

*Carpathia Club, Inc.***The Destruction of Ethnic Germans and German Prisoners of War in Yugoslavia, 1945-1953**

By Tomislav Sunic

From the European and American media, one can often get the impression that World War II needs to be periodically resurrected to give credibility to financial demands of one specific ethnic group, at the expense of others. The civilian deaths of the war's losing side are, for the most part, glossed over. Standard historiography of World War II is routinely based on a sharp and polemical distinction between the "ugly" fascists who lost, and the "good" anti-fascists who won, and few scholars are willing to inquire into the gray ambiguity in between. Even as the events of that war become more distant in time, they seemingly become more politically useful and timely as myths.

German military and civilian losses during and especially after World War II are still shrouded by a veil of silence, at least in the mass media, even though an impressive body of scholarly literature exists on that topic. The reasons for this silence, due in large part to academic negligence, are deep rooted and deserve further scholarly inquiry. Why, for instance, are German civilian losses, and particularly the staggering number of postwar losses among ethnic Germans, dealt with so sketchily, if at all, in school history courses? The mass media - television, newspapers, film and magazines - rarely, if ever, look at the fate of the millions of German civilians in central and eastern Europe during and following World War II. [1]

The treatment of civilian ethnic Germans- or Volksdeutsche – in Yugoslavia may be regarded as a classic case of "ethnic cleansing" on a grand scale. [2] A close look at these mass killings presents a myriad of historical and legal problems, especially when considering modern international law, including the Hague War Crimes Tribunal that has been dealing with war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Balkan wars of 1991-1995. Yet the plight of Yugoslavia's ethnic Germans during and after World War II should be of no lesser concern to historians, not least because an understanding of this chapter of history throws a significant light on the violent breakup of Communist Yugoslavia 45 years later. A better understanding of the fate of Yugoslavia's ethnic Germans should encourage skepticism of just how fairly and justly international law is applied in practice. Why are the sufferings and victimhood of some nations or ethnic groups ignored, while the sufferings of other nations and groups receive fulsome and sympathetic attention from the media and politicians?

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, more than one and a half million ethnic Germans were living in southeastern Europe, that is, in Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Romania. Because they lived mostly near and along the Danube river, these people were popularly known as "Danube Swabians" or Donauschwaben. Most were descendants of settlers who came to this fertile region in the 17th and 18th centuries following the liberation of Hungary from Turkish rule.

For centuries the Holy Roman Empire and then the Habsburg Empire struggled against Turkish rule in the Balkans, and resisted the "Islamization" of Europe. In this struggle the Danube Germans were viewed as a rampart of Western civilization, and were held in high esteem in the Austrian (and later, Austro-Hungarian) empire for their agricultural productivity and military prowess. Both the Holy Roman and Habsburg empires were multicultural and multinational entities, in which diverse ethnic groups lived for centuries in relative harmony.

After the end of World War I, in 1918, which brought the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg empire, and the imposed Versailles Treaty of 1919, the juridical status of the Donauschwaben Germans was in flux. When the National Socialist regime was established in Germany in 1933, the Donauschwaben were among the more than twelve million ethnic Germans who lived in central and eastern Europe outside the borders of the German Reich. Many of these people were brought into the Reich with the incorporation of Austria in 1938, of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia in 1939, and of portions of Poland in late 1939. The "German question", that is, the struggle for self-determination of ethnic Germans outside the borders of the German Reich, was a major factor leading to the outbreak of World War II. Even after 1939, more than three million ethnic Germans remained outside the borders of the expanded Reich, notably in Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary and the Soviet Union.

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In the first Yugoslavia - a monarchical state created in 1919 largely as a result of efforts of the victorious Allied powers - most of the country's ethnic Germans were concentrated in eastern Croatia and northern Serbia (notably in the Vojvodina region), with some German towns and villages in Slovenia. Other ethnic Germans lived in western Romania and south-eastern Hungary.

This first multiethnic Yugoslav state of 1919-1941 had a population of some 14 million people of diverse cultures and religions. On the eve of World War II it included nearly six million Serbs, about three million Croats, more than a million Slovenes, some two million Bosnian Muslims and ethnic Albanians, approximately half a million ethnic Germans, and another half million ethnic Hungarians. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia in April 1941, accelerated by a rapid German military advance, approximately 200,000 ethnic Germans became citizens of the newly established Independent State of Croatia, a country whose military and civil authorities remained loyally allied with Third Reich Germany until the final week of the war in Europe. [3] Most of the remaining ethnic Germans of former Yugoslavia - approximately 300,000 in the Vojvodina region - came under the jurisdiction of Hungary, which during the war incorporated the region. (After 1945 this region was reattached to the Serbian portion of Yugoslavia.)

The plight of the ethnic Germans became dire during the final months of World War II, and especially after the founding of the second Yugoslavia, a multiethnic Communist state headed by Marshal Josip Broz Tito. In late October 1944, Tito's guerilla forces, aided by the advancing Soviets and lavishly assisted by Western air supplies, took control of Belgrade, the Serb capital that also served as the capital of Yugoslavia. One of the first legal acts of the new regime was the decree of November 21, 1944, on "The decision regarding the transfer of the enemy's property into the property of the state." It declared citizens of German origin as "enemies of the people", and stripped them of civic rights. The decree also ordered the government confiscation of all property, without compensation, of Yugoslavia's ethnic Germans. [4] An additional law, promulgated in Belgrade on February 6, 1945, canceled the Yugoslav citizenship of the country's ethnic Germans. [5]

By late 1944 - when Communist forces had seized control of the eastern Balkans, that is, of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia - the German-allied state of Croatia still held firm. However, in early 1945, German troops, together with Croatian troops and civilians, began retreating toward southern Austria. During the war's final months, the majority of Yugoslavia's ethnic German civilians also joined this great trek. The refugees' fears of torture and death at Communist hands were well founded, given the horrific treatment by Soviet forces of Germans and others in East Prussia and other parts of eastern Europe. By the end of the war in May 1945, German authorities had evacuated 220,000 ethnic Germans from Yugoslavia to Germany and Austria. Yet many remained in their war-ravaged ancestral homelands, most likely awaiting a miracle.

After the end of fighting in Europe on May 8, 1945, more than 200,000 ethnic Germans who had remained behind in Yugoslavia effectively became captives of the new Communist regime. Some 63,635 Yugoslav ethnic German civilians (women, men and children) perished under Communist rule between 1945 and 1950 - that is, some 18 percent of the ethnic German civilian population still remaining in the new Yugoslavia. Most died as a result of exhaustion as slave laborers, in "ethnic cleansing", or from disease and malnutrition. [6] Much of the credit for the widely-praised "economic miracle" of Titoist Yugoslavia, it should be noted, must go to the tens of thousands of German slave laborers who, during the late 1940s, helped to build the impoverished country.

Property of ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia confiscated in the aftermath of World War II amounted to 97,490 small businesses, factories, shops, farms and diverse trades. The confiscated real estate and farmland of Yugoslavia's ethnic Germans came to 637,939 hectares (or about one million acres), and became state-owned property. According to a 1982 calculation, the value of the property confiscated from ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia amounted to 15 billion German marks, or about seven billion US dollars. Taking inflation into account, this would today correspond to twelve billion US dollars. From 1948 to 1985, more than 87,000 ethnic Germans who were still residing in Yugoslavia moved to Germany and automatically became German citizens. [7]

All this constitutes a "final solution of the German question" in Yugoslavia.

Numerous survivors have provided detailed and graphic accounts of the grim fate of the ethnic German civilians, particularly women and children, who were held in Communist Yugoslav captivity. One noteworthy witness is the late Father Wendelin Gruber, who served as a chaplain and spiritual leader to many fellow captives. [8] These numerous survivor accounts of torture and death inflicted on German civilians and captured soldiers by Yugoslav authorities adds to the chronicle of Communist

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oppression worldwide. [9]

Of the one and a half million ethnic Germans who lived in the Danube basin in 1939-1941, some 93,000 served during World War II in the armed forces of Hungary, Croatia and Romania - Axis countries that were allied with Germany - or in the regular German armed forces. The ethnic Germans of Hungary, Croatia and Romania who served in the military formations of those countries remained citizens of those respective states. [10]

In addition, many ethnic Germans of the Danubian region served in the "Prinz Eugen" Waffen SS division, which totaled some 10,000 men throughout its existence during the war. (This formation was named in honor of Prince Eugene of Savoy, who had won great victories against Turkish forces in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.) [11] Enlisting in the "Prinz Eugen" division automatically conferred German citizenship on the recruit.

Of the 26,000 ethnic Danubian ethnic Germans serving in various military formations who lost their lives, half perished after the end of the war in Yugoslav camps. Particularly high were the losses of the "Prinz Eugen" division, most of whom surrendered after May 8, 1945. Some 1,700 of these prisoners were killed in the village of Brezice near the Croat-Slovenian border, while the remaining half was worked to death in Yugoslav zinc mines near the town of Bor, in Serbia. [12]

In addition to the "ethnic cleansing" of Danube German civilians and soldiers, some 70,000 Germans who had served in regular Wehrmacht forces perished in Yugoslav captivity. Most of these died as a result of reprisals, or as slave laborers in mines, road construction, shipyards, and so forth. These were mostly troops of "Army Group E" who had surrendered to British military authorities in southern Austria at the time of the armistice of May 8, 1945. British authorities turned over about 150,000 of these German prisoners of war to Communist Yugoslav partisans under pretext of later repatriation to Germany.

Most of these former regular Wehrmacht troops perished in postwar Yugoslavia in three stages: During the first stage more than 7,000 captured German troops died in Communist-organized "atonement marches" (Sühnemärsche) stretching 800 miles from the southern border of Austria to the northern border of Greece. During the second phase, in late summer 1945, many German soldiers in captivity were summarily executed or thrown alive into large karst pits along the Dalmatian coast of Croatia. In the third stage, 1945-1955, an additional 50,000 perished as forced laborers due to malnutrition and exhaustion. [13]

The total number of German losses in Yugoslav captivity after the end of the war - including ethnic "Danube German" civilians and soldiers, as well as "Reich" Germans - may therefore be conservatively estimated at 120,000 killed, starved, worked to death, or missing.

What is the importance of these figures? What lessons can be drawn in assessing these postwar German losses?

It is important to stress that the plight of German civilians in the Balkans is only a small portion of the Allied topography of death. Seven to eight million Germans - both military personnel and civilians - died during and after World War II. Half of those perished during the final months of the war, or after Germany's unconditional surrender on May 8, 1945. German casualties, both civilian and military, were arguably higher in "peace" than in "war".

In the months before and after the end of World War II, ethnic Germans were killed, tortured and dispossessed throughout eastern and central Europe, notably in Silesia, East Prussia, Pomerania, the Sudetenland, and the "Wartheland" region. Altogether 12-15 million Germans fled or were driven from their homes in what is perhaps the greatest "ethnic cleansing" in history. Of this number, more than two million were killed or otherwise lost their lives. [14]

The grim events in postwar Yugoslavia are rarely dealt with in the media of the countries that emerged on the ruins of communist Yugoslavia, even though, remarkably, there is today greater freedom of expression and historical research there than in such western European countries as Germany and France. The elites of Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia, largely made up of former Communists, seem to share a common interest in repressing their sometimes murky and criminal past with regard to the postwar treatment of German civilians.

The breakup of Yugoslavia in 1990-91, the events leading to it, and the war and atrocities that followed, can only be understood

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within a larger historical framework. As already noted, “ethnic cleansing” is nothing new. Even if one regards the former Serb-Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic and the other defendants being tried by the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague as wicked criminals, their crimes are trivial compared to those of Communist Yugoslavia’s founder, Josip Broz Tito. Tito carried out “ethnic cleansing” and mass killings on a far greater scale, against Croats, Germans and Serbs, and with the sanction of the British and American governments. His rule in Yugoslavia (1945-1980), which coincided with the “Cold War” era, was generally supported by the Western powers, who regarded his regime as a factor of stability in this often unstable region of Europe. [15]

The wartime and postwar plight of Germans in the Balkans also provides lessons about the fate of multiethnic and multicultural states. The fate of the two Yugoslavias - 1919-1941 and 1944-1991 - underscores the inherent weakness of multiethnic states. Twice in the 20th century, multicultural Yugoslavia fell apart amid needless carnage and a spiral of hatreds among its constituent ethnic groups. One can argue, therefore, that it is better for diverse nations and cultures, let alone different races, to live apart, separated by walls, than to pretend to live in a feigned unity that hides animosities waiting to explode, and leaving behind lasting resentments.

Few could foresee the savage inter-ethnic hatred and killings that swept the Balkans following the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, and this among peoples of relatively similar anthropological origins, albeit different cultural backgrounds. One can only speculate with foreboding about the future of the United States and western Europe, where growing interracial tensions between the native populations and masses of Third World immigrants portend disaster with far bloodier consequences.

Multicultural Yugoslavia, in both its first and second incarnations, was above all the creation of, respectively, the French, British and American leaders who crafted the Versailles settlement of 1919, and the British, Soviet Russian and American leaders who met at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945. The political figures who created Yugoslavia did not represent the nations in the region, and understood little of the self-perceptions or ethnic-cultural affinities of the region’s various peoples.

Although the deaths, suffering and dispossession of the ethnic Germans of the Balkans during and after World War II are well documented by both German authorities and independent scholars, they continue to be largely ignored in the major media of the United States and Europe. Why? One could speculate that if those German losses were more widely discussed and better known, they would likely stimulate an alternative perspective on World War II, and indeed of 20th century history. A greater and more widespread awareness of German civilian losses during and after World War II might well encourage a deeper discussion of the dynamics of contemporary societies. This, in turn, could significantly affect the self-perception of millions of people, forcing many to discard ideas and myths that have fashionably prevailed for more than half a century. An open debate about the causes and consequences of World War II would also tarnish the reputations of many scholars and opinion makers in the United States and Europe. Arguably, a greater awareness of the sufferings of German civilians during and after World War II, and the implications of that, could fundamentally change the policies of the United States and other major powers.

>from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is an author, translator and former professor of political science in the USA. Tom Sunic currently lives with his family in Croatia.

For more by and about him, see his website

<http://doctorsunic.netfirms.com/>

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Rose Bering – rose.c.bering@gm.com

Tony Bering – anthony.j.bering@gm.com

Tom Forest – tom.m.forest@gm.com

Rob Hanschu - rob.hansch@gm.com - Cell: 248-830-8555

Art Kloss – aabkclan@wowway.com

Rob Seiberling – robert.seiberling@gm.com

Rick Pautz – rick.f.pautz@gm.com