesses entered into the hands of foreigners [...] perhaps worse than the Jews, because they also had substantial political power.⁴⁷

In Croatia, too, some Ustaša supporters referred to ethnic Germans as “Other Jews” due to the xenophobic projection that Germans, as foreigners, would dominate the political and economic landscape of Croatia.⁴⁸ The Ustašas in Osijek argued repeatedly that all companies “owned by Jews and foreigners” should be awarded to Croats. Being aware that relatively few Jewish businesses which were “Aryanised” ended up in German hands, Volksgruppe members argued that they could cement their economic prosperity by securing a monopoly on trading with all imported German-produced goods in the NDH.⁴⁹ However, this idea never came to fruition. The Ustašas and Nazis shared the antisemitic belief that Jews ran the economy, and this ironically placed the two fascist movements at odds with each other. They maintained that whoever controlled “Aryanisation” would control the economic future of the city. Therefore, the struggle over Jewish property became a battlefield for fascist elite-building and for securing dominance over future city politics.

A further point of contention between the Ustašas and the Volksgruppe was the emphasis on the racial superiority of the Germans, which disturbed many Croats.⁵⁰ Volksgruppe members considered themselves as pioneers of modernisation. They argued that Slavonia was a prosperous region because

German craftsmen and German peasants contribute to the development of the economy through their progressive methods far more than their Croatian counterparts [...]. This is the result of greater work capabilities, and the diligence of the German peasants and craftsmen [...] the German peasant and craftsmen should be rightfully seen as the teacher of other nations in this region.⁵¹

Due to such attitudes, many local non-German residents expressed “dissatisfaction due to the arrogance of the German minority”.⁵² The feeling of resentment was further deepened by the special privileges that the Ustaša regime in Zagreb gave to the Volksgruppe. In August 1941, Branimir Altgayer, the leader of the Volksgruppe, wrote to the NDH authorities in Zagreb requesting that in “purely German” villages only Germans should have the right to hold public office, while in “mixed [German-Croatian]” municipalities this power should be shared. In the latter cases, no Croatian official should take public office without approval from the Volksgruppe.⁵³

47 As quoted in Stefan Cristian Ionescu, *Jewish Resistance to “Romanianization”, 1940–44* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 120–121.

48 Danijel Matijević, “Germans, Jews and ‘Other’ Jews: The Holocaust in Vukovar, Croatia, in Light of the Historical Record” (Presentation held at the Claims Conference Saul Kagan Fellowship in Advanced Shoah Studies, Online Summer Workshop, 19–23 July 2021).

49 Bethke, *(K)eine gemeinsame Sprache?*, 275–277, 279.

50 Hrečkovski et. al., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 2, 283, Report of Velika Župa Baranja sent to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 11 July 1942.

51 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 333, German National Group in Croatia: Current Situation and Development from April to November 1941, 5 December 1941.

52 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 124–125, Command of the Osijek Division Area to the Ministry of Armed Forces of the NDH, 28 August 1941.

53 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937–1943., Branimir Altgayer, the leader of the German National Group to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 2 August 1941.

It seems that the authorities in Zagreb had given verbal consent to such a practice, which put the Volksgruppe in Slavonia in a powerful position from which they could influence the appointments in public offices across the regions around Osijek. The Ustaša elite in Zagreb considered this a minor concession because ethnic Germans constituted around 3 per cent of the population throughout the NDH. However, what was seen as a minor concession in Zagreb was a major political threat to the Ustašas in Osijek, where the number of ethnic Germans allegedly skyrocketed.

In mid-1941, a rumour started to circulate about the potential population census which was meant to take place in the NDH by the end of the year.⁵⁴ This created an incentive for the Volksgruppe to recruit as many members as possible to consolidate its power through the above-mentioned agreement. In other words, it had to “make” more Germans. This was, for example, reported by one of the local NDH officials from Slavonia in November 1941: “since the legal regulations gave certain privileges to the German National Group which are based on certain percentages [of the population in a given community] they are trying to raise their numbers from 8% to 20% by all available means”.⁵⁵ The recruitment was primarily conducted among Serbs and Croats. Some Croats decided to declare themselves ethnic Germans under the promise that they would receive better food provisions, while others joined to evade military conscription since Germans did not have to serve in the NDH’s armed forces.⁵⁶ The German recruitment campaign was a major success in certain areas. Some local German schools reported that they had up to 70 per cent of newly registered children who did not speak a single word of German.⁵⁷ Even though there was no census in 1941, Holocaust survivor Pavle Vinski estimated that there were 18,000 ethnic Germans in Osijek, which implied that their population had risen from around 24 per cent in 1931 to more than 40 per cent of the city population in 1941.⁵⁸

One of the greatest thorns in the eye of the Ustaša was a perception that the Volksgruppe was recruiting ethnic Serbs, promising them protection from the Ustaša’s genocidal campaign if Serbs declared themselves as ethnic Germans. The Ustaša saw this as an impediment against Croatian dominance.⁵⁹ According to a report which reached the German embassy in Zagreb, “the overwhelming majority of Ustaša [in Osijek] are agitating against the Volksdeutsche and Germany. The Ustaša claim that Germany is to be blamed for the insurrection in Croatia, because they did not allow the Ustaša to destroy the Serbs last year.”⁶⁰ Therefore, in the eyes of some Ustašas,

54 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 341–342, Minutes from the Meeting of the Regional Leader [of the German National Group], 5 December 1941. See also Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 325, German National Group in Croatia: Current Situation and Development from April to November 1941, 5 December 1941.

55 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 258–259, Kotarska Oblast Virovitica to Velika Župa Baranja, 1 November 1941.

56 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 32, Zapovjedništvo Osječkog divizijskog područja to Zapovjedniku kopnene vojske (Vojni ured), 18 June 1941.

57 Hrečkovski et. al., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 2, 282, Report of Velika Župa Baranja sent to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 11 July 1942.

58 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2942, frame number 365, Testimony of Holocaust survivor Pavle Vinski. Historian Zlata Živaković Kerže concurs with Vinski’s estimates, arguing that the population of ethnic Germans grew from 14,000 in 1940 to 18,000 after the NDH was formed. See Zlata Živaković-Kerže, *Stradnja i pamćenja: Holokaust u Osijeku i život koji se nastavlja* (Osijek: Hrvatski institut za povijest – Podružnica za povijest Slavonije, Srijema i Baraje, Slavonski Brod, Židovska općina Osijek, 2006), 12.

59 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 226, Report of the High Command of the Osijek Divisional Area, 18 October 1941.

60 HR-HDA-1521, Hans Helm – policijski izaslanik pri Poslanstvu Trećeg Reicha u Zagrebu, box 36, book VIII, file II “Ustaški pokret”, 171, document dated 28 August 1942, document number 31/8, 2170/2.

ethnic Germans had become a genuine obstacle in the attempt to create an ethnically homogenous Croatian state.

Various Croatian officials complained to the state authorities in Zagreb that members of the German Volksgruppe were behaving as if “they are a state within a state” and demanded concrete instructions on how to deal with them.⁶¹ In various localities, the Ustašas obstructed the formation of Volksgruppe organisations. For example, in one village the Ustašas prevented the participation of Volksgruppe members in a Labour Day celebration, threatening violence and issuing them a warning: “[w]e are not an occupied country”.⁶² In the nearby city of Vinkovci, located some thirty kilometres south of Osijek, Ivan Tolj, the head of the police, addressed similar concerns. He held a speech on 11 June 1941 in which he reportedly described his policy towards the Volksdeutsche in the following words:

I am fully aware that certain secret channels and conspiratorial meetings are being held [by ethnic Germans]. They are planning various things [...], I will annihilate this secrecy. I have prepared bullets for this occasion, and blood will flow. There are six million of us, and we will fight. I am the authority, and I have the police, gendarmes, and the military under my command. Either we will win, or we will die. Who do they [ethnic Germans] think they are to simply requisition the [Jewish owned] houses? I am a lawyer, and I know they cannot do this. I will stop this [wild] robbery. Germans are merely settler-colonists. This is Croatia, and only Croats have a say in how things should be. Those who do not like this can move out [of our country].⁶³

The speech caused an uproar among the Volksgruppe members in Croatia, who declared Tolj to be an enemy of Germany. From a larger perspective, the conflicts between the Ustašas and the Volksgruppe remained issues of a regional nature, so only in those areas where ethnic Germans constituted a significant minority of the population. Locally, however, the relations between the Ustašas and the Volksgruppe reflected serious political conflict. Local leaders, such as Tolj, believed that their demand for the complete subjugation of the Volksgruppe to the Croatian authorities was consistent with the foundational principle of Ustaša ideology that held that “only full-blooded Croats can govern in Croatia”.⁶⁴ Moreover, pursuant to the totalitarian aspects of Ustaša ideology, Tolj aimed to eliminate any competing political organisations that were outside of the control of the state. In one of his meetings with local Volksgruppe leaders, Tolj warned them not to disseminate propaganda without his prior approval. When Volksgruppe members argued that they did not answer to him, Tolj responded that “those who do not abide and respect the laws [of the NDH] will get a bullet in the head. I will issue a warrant for the arrest of those who are printing and spreading these [German] propaganda posters.”⁶⁵ Following a series of con-

61 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 35, High Command of the Osijek Division Area to the High Command of the Land Forces (Military Office), 18 June 1941. See also Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 248, Report of the High Command of the Osijek Division Area, 28 October 1941, and 258–259, Kotarska Oblast Virovitica to Velika Župa Baranja, 1 November 1941.

62 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 17, Report of the leader of the German minority in Croatia – Branimir Altgayer, 12 May 1941.

63 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 455, Report of the German National Group from the Sava-Dunav district with the seat in Vinkovci, 31 December 1941.

64 Crljen, *Načela Hrvatskog ustaškog pokreta*, 63.

65 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 452–453, Report of the German National Group from the Sava-Dunav district with the seat in Vinkovci, 31 December 1941.

licts with Tolj, Volksgruppe members intervened with the central authorities of the NDH and insisted that he had to be removed from his position due to “anti-German attitudes” and the “mistreatment of Germans”.⁶⁶ Their plea was successful, and Tolj was forced to leave Vinkovci; he received a new position in the city of Bijeljina, where he continued to exercise his power.

The conflicts between the Volksgruppe and the Ustašas did not remain at the verbal, written, or abstract ideological level. It sometimes escalated into open violence. In the summer of 1942, members of the Ustaša Youth who were armed with pistols organised an attack on the Hitler Youth in Osijek. They surrounded its headquarters with the intention of starting a full attack, but their intentions were obstructed by the police, who prevented the bloodshed with timely intervention.⁶⁷ In other cases, conflicts escalated into outright violence, such as in the village of Kapan, where the Volksgruppe tried to disarm the local Ustašas after they harassed local ethnic Germans. The Ustašas refused to surrender their weapons and, in the ensuing brawl, three Ustašas were wounded. In a later incident, ethnic Germans occupied the local school and refused to host classes in Croatian. The Ustašas intervened and tried to force ethnic Germans to accept Croatian children. However, they were chased away by an armed mob of local Germans.⁶⁸

Besides the common arguments that the Ustašas were generally incompetent, corrupt, and disorganised governors, one of the most widely used accusations by the Volksgruppe against the Ustašas was the misleading notion that they were not anti-semitic enough. For example, Branimir Altgayer argued that the clerical elements in Osijek were protecting Jews in the city.⁶⁹ Others accused Ustaša officials of “fraternising with Jews in broad daylight”.⁷⁰ Such accusations partly stemmed from the specific circumstances in which the Holocaust was implemented in Osijek.

The Holocaust in Osijek

After the initial wave of the Volksgruppe’s and Ustašas’ persecution of Jews in April 1941, a power struggle over the control of the “Jewish council” emerged between the two fascist movements. In less than a year and a half, five different people held the position of the “commissioner” of the Jewish Religious Community in Osijek. In cooperation with other security agencies, the “commissioner” could often determine the pace of the persecution of Jews locally.⁷¹ This was an exceptional development, and there was no other case in the NDH in which so many “commissioners” were replaced. This was the result of a power struggle between the Volksgruppe, the Ustašas, and Osijek’s city police, which all tried to assert their influence in the shaping of anti-Jewish policies.

66 HR-HDA-223, MUP NDH, file 463 (Ivan Tolj), Veliki župan Jakob Elicker to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 25 April 1942.

67 HR-HDA-1521, Hans Helm, document number 31/8, 2170/2.

68 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 276–277. Kotarski rukovodioc of Kotar Srednja Drava-Ilova to the Leader of the National Group, 10 November 1941.

69 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 17, Report of the leader of the German minority in Croatia – Branimir Altgayer, 12 May 1941.

70 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943., document number 3832-42-SK/B, Deutsche Volksgruppe section Unterdrau to Veliki Župan Stjepan Hefer, 10 June 1942.

71 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2943, frame number 1242–1258, Analysis on the persecution of Jews in Osijek created by Holocaust survivor Vladimir Grunbaum, 18 July 1945.

The greatest influence over the Jewish Religious Community was wielded by Osijek police chiefs and the regional prefect (*veliki župan*⁷²), Stjepan Hefer, who worked together to instrumentalise anti-Jewish policies and curb the power of the Volksgruppe. Hefer was a nationalist, anticommunist, and antisemite. Holocaust survivor Pavle Vinski met Hefer several times, and Vinski recalled that in their conversations Hefer

pointed out that only Croats have the right to rule over Croatian soil and only they can have full citizenship, while all others can only be residents of Croatia. When I asked him once whether he ever read the constitution of Soviet Russia, which makes no difference among various citizens, he answered me that he never read it, and that Soviet Russia is a rotten country created by the Jews. Then he continued to debate about the Jews. Hefer said that Jews in Osijek are showing off too much and that the people are bothered by that. Jews are wearing expensive jewelry and they should know that this is the land of the Croats.⁷³

In line with his antisemitism, Hefer also attended antisemitic lectures and manifestations in Osijek. He equipped his office with confiscated Jewish property and encouraged the distribution of Jewish-owned possessions to different regime organisations, such as the Ustaša Youth. Nevertheless, Hefer was concerned about the pace with which antisemitic measures proliferated. In a letter sent to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH on 22 June 1941, he wrote that he was

tormented with issues related to the Jewish question. Since the first day [I took office], I did not have a single day of rest when it comes to this because many people constantly brought up various issues related to it. This is because our authorities implement [antisemitic] measures too quickly and too eagerly while they only later realise that these measures cannot be enforced.⁷⁴

It is unclear which specific measures Hefer was referring to. However, the available documents suggest that, much like Osijek's chiefs of police, he maintained that the antisemitic measures were to be implemented gradually through a strictly legal framework. Interpreted within the context of interethnic relations in Osijek, the emphasis on the institutional and legal framework gave a competitive edge to the Ustašas. Chiefs of Osijek's police reportedly told members of the Jewish Religious Community that they would follow the orders related to the "Jewish question" issued at the state level, but that they would not introduce any new radical measures locally if Jews complied with all the orders of the police.⁷⁵ When state-wide orders were issued to signal the beginning of the mass deportations of Jews across the NDH to Ustaša-run concentration camps in July 1941,⁷⁶ approximately 300 of Osijek's Jews were deported to camps during August 1941, accounting for roughly 10 per cent of the entire

72 Velika Župa Baranja was one of twenty-two regional administrative and political units in the NDH. It had a seat in Osijek and included jurisdiction over the city and the municipality of Osijek, and the municipalities and towns of Našice, Donji Miholjac, Podravska Slatina, Djakovo, Valpovo, Orahovica, and Virovitica.

73 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2942, frame number 367, Testimony of Pavle Vinski given to the Commission for War Crimes on 7 September 1945.

74 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 14, file Veliki Župan Velike Župe Baranja 1940–1944, document dated 22 June 1941.

75 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2943, frame number 1312, Testimony of Holocaust survivor Arnold Kohn. See also HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2943, frame number 1247, Testimony of Holocaust survivor Vladimir Grunbaum.

76 Slavko Vukčević, ed., *Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u Prvom i Drugim svetskom ratu: zbornik dokumenata* [War Crimes in the Yugoslav Areas during the First and Second World War: Collection of Documents] (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1993), 366, Main Ustaša Police Headquarters to all Velike Župe, 23 July 1942.

Jewish community in the city.⁷⁷ However, the deportations suddenly stopped after that and the bulk of Osijek's Jews remained in the city until August 1942. This was a divergent development in comparison to many other cities in the NDH, where the deportations continued throughout 1941 and the beginning of 1942. For example, all Jews in the city of Bijeljina⁷⁸ were deported in August 1941, and in Sarajevo virtually the entire Jewish community was deported by the end of December 1941. However, the comprehensive deportations of Osijek's Jews were "delayed" significantly in comparison to these locations as well as to many others across the NDH.⁷⁹

The available sources do not offer a conclusive answer as to why this case of a "delayed" Holocaust occurred in Osijek. Instead of mass deportations, at least two local "solutions to the Jewish question" were contemplated. According to one, the Ustašas wanted to baptise Jews.⁸⁰ These suggestions, however, were completely unrealistic. The Ustaša regime in Zagreb rejected such options because they were contrary to the existing race laws that had been introduced on 30 April 1941; the Volksgruppe leadership echoed a similar position. Another solution was proposed by the regional prefect Stjepan Hefer, who suggested creating a "Jewish settlement," a ghetto just outside of Osijek. Hefer made all the arrangements for the beginning of the construction of the Tenja ghetto in March 1942, and its construction was planned for completion in the following three months. This was the only initiative undertaken in the NDH to create a Jewish ghetto, since the deportations were usually swift enough that ghetto spaces were not needed.⁸¹

It is unclear why Hefer preferred to organise a ghetto, as he had the means and the incentive from the top to proceed with the deportations to Ustaša-run concentration and death camps. This is particularly intriguing considering that, at the same time that Hefer was thinking about ghettoisation, the deportations of Sarajevo Jews to the Jasenovac camp were in full swing and included approximately 7,000 Jews. A potential answer could be connected to a specific demographic concern related to the city of Osijek. A document from 20 November 1941 clearly demonstrates that the local Croatian authorities made serious plans to convert as many Jews and Serbs as possible to Catholicism, which would effectively mean their assimilation into the Croatian nationality.⁸² The potential success of this plan would provide a competitive advantage to the Croats, as it would reduce the proportion of Germans in Osijek and potentially eliminate them as a power broker if their number were to drop to below 20 per cent of the city's population. By implementing the deportations of Serbs and Jews too quickly, the local Croatian elites would lose this opportunity.

The ghettoisation would have allowed the Ustašas to strip the Jews of all property and easily police their activities while keeping the ethnic balance, and the potential for conversions, in the city relatively intact. Maintaining the demographic status quo favoured Croatian ethnic dominance. In this regard, Ustaša actions echo Helen Fein's "role theory", according to which even antisemites are prone to hold back

77 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 213, The Vinski report.

78 HM, UNS, box 1, file 25, 2, Ustaša Regional Office [Logor] in Bijeljina to the Main Ustaša Headquarters (GUS), 9 August 1941.

79 Goldstajn, Aleksandar, Interview 6204, Segments 42–43, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1995, accessed 30 March 2021.

80 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 209, The Vinski Report.

81 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2944, frame number 205, The Vinski Report. See also Hrečkovski et. al., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 2, 115–116, Report of the Velika Župa Baranja sent to the Zapovjedništvo ustaške nadzorne službe Zagreb, 23 March 1942.

82 HR-DAOS-10, Gradsko poglavarstvo Osijek, document number 89, Prs – 1941, Report of the Deputy Mayor of Osijek to Velika Župa Baranja, 20 November 1941.

antisemitic actions when rewards “are positive and there are no negative costs or sanctions to consider, however, the same actor might be more likely to discriminate against or destroy Jews when the rewards for such acts are greater than the costs”.⁸³ In any event, Stjepan Hefer’s plan for the ghettoisation of the Jewish community failed because of the deportation plans which the Ustaša regime in Zagreb set in motion. In May 1942, the Ustaša government inquired whether Germany would be willing to deport the remaining Croatian Jews “to the East”. The Germans approved the Croatian request and preparations were made to for the deportations of the remaining Jews of the NDH to Auschwitz.⁸⁴

The entire remaining Jewish population of Osijek, approximately 2,000 people, were deported in the first half of August 1942.⁸⁵ A small number of Jews remained in the city of Osijek, mostly those in “mixed marriages”. However, the Volksgruppe was dissatisfied and resorted to continuous accusations that the Ustašas protected Jews. When the Volksgruppe demanded the removal of Jews who were intermarried with “Aryans”, Altgayer accused Hefer and Osijek’s police of informing the remaining Jews and promising them protection. The antisemitic conspiratorial thinking within the Volksgruppe continued in 1943, when its officials still expressed disappointment at the “lack of zeal in the persecution of Jews”, even though more than 90 per cent of Osijek’s Jews either had been deported or had fled the city.⁸⁶

Fears and Fantasies of Mutual Annihilation

Various fascist and right-wing authoritarian movements across Europe unleashed programmes of ethnic reorganisation and the homogenisation of states on a massive scale. At least to a degree, virtually all of them were unified in their intention to create a world devoid of Jews. The institutions created to persecute Jews and other minorities were empowered to plan the mass executions, rob the dead and replace them with ethnically or racially desirable substitutes. In the NDH, Serbs and Roma were persecuted simultaneously with Jews. They were often arrested in the same neighbourhoods, placed in temporary detention sites together, transported in the same trains, killed right next to each other, and finally buried in the same mass graves. Even though the genesis of their ideas motivated the perpetrators to persecute each of these minorities, they also shared a common cause rooted in the ideological core of Ustaša xenophobia and chauvinism. In the desire to create a homogenous nation-state, the Ustaša tore down the previous social order, civil morality, and institutional checks and balances, and produced habitual murderers, all under the promise of bringing security and prosperity. Yet, none of these promises were ever delivered upon.

The ambition to achieve ethnic homogenisation was seen as a shortcut in catching up with the imagined ideal of the “West”. Ethnic cleansing and genocide were, therefore, a central part of the Ustaša’s project of modernisation. This gave rise to fantasies that did not end with the destruction of Jews, Serbs, or Roma in the NDH. Ideas of ethnic homogenisation could at least theoretically target anyone identified as a

83 Helen Fein, ed., *The Persisting Question: Sociological Perspectives and Social Contexts of Modern Antisemitism* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 1987), 82.

84 Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 595.

85 HR-HDA-306, ZKRZ, microfilm roll 2943, frame number 1298, Testimony of Holocaust survivor Dragutin Glasner.

86 Bethke, *(K)eine gemeinsame Sprache?*, 374–375, 378.

non-Croat. In Osijek, members of all three fascist groups which produced Holocaust perpetrators – Croats, Germans, and Hungarians – both feared and fantasised about the question of who would come next after the last Jew, Serb, and Roma would have disappeared. On 5 June 1942, the regional governor Stjepan Hefer complained that “every single day, delegations of Croats from villages surrounding Osijek visit me and complain that various members of the German National Group openly speak that after the Gypsies and Jews have been deported, then Croats will be next”.⁸⁷ In another report, Hefer wrote that he thought that Germans “dislike Croats altogether” and posed a rhetorical question: “Croatian peasants want the ultimate victory of Germany but they ask themselves: ‘How will our local Germans behave after Germany wins the war, if this is how they treat us now?’”⁸⁸

During the mass deportations of Roma to the concentration camps in the NDH in May 1942, some Croats in Slavonia complained that a member of the Volksgruppe could be heard telling Croats that “after the gypsies, it is your turn to be deported”. When a Croatian teacher in the company of an Ustaša activist tried to uphold orders to start a Croatian school programme in a German-dominated village, they were chased away by local Germans who told them that “for us, there are no legal decrees. In Croatia, Germans have 75% of the rights and Croats 25%.” A brawl ensued between the Ustašas and the Germans, and children of both ethnicities joined in following the footsteps of the adults. Afterwards, the Germans told the Croats that they will be deported to a concentration camp intended for Jews and that “not even hundreds of Poglavniki can save you [from us]”.⁸⁹

Local ethnic Germans had fears similar to those of their Croatian neighbours. They primarily feared that they would share the same fate as the Baltic Germans who were “resettled” in Poland beginning in 1939. However, they also feared the aggressive policies of the Ustašas. A report from the Volksgruppe issued in the town of Vinkovci in December 1941 claimed that there were widespread rumours that Germans would be deported from this area and that their lands would be settled with Slovenes. Moreover, according to the same report, local Ustaša leaders said that “first the Serbs, and then the Germans – either they will be converted [assimilated] or deported”.⁹⁰ When Ustašas escorted columns of Roma through the streets of Osijek on their way to the railway station for the deportation of the Roma to the Jasenovac death camp, large crowds of citizens gathered to watch. When some ethnic Germans ridiculed the Roma, one Croatian family turned towards them and shouted: “Hitler still hasn’t won! One day you will march here just like these Gypsies today – then it will be our turn to laugh!”⁹¹ This was not the only such case. On the same day in a village near Osijek, a Croatian peasant told local Germans “[fuck] your Hitler! He will never enter Moscow! Rather than that, all of you Germans will lose your heads. A time will come when we [Croats] will deal with you.”⁹²

87 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943., document number 18:00-1/3-1942, Telegram sent by Veliki Župan Stjepan Hefer to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the NDH, 5 June 1942.

88 Hrečkovski et. al., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 2, 282, Report of Velika Župa Baranja sent to the Ministry of the Interior of the NDH, 11 July 1942.

89 Hrečkovski et. al., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 2, 286, Report of Velika Župa Baranja sent to the Ministry of Interior of the NDH, 11 July 1942.

90 Krnić and Kaminski, eds., *Grada za historiju Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji*, vol. 1, 459, Report of the German National Group from the Sava-Dunav district with the seat in Vinkovci, 31 December 1941.

91 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943., document number 3854-42-H/B, Testimony of Matilda Beck given to the German national group in Osijek on 9 June 1942.

92 HR-DAOS-1177, Stjepan Hefer, box 17, file: Njemačka Narodnosna Skupina – Razno, 1937.–1943., document number 3781-42-Sk/B, Report of Mathias Geiger to Okružno vodstvo “Unterdrau”, 1 June 1942.

Conclusion

The Ustaša, the Nazis, and the Arrow Cross in Osijek shared many goals and enemies. Yet, the future that they wanted to build remained vague, contested, and contradictory. Parallel programmes of territorial expansion and ethnic homogenisation stood in the way of each other. Despite all the preconditions being met, the three fascist movements failed to create a transnational fascist city-state, a fascist Eden. This was not unique to Osijek. For example, historian Dietrich Orlow has examined the relations between French, Dutch, and German fascists and concluded that “international fascism was a failure”.⁹³ A similar conclusion was reached in a regional study of Alsace, where various fascist movements interacted in the interwar period. According to historian Samuel Huston Goodfellow, despite “the existence of common regional themes, the diversity of the fascist movements meant that no single consensus presentation of fascism emerged”.⁹⁴

However, unlike the previously mentioned cases, Osijek provides us with a particular example of attempted transnational fascist mobilisation during the Holocaust. Even though antisemitism should be rightly studied as a transnational ideology, it must also be carefully contextualised in terms of how it blends, or is adapted to, different fascist ideologies. In Osijek, fascists seemingly spoke the same political language of antisemitism. However, antisemitism was also adapted to serve national interests which could be directed against another fascist movement. Osijek’s Nazis weaponised antisemitic rhetoric against the Ustaša on several occasions. Accusations that Ustašas were not antisemitic enough, or that they even helped Jews, were supposed to delegitimise the Ustaša. Similarly, the Arrow Cross used antisemitism to discredit its rival Hungarian Cultural Community. In Osijek, therefore, antisemitism became a means of competitive nation-building.

⁹³ Dietrich Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French Fascists, 1933–1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 153.

⁹⁴ Goodfellow, “Fascism as a Transnational Movement,” 90.

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