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JOVAN BYFORD

PICTURING  
GENOCIDE IN  
THE INDEPENDENT  
STATE OF CROATIA

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ATROCITY IMAGES AND THE  
CONTESTED MEMORY OF THE SECOND  
WORLD WAR IN THE BALKANS



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# Picturing Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia

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# Picturing Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia

*Atrocity Images and the Contested Memory  
of the Second World War in the Balkans*

Jovan Byford

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LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2020

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Cover image: Ustasa militia execute prisoners near the Jasenovac concentration camp.  
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Byford, Jovan, author.

Title: Picturing genocide in the independent state of Croatia: atrocity images and the  
contested memory of the Second World War in the Balkans / Jovan Byford.

Description: New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. | Series: War, culture and society |

Includes bibliographical references and index. | Identifiers: LCCN 2020009661 (print) |

LCCN 2020009662 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350015968 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781350015982 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350015975 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: World War, 1939-1945--Atrocities--Croatia--Pictorial works--Historiography. |  
Croatia--History--1918-1945--Pictorial works--Historiography. | Ustas?a, hrvatska revolucionarna  
organizacija--Historiography. | Collective memory--Former Yugoslav republics. |

Collective memory--Balkan Peninsula.

Classification: LCC D804.C76 B94 2020 (print) | LCC D804.C76 (ebook) |

DDC 940.53/18094972--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020009661>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020009662>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3500-1596-8

ePDF: 978-1-3500-1598-2

eBook: 978-1-3500-1597-5

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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## Acknowledgements

My thanks are due first to the staff of the archives and museums where I conducted research for this book, above all the Archives of Yugoslavia and the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, the Archives of Vojvodina in Novi Sad, the Croatian State Archives and the Croatian History Museum in Zagreb, Archives of Bosnia - Herzegovina and the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo, Archives of Republika Srpska and the Museum of Republika Srpska in Banja Luka, and, last but not least, the Public Institution Jasenovac Memorial Area in Jasenovac. I am immensely grateful for all the assistance they provided me over the years, and for their hospitality, professionalism and kindness.

I gratefully received help and support also from staff at the National Library of Serbia and the University Library 'Svetozar Marković' in Belgrade, the Matica Srpska Library in Novi Sad, the library of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, and, of course, The Open University Library, whose interlibrary loan system I unashamedly exploited.

I should like to thank Hrvoje Gržina from the Croatian State Archives, Radovan Cukić from the Museum of Yugoslavia, Ivo Pejaković and Đorđe Mihovilović from the Jasenovac Memorial Area, Adam Sofronijević from the University Library in Belgrade, and Marko Radovanović and Đurđa Borovnjak from the Archives of Yugoslavia for their help with obtaining the photographs featured in the book. I am also grateful to the Jasenovac Memorial Area, the Military Museum in Belgrade, the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia and the Museum of Vojvodina in Novi Sad for granting me permission to reproduce images for which they own the copyright.

I am indebted to my employer, The Open University, for allowing me the freedom to pursue my intellectual interests without too much administrative interference and managerial scrutiny.

Part of Chapter 3 was published previously as 'Picturing Jasenovac: Atrocity photography between evidence and propaganda' in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes: Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, eds Hildegard Frubis, Clara Oberle, and Agnieszka Pufelska (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag), pp. 227–248. I am grateful to the publishers of the volume for the permission to reproduce some of this material in the book.

Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, as well as to Beatriz Lopez, Laura Reeves and Rhodri Mogford of Bloomsbury Academic for their efficient handling of the publishing process, and for their patience and support.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my partner Sabina Mihelj, and my two exceptionally clever and inquisitive daughters Clara and Emma for their love and encouragement, and for making me smile.

# Abbreviations

- ABiH. Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine / Archives of Bosnia - Herzegovina, Sarajevo
- AJ. Arhiv Jugoslavije / Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Serbia
- ARS. Arhiv Republike Srpske / Archives of Republika Srpska, Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina
- AV. Arhiv Vojvodine/ Archives of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Serbia
- HDA. Hrvatski državni arhiv / Croatian State Archives, Zagreb, Croatia
- HPM. Hrvatski povjesni muzej / Croatian History Museum, Zagreb, Croatia
- MIJ. Muzej istorije Jugoslavije / Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Serbia
- JUSPJ. Javna ustanova Spomen područje Jasenovac / Public Institution Jasenovac Memorial Area, Jasenovac, Croatia

# Map



**Map 1** The partition of Yugoslavia, 1941. From *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* by Jozo Tomasevich. Copyright © 2001 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher, Stanford University Press, [www.sup.org](http://www.sup.org).

# Introduction

## Picturing genocide

On 21 November 1945, Robert H. Jackson, the US Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, delivered his historic opening statement. To the packed courtroom as well as to a global audience through journalists gathered in the nearby press room, Jackson introduced the ‘twenty-odd broken men’ in the dock as the ‘living symbols of racial hatreds, of terrorism and violence, and of the arrogance and cruelty of power.’ He accused them of ‘abnormal and inhuman conduct’, of leading ‘their people on a mad gamble for domination’ and of orchestrating a ‘campaign of arrogance, brutality and annihilation as the world has not witnessed since the pre-Christian ages.’<sup>1</sup> For this, the men – all leading Nazi officials – stood charged with crimes against peace, the violation of the laws and customs of war and for the first time in history, crimes against humanity – the heinous acts of murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment and deportation of millions of civilians throughout Nazi-occupied Europe.

In prosecuting the Nazi leadership, the International Military Tribunal was breaking new legal ground. Existing international legal theory and practice proved inadequate for bringing to book perpetrators of state-sponsored crimes of unprecedented scale and horror. New laws needed to be codified, and fresh procedures and rules of evidence devised. As Jackson admitted in his statement, the tribunal was ‘novel and experimental’, but at the same time vitally important: ‘The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating that civilisation cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.’<sup>2</sup>

One of the novelties introduced at Nuremberg was that photographic and film evidence was accorded a prominent place in the proceedings. At key moments in the trial, the tribunal was shown graphic images and film footage of atrocities found among captured German records or taken by American, British and Soviet photographers and film-makers who accompanied the liberators of Nazi concentration camps. Importance attributed to visual material was reflected even in the spatial arrangement of the courtroom, organized around a large screen which hung on the wall facing the spectators, with the judges’ bench on the right and the prisoners’ dock on the left.

The reason for showing images that Robert H. Jackson warned would rob the viewer of their sleep and 'turn the stomach of the world' was that it was believed that to provide 'undeniable proofs of incredible events', Nazi crimes needed to be *seen* in all their horror.<sup>3</sup> Images were trusted to 'speak for themselves'; they offered, through their authenticity and vividness, direct access to and irrefutable evidence of the scale and horror of Nazism.<sup>4</sup> As the Soviet prosecutor Colonel Yuri Pokrovsky later told the tribunal chamber, visual images were the testimony of slain victims, of the dead who 'never lie'.<sup>5</sup> The verisimilitude conveyed by the images was thus meant to provide an antidote to suspicion and scepticism that had accompanied the tales of Nazi atrocities ever since the start of the war. Furthermore, because this very public trial was as much about history and memory as about law and justice, the dryness of the lengthy legal arguments and discussions of German documents – what Rebecca West described as the 'extreme tedium' of the courtroom – needed to be punctured by moments of spectacle.<sup>6</sup> The images, and the reactions to them in the courtroom, offered the 'dramatic contrast' needed to hold the attention of the media and maintain public interest in the trial.<sup>7</sup>

The use of photographs and film footage at Nuremberg marked a watershed moment in the history of visual culture of atrocity. As Susan Sontag argued, although 'photography has kept company with death' ever since the invention of the daguerreotype in mid-nineteenth century, it was only in 1945 – when the harrowing images from Majdanek, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and Dachau entered popular consciousness – that the superior power of the visual image to 'define, not merely record, the most abominable realities' of war became fully recognized.<sup>8</sup> Images were validated as an 'unforgettable form of explanation' which could be legitimately and persuasively used, both in a court of law and outside it, to bear witness to and 'bring home' the horrors of Nazism.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the reporting of Nazi atrocities in the press, and the numerous photographic exhibitions staged at the time, meant that the newly established, or emerging, categories of mass crimes, namely crimes against humanity, genocide and the Holocaust, became irrevocably visually defined in the public imagination. While the visibility of atrocity images ebbed and flowed over subsequent decades, there nevertheless remained the expectation that to attract the attention, and condemnation of the global public, contemporary mass atrocities needed to be evidenced, and rendered visible, with recognizably symbolic, dramatic and vivid images, evocative of the aesthetic and impact of those that shocked the world in 1945. According to Barbie Zelizer, Nazi-era photographs have become 'a frame for understanding contemporary instances of atrocity', 'a backdrop, or context against which to appropriate the more contemporaneous instances of barbarism'.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of the Second World War on the visual culture of atrocity was perhaps inevitable given the sheer number of images of death and suffering that it left in its wake. By the time the Nazi expansionist project began, photographic equipment was sufficiently small, light, affordable and easy to use, to become the ordinary soldier's faithful companion in war. Advances in photographic technology went hand in hand with, and were constitutive of, important cultural and creative developments.<sup>11</sup> These included the rising consumption of images through the illustrated press, photography's growing reputation as the medium that offers both an accurate record of reality and the

means of constructing it and the realization that the camera, which was now a personal commodity as much as a professional tool, can be used to capture, narrate and share *individual* experience and perspective on the world. All this resulted in the Second World War being photographed not just by all sides in the conflict but also from a multitude of viewpoints – official and unofficial, professional and amateur. Among the resulting rich visual record was an unprecedented amount of incriminating evidence of crimes committed by the Nazis and their associates. Within just a few months of Germany's defeat, prosecutors at Nuremberg had amassed more than 25,000 still photographs, with tens of thousands more surfacing since.<sup>12</sup>

Over the years, the visual record of Nazi crimes has attracted considerable interest from scholars of different disciplines, including history, cultural and media studies and photography.<sup>13</sup> Their work has generated extensive debates about the historiographic, commemorative and educational value of violent images, about the precise source of their symbolic and evidential power, as well as about the ethics of their continuing dissemination and consumption. Given the unprecedented nature of the tragedy of European Jews under Nazism, and the central place it occupies in Western historical consciousness, imagery relating to the Holocaust has received most attention, as scholars sought to explore how the visual culture of atrocity reflected and, at the same time, helped to determine the course of post-war representation and understanding of the Holocaust.

In existing writing, much of which comes from and is focused on the West, there is a tendency to presume that engagement with atrocity images typical of Western societies and cultures (especially the United States) is universally relevant. This is manifested in the adherence, in the literature, to a Western-centric narrative of the Second World War and Nazi atrocities (including the focus on the liberation of concentration camps), in the choice of photographs and assumptions about what they signify or what makes them 'iconic', but also in considerations of the ethics of looking, namely, the question about when and how it might be appropriate (if at all) for 'us' to gaze at images of past suffering. Relatively little attention has been paid to the social and cultural contingency of, and variability in, visual representations of atrocities, or to the question of how the rest of the world visualizes and remembers Nazi-era crimes.

The importance of this blind spot becomes clear when one turns to Eastern Europe, a region where the memory of Nazi occupation has always had a very different flavour, and social and political function, compared to the West. For one thing, throughout Eastern Europe the Holocaust – while unparalleled in terms of overall scale and intended totality – often took place alongside, and in conjunction with, other instances of racial, ethnic and political persecution or the implementation of brutal counterinsurgency or punitive measures against non-Jewish civilians. This means that Nazi-era atrocities, incorporated into *national* memories of the war, have had a different meaning for, and a more direct emotional and political impact on, local societies and majority populations compared to, for instance, in Britain or the United States, where Nazi crimes were, for the most part, experienced from a distance and where they are today remembered mainly through the prism of the Holocaust. Also, under communism, the selective and carefully managed memory of the Second World War was much more directly political.<sup>14</sup> Motifs of resistance and suffering were an intrinsic part of state and nation

building projects. They were used not only to legitimize communist rule and foster social and political unity but often also to divert attention from the delicate issues of local collaboration with Nazi Germany and the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Yet the role of visual culture in this politics of memory, and how ideological and political concerns affected the visibility, choice and interpretation of images of Nazi crimes, has not been adequately explored. The evolution of visual memory over time, including after the fall of communism, has also received little attention, despite the abundance of literature on the wave of historical revisionism that swept the region after 1989.<sup>15</sup>

This book begins to address some of these gaps in research, by looking at visual culture of atrocity in the former Yugoslavia. The book's specific focus is the history and politics of visual representation of the bloodiest, but also the most controversial and politically divisive episode of the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, namely genocidal violence against Serbs, Jews and Roma perpetrated by the pro-Nazi, collaborationist, Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia. It explores how Ustasha atrocities have been represented in public exhibitions, documentaries, books and the press from 1945 to the present. The book is especially concerned with the politics of atrocity images and how they were selectively mobilized at different times, and by different memory communities and stakeholders, to *do* different things: to justify retribution against collaborators and their sympathizers in the immediate aftermath of the war, sustain the discourses of national unity on which socialist Yugoslavia was founded, or in the post-communist era, prop up different nationalist agendas, and in many ways 'frame' the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

## Why examine the visual record of Ustasha violence?

The Ustasha genocide took place on the periphery of the European theatre of war, and, in the context of the overall devastation that Nazi Germany and its allies brought upon the continent, was an event primarily of regional relevance. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why the genocide – especially that against the Serbian population of the Independent State of Croatia – constitutes a particularly apposite case study for examining the power of visual images to shape collective memory of mass violence.

First, the genocide against Serbs – who were the main target of Ustasha persecution – occurred in the context of a bloody and traumatic civil war of unprecedented complexity. The warring factions included the mostly Croatian Ustasha units and the regular army of the Independent State of Croatia (the Home Guard or *Domobrani*), bands of Serbian Chetniks (who opposed the Ustasha while collaborating to varying degrees with Germans and Italians in the fight against communist Partisans), Muslim militias (who were loyal to the Independent State of Croatia and the Germans and fought against Chetniks and Partisans) and the multi-ethnic, communist Partisan army, which fought not just against the Germans and the Italians, but also against collaborators of all backgrounds and persuasions. The prolonged and fluid conflict between the different sides, in which hundreds of thousands of civilians – Serbs, Muslims and Croats – perished, left a deep and enduring scar on community relations in post-war Yugoslavia. This presented a unique political challenge for the authorities.



Fratricidal violence, collaboration with the occupiers, countless atrocities and so on all needed to be explained and committed to memory in a way that did not jeopardize Yugoslavia's identity as a multi-ethnic state or undermine the doctrine of 'brotherhood and unity' on which communist authorities staked their legitimacy. The main legacy of the Ustasha genocide – the damaged relationship between the country's largest constituent nations, Serbs and Croats – was, obviously, the most sensitive issue. As we shall see, atrocity images were mobilized from the outset to render visible the horrors of fascist violence and delegitimize collaborationist forces, but also to promote national reconciliation and build a future-oriented socialist state. How this was achieved is one of the main themes of this book.

Also, the specific circumstances of Yugoslavia's post-communist transition – its violent dissolution in the 1990s and the rekindling of hostilities that had been dormant since 1945 – offer a new way of looking at how the visual record of a past conflict shapes the presentation and perception of a more recent one. Existing literature on this topic mainly focuses on the role that visual analogies (especially those relating to the Holocaust) have played in shaping public opinion in Western societies, about conflicts taking place far away: in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and so on.<sup>16</sup> This Western-centric focus on the visualization of *remote* suffering inevitably assumes a geographical distance between locations of past and present instances of mass violence, and the social and political context in which the analogy between them is made. By contrast, Yugoslavia – the only European country to have experienced large-scale military conflict on its territory since 1945 – provides a unique opportunity for examining the dynamics, and politics, of analogy-driven visual memory in a context where no such geographical distance exists.

In fact, Yugoslavia's bloody demise provides a compelling example of how in times of social and political upheaval, iconography of violence and polemics over the relevance of images as a mode of historical representation become a medium through which identities are constructed and challenged, and political projects forged and contested. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, at a time of rising nationalism and worsening political crisis in Yugoslavia, graphic atrocity images from the Second World War became a core component of Serbian nationalist discourse and propaganda. They were used to promote the message that the present-day plight of Serbian communities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was a continuation of the genocide endured in the Independent State of Croatia, and, by extension, that armed uprising and secession were the only ways to prevent renewed suffering. Among Croatian nationalists, by contrast, the emphasis was on challenging the authenticity and relevance of both the images and the events they represent. The exclusion of atrocity photographs from public gaze was an important part of the broader drive, apparent in Croatia in the 1990s, to whitewash the lamentable historical record of the Independent State of Croatia.

Arguments over the relevance, and use, of atrocity images persist to the present day. In Serbia and in the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska, even the most graphic atrocity photographs still feature regularly in the mainstream press, in news reports, documentaries and exhibitions devoted to the suffering of Serbs. One can even speak of a distinct atrocity-focused aesthetic of memory, captured in recurring, graphic images of mock or actual executions, decomposing bodies, decapitated or disembowelled



victims, corpses of children and the like, which frame public understanding of war and genocide.<sup>17</sup> Exposure to the spectacle of suffering is accepted within these societies as both normal and necessary, even if often disturbing. As the website of the Military Museum in Belgrade explains, scenes of mutilated and dismembered bodies found in its collection of Second World War-era photographs

leave a heavy and painful impression on all those who look at them, even fleetingly. Yet these photographs are exceptionally important, because they represent almost the only way for the viewer today to appreciate the real horrors of war, short of experiencing them firsthand.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, gruesome photographs are treated as both historical evidence and a source of unique vicarious experience, a means of transmitting traumatic memory across generations.

Meanwhile, in Croatia, the same photographs are seldom seen in public. The argument there is that explicit images of brutality are incompatible with a more ethically informed, victim-focused memory of the genocide, one that respects the dignity of the dead and moves away from the aesthetic of shock.<sup>19</sup> Also, it is argued that the legacy of propagandistic misuse by Serbian nationalists has compromised the status of violent images as a vehicle for public remembering. Regrettably, the taboo surrounding atrocity images helps to sustain the almost complete suppression of the genocide against Serbs as a topic of public memory. In Croatian bookshops today, one is more likely to encounter glossy books with photographs glamorizing the Ustasha army than any trace of the visual record of their crimes.<sup>20</sup> In fact, photographs of Ustasha brutality have something of a subversive character in Croatia. Their presence tends to be limited to social media, blogs or internet portals, where they are used sparingly and strategically, to puncture the prevailing political taboos and expose, and counter, the failure of mainstream institutions and the media to confront the country's violent past.<sup>21</sup>

A major aim of this book is to deconstruct the two dramatically different approaches to images of Ustasha violence and analyse their origins, evolution and interdependence. Placing the two cultures of visual memory in the appropriate historical context is especially important. Up until the early 1990s, societies that today treat atrocity images so differently were part of the same country and shared a distinctly 'Yugoslav' memory of the Second World War. Yet if one was to believe the today dominant interpretations of the former Yugoslav regime's approach to Ustasha genocide, one would struggle to find evidence of a shared past. In Serbia, there is a widely held view that the martyrdom of Serbs at the hands of the Ustasha was a suppressed topic under communism, part of history swept under the carpet by Yugoslavia's leader Josip Broz Tito and his clique. Hence, the proliferation of atrocity images in Serbia in the late 1980s was part of a broader pushback against the perceived injustices of a state-controlled history and the 'oblivion and taboo' that had supposedly surrounded the genocide against Serbs.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, in Croatia, the memory of the socialist period is based on the opposite premise, namely that Yugoslav authorities had deliberately created, sustained and promoted the various 'myths' about the Ustasha and exaggerated their iniquity. As Franjo Tudman – the first

president of the Republic of Croatia – argued in his 1989 book *Horrors of War*, these myths were a ‘black legend of the historical guilt of the entire Croatian nation, a guilt which should be expiated’, and a political instrument utilized to ‘keep Croatanness in shackles’ and instil a sense of national shame.<sup>23</sup> In Croatian nationalist discourse ever since, atrocity images and their uses and alleged abuses, have been considered an important symbol of this long-standing political, ‘anti-Croat’ manipulation of history.<sup>24</sup> As we shall see, both positions harbour an element of truth, but they also simplify and misrepresent socialist Yugoslavia’s complex and inherently ambivalent attitude towards the Second World War-era ethnic violence and its memorialization. What is more, both sides will be shown to draw on representational strategies that originate from the very same Yugoslav culture of memory that they today so vociferously condemn.

## Photographs of Jasenovac and the question of authenticity

In considering visual representations of the Ustasha genocide, forthcoming chapters will use the memory of the Ustasha-run Jasenovac concentration camp as the main case study. Established in August 1941 on the marshes at the confluence of the rivers Una and Sava, around 100 km southeast of Zagreb, Jasenovac was the largest concentration camp in occupied Yugoslavia and, in terms of the number of deaths, among the ten largest camps in Nazi-occupied Europe. According to current estimates, around 83,000 inmates were killed there, of whom 47,000 Serbs, 16,000 Roma, 13,000 Jews, 4,000 Croats and 2,000 victims of other nationalities.<sup>25</sup> Also, Jasenovac was the only camp of its size in the Second World War operated entirely by a collaborationist administration, without the involvement of, or much encouragement from, Nazi Germany.

Throughout the post-war period Jasenovac occupied a central place in both official and vernacular memory of Ustasha crimes. Even today, the word ‘Jasenovac’ serves as a metonymy for the entirety of the genocide perpetrated in the Independent State of Croatia. Jasenovac owes its metonymic status partly to the fact that in socialist Yugoslavia the number of victims was grossly exaggerated, with the official estimate standing at 700,000 dead. This figure, which was routinely used but never officially debated or justified, implied that as many as 40 per cent of Yugoslavia’s assumed 1.7 million wartime casualties perished in Jasenovac.<sup>26</sup> As a result, remembrance of Ustasha crimes inevitably gravitated towards this camp, which eventually became the site of a national memorial. Because of its symbolic importance and political sensitivity, Jasenovac has been the subject of constant instrumentalization and politicization, first by Yugoslav communist authorities, and later also by Serbian and Croatian nationalists. Endless debates between the latter over the number of victims and the nature and purpose of the camp, which date back to the 1980s and refuse to go away, have been explored and written about in considerable detail.<sup>27</sup> Much less scholarly attention has been devoted to the deep divisions regarding the photographic record of Jasenovac and the role of atrocity images in representing the horrors of this camp. This is a surprising omission, given that the question about how Jasenovac should be represented visually, and specifically what should and should not be seen in the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, remains a significant barrier to regional reconciliation, comparable in importance to

the polemics over casualty figures. To begin to address the ongoing controversies over the museum in Jasenovac, this book offers the first detailed, comparative examination of the use of visual images in the three permanent displays, from 1968, 1988 and 2006.

The single most contentious aspect of the photographic record of Jasenovac is the questionable 'authenticity' of many of the images that have been used over the years to depict the killings at the camp. As Nataša Mataušić has shown in her book on photographic sources relevant to Jasenovac, images that demonstrably have little to do with this camp have frequently been attributed to it.<sup>28</sup> Photographs depicting Ustasha killings perpetrated at other, usually indeterminable locations, crimes committed by German, Italian or Hungarian troops, even photographs purporting to show Partisan atrocities which appeared in Ustasha propaganda literature during the war, have all been used in publications and exhibitions about Jasenovac. Through erroneous, or in some instances deliberately misleading captions, descriptions and attributions, these photographs, Mataušić argues, have become an 'instrument of untruth'.<sup>29</sup>

The misattribution of images to which Mataušić and others have drawn attention is not unique either to Jasenovac or to the Yugoslav context. The Second World War produced an imperfect photographic record. Photographs uncovered by victorious armies after the war – especially the harrowing images of Nazi atrocities taken by perpetrators or bystanders – often lacked reliable information about their provenance, authorship, subject matter or the circumstances in which they were taken. Many of them ended up being used to illustrate multiple, unrelated locations and events.<sup>30</sup> And yet, very little has been written to date on *how* and *why* these misattributions happen. In the case of photographs of Ustasha crimes, causes are usually sought either in 'human error' or, more commonly, in propagandistic motives.<sup>31</sup> While the latter assumption is not unreasonable, explanations that over-rely on intentionality seldom tell the complete story when it comes to the dynamics of collective remembering. To explain the various misattributions and understand their complex and multifaceted causes, it is necessary to delve deeper into the history of the images and the processes of their collection, curation and dissemination, and scrutinize the complex web of institutional and social practices by which photographs are constituted as authentic, credible and appropriate (although often contested) representations of the past. At the same time, it is just as important to critically examine the rhetoric of doubt and suspicion about the credibility and relevance of images, and consider how it is being used, often just as selectively and tendentiously, to render some photographs, and aspects of the past, invisible.

## Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia: The historical context

The Independent State of Croatia, on whose murderous legacy the book focuses, was established by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in April 1941, in the aftermath of the Axis invasion and dismemberment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It encompassed the territory of today's Republic of Croatia (without a large part of the Adriatic coast and

the Baranja region which were ceded to Italy and Hungary, respectively), the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Srem region of what is today the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina. The country was placed under the control of the Ustasha, a brutal Croatian fascist terrorist organization that before the war had mostly operated from military training camps in Italy and Hungary.<sup>32</sup> Although the Ustasha, led by the *poglavnik* ('leader') Ante Pavelić and his government, were formally in power, for most of its existence the Independent State of Croatia was an 'Italian-German quasi-protectorate': it was split into a German and an Italian 'sphere of interest', with their respective security forces and military-diplomatic representatives often influencing key decisions.<sup>33</sup> Amid the inevitable power struggle and rivalry among the Ustasha, the Italians and the Germans, the Ustasha embarked on a ruthless campaign of terror against Serbs and the much smaller Jewish and Roma communities, with the aim of creating an ethnically homogenous and 'pure' Croatian state.<sup>34</sup>

For the Ustasha, the 1.9 million Serbs living in the Independent State of Croatia – almost a third of the country's population – represented the main obstacle to the fulfilment of their nationalist dream. Drawing on popular resentment over what was perceived by many Croats as the oppression of their nation by the Serb-dominated, centralized, pre-war Yugoslav state, the Ustasha portrayed Serbs as the arch-enemy, an alien, disloyal, culturally and morally inferior group that poses a threat to the stability, if not existence, of the newly founded independent Croatia. For the ideologues of the Ustasha movement, the 'Serbian question' had always been something of an obsession. Even before the war, Ustasha publications called for a violent reckoning with the Serbs and wished for the day when 'razor-sharp daggers of the Croatian Ustasha will cut out all the rotten flesh from the body of the Croatian nation'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when the Ustasha, radicalized by years in exile, returned to their homeland in 1941, they saw the Nazi-sponsored Independent State of Croatia as providing both the rationale and an opportunity for the fulfilment of their violent ambitions. Other 'undesirable elements' in the new state – Jews, Roma and communists – were also targeted. Defined in racial terms, Jews and Roma were subjected to Nuremberg-style racial laws and faced mass arrests, internment and, ultimately, mass murder in concentration camps.

Between 1941 and 1945, as many as 330,000 Serbs, 30,000 Jews and 20,000 Roma perished in the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>36</sup> With regard to Serbian victims in particular, the multidirectional nature of the violence and the absence of reliable wartime or post-war records make it virtually impossible to partial out military from civilian losses or determine with any precision what proportion of victims were killed in the genocide, as opposed to other war activities.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the genocide has always been a politically sensitive issue has not helped. Tomislav Dulić estimates the number of Serbian victims of Ustasha genocide to be around 245,000, although other researchers have put forward a higher figure.<sup>38</sup>

While Serbs, Jews and Roma were all victims of horrific and sustained violence at the hands of the Ustasha, there are significant differences between the fate of Serbs, on the one hand, and that of Jews and Roma on the other. Marko Attila Hoare even writes about 'two overlapping but distinct genocides with very different causes and serving different purposes'.<sup>39</sup> The first and main difference is that the destruction of Jews and Roma was part of the Nazi project of extermination that was taking place throughout

occupied Europe. Although the Ustasha were both racist and antisemitic, for them the complete annihilation of Jewish and Roma communities was, ideologically speaking (and because of their relatively small size), of secondary importance. Diligence shown in the implementation of the Holocaust was mainly a way of demonstrating adherence to the Nazi principles of racial purity.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, the intolerance of and violence against Serbs reflected a strong, 'home-grown' form of hatred. The persecution of Serbs was pursued even though it eroded popular support for the regime, fuelled Serbian rebellion and jeopardized the security situation in the country.<sup>41</sup>

The second difference is that the persecution of Jews and Roma was more systematic. Most Jews (those who did not go into hiding, join the Partisans or flee to the relative safety of the Italian zone of occupation) were rounded up by the Ustasha, deported to concentration camps and killed.<sup>42</sup> The same happened to the arrested Roma, most of whom were murdered in Jasenovac in the summer of 1942.<sup>43</sup> The organized nature of the persecution accounts for the devastating losses among the two communities: the Ustasha killed around 76 per cent of Croatian and Bosnian Jews and almost all the interned Roma.<sup>44</sup> The fate of the Serbs was different. Because they were more numerous, and largely inhabited rural areas, Serbs could not be easily rounded up, deported to camps and killed. Only around 90,000 Serbian victims of Ustasha genocide were murdered in concentration camps. The rest perished in what is commonly referred to as 'direct terror': punitive expeditions against Serbian settlements (usually accompanied by theft, looting and repossession of land) which often resulted in whole villages being raised to the ground and residents killed, or in numerous pogroms, massacres and sporadic executions perpetrated mostly in 1941 and 1942.<sup>45</sup> Also, because Serbs, unlike Jews and Roma, were defined in ethno-religious rather than racial terms, the Ustasha state subjected them to forced assimilation, mainly through religious conversion to Catholicism, or deportation. Hundreds of thousands were banished to Serbia or fled across the border to escape persecution, while thousands of others were deported to German-run labour camps throughout Europe.<sup>46</sup>

The somewhat chaotic nature of the 'direct terror' means that there was much greater geographical and temporal variation in the persecution of Serbs, compared to Jews and Roma. The scale and ferocity of the violence was often determined more by local social and intercommunal relations, and the proclivities of local warlords, than by any well thought-through, regime-driven policy.<sup>47</sup> Also, the killings were often part of the complex cycle of multidirectional violence and retribution, or were perpetrated under the guise of counterinsurgency operations. And yet, there is no doubt that the campaign of terror was inspired and enabled by the Ustasha regime's broader policy towards Serbs, which included systematic discrimination, open threats of annihilation and concerted efforts to eradicate any trace of Serbian cultural life in the country.

One of the distinguishing features of Ustasha violence, whether directed at Serbs, Jews, Roma or political enemies, was its excessive, sadistic ferocity, which spread fear among the population and sometimes alarmed Italian and German troops. Victims were often, although by no means always, bludgeoned with a mallet or axe, stabbed to death, pushed off a cliff or thrown down a ravine, or had their throats slit with a knife. The partiality for 'cold weapons' was partly due to the shortage of firearms and ammunition, especially in the early stages of the war.<sup>48</sup> But it also reflected an adherence

to the culture of violence that glorified the knife as a 'cult object' and regarded intimate forms of killing as a sign of commitment to the Ustasha cause.<sup>49</sup> After the war, the image of the bloodthirsty, knife-wielding Ustasha became the dominant motif of the memory of genocide in the Independent State of Croatia, culminating in the today common, albeit somewhat misguided inference that the sadism of the Ustasha made them 'worse' than their Nazi counterparts.<sup>50</sup>

The fact that the violence against Serbs was not as methodical as that against Jews and Roma, that it occurred alongside the policies of expulsion and assimilation and that it was often exacerbated by the Serb-dominated uprising has led to polemics about whether the fate of Serbs amounted to genocide.<sup>51</sup> While this may sound like a matter of semantics, in a region where 'genocide' is a politically highly charged term (both in relation to the Second World War and the wars of the 1990s), terminology is important. On the one hand, those who argue against the use of the term 'genocide' (at least those who are well intentioned and who question the categorization of the crime rather than its scale) are correct to point out that the often-used phrase 'genocide against Serbs, Jews and Roma' obscures the important differences between the fate of these communities in terms of intent, systematicity and magnitude of the violence. They are also right that the failure to acknowledge those differences fuels the rhetoric of competitive martyrdom and the appropriation of the Holocaust that has been a notable feature of Serbian nationalism since the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> But claiming that the persecution of Serbs was *not* genocide, and focusing on the differences between their fate and that of Jews and Roma, also stimulates nationalist myths: it legitimizes (even if unintentionally) attempts by some in Croatia to minimize, trivialize or deny the scale of Serbian suffering. More importantly, while it may be true that the Ustasha did not have a premeditated plan to kill *all* Serbs, and that losses among the Serbian community were proportionally lower than among Jews and Roma, it is undeniable that the dynamic of destruction bore the hallmarks of genocide. The aim of the Ustasha was, from the outset, to 'destroy the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia as a distinct national community capable of independent life'.<sup>53</sup>

Importantly, by this definition, the brutal campaign of murder and expulsion that Serbian Chetnik militias waged against Muslim civilians in eastern Bosnia in 1942 and 1943 – which left tens of thousands of civilians dead – was also genocide. This crime may have been more localized and smaller in scale compared to Ustasha violence against Serbs, but its aims, calculated cruelty and devastating impact on the victim community were comparable.<sup>54</sup> While recognizing that Muslims in eastern Bosnia were also victims of genocide, this book will not focus on their fate or its visual representation. This is partly because within the bloody vortex of fratricidal violence among Serbs, Croats and Muslims during the Second World War, the Ustasha genocide against Serbs stands out. For one thing, Serbs, unlike Bosnian Muslims, had the infrastructure, bureaucracy and security apparatus of a state, albeit an imperfect and dysfunctional one, intent on their destruction. The state-sponsored nature of the violence is, in part, why Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia suffered among the highest death tolls in Europe during the Second World War and why they account for as many as two-thirds of all civilian casualties in the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>55</sup> Also, the Ustasha persecution of Serbs, on which much of this book focuses, played a more prominent role in the

post-war politics of memory, and, as an object of remembrance, was more strongly visually defined. And yet, Chetnik violence will not be completely overlooked. As we shall see, throughout the socialist era the juxtaposition of Ustasha and Chetnik crimes was a prominent motif in the state-sponsored, 'Yugoslav' memory of the war which had ethnic balance in villainy and suffering as one of its basic principles.

## The politics of atrocities and atrocity images

In the book *Explaining Yugoslavia*, John Allcock described collective violence in the Balkans as an area of inquiry 'where angels fear to tread' and warned researchers that 'serious dangers await the fool who enters there'.<sup>56</sup> The main source of danger is that, when it comes to accounts of Yugoslavia's violent past, 'disentanglement of myth from reality' is a delicate affair. Past suffering is often remembered through elaborate stories of atrocities, which, although based on real events, have acquired, through repeated transmission and embellishment, the attributes of myth. The past has been reduced to 'powerful symbolic compilations, whose importance has long since ceased to depend in any way upon their veracity'. As a result, 'the truth is hard to establish, and to separate from various forms of deliberate or incidental fiction'.<sup>57</sup>

Representations of Ustasha atrocities are a prime example of this mingling of fact and fiction. Although the bloodthirstiness of the Ustasha and their penchant for 'intimate' killing methods are well documented, the genocide against Serbs is often remembered through striking and exaggerated atrocity stories which, while built on kernels of truth, belong firmly in the realm of myth.<sup>58</sup> These include tales of children being thrown in the air and impaled on bayonets, fetuses being ripped out from the bellies of pregnant women, victims having their genitalia or breasts mutilated, hearts extracted or noses and ears cut off and kept as trophies, or indeed tales of prominent Ustasha slitting the throats of thousands of Serbs in a single killing spree, sometimes even tasting the blood of their victims. Referring to these stories as 'myths' is not to say that perpetrators never mutilated the corpses of victims, collected body parts as trophies or engaged in mass murder or macabre killing rituals. The Ustasha committed unimaginable atrocities, and they may even have occasionally acted out the various gory rumours that followed them, to shock victims and bystanders, and augment the unsavoury reputation in which many of them revelled. After all, certain forms of violence – throat-slitting, decapitation, genital mutilation, sexual violence and so on – are inherently symbolic and operate within a culturally embedded framework of meaning, a 'rhetoric of atrocity', that is often shared by perpetrators and victims.<sup>59</sup> When carried out, boasted about or documented in a 'trophy photograph', demonstrative violence is a form of communication (e.g. Figure 1.1). It reaffirms the perpetrator group's cult of militarism and masculinity, and conveys to fellow soldiers, victims and bystanders, but also to the outside world, the scale of the triumph over the vanquished enemy. Throat-slitting, for instance, is a method traditionally used to slaughter animals. When used against a human being in war, as the Ustasha frequently did, it becomes an act of almost ritualistic dehumanization.<sup>60</sup> Decapitation and the removal of body parts (usually ones linked to a person's identity such as parts of the