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## THE CONDUCT OF THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF CROATIA TOWARDS SERBS DURING WORLD WAR II: A BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRESS PERSPECTIVE, 1941

**Abstract:** The article explores how British and American newspapers reported on the treatment of Serbs by the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during World War II. The NDH, established in 1941 with support from Nazi Germany, quickly adopted radical and genocidal policies aimed at the Serb population. These included mass killings, forced conversions, and deportations, which were part of the Ustaše's efforts to ethnically cleanse the territory. The article is based on a review of 44 articles published in British and American newspapers in 1941. By contrasting them, it is possible to see the challenges faced by the Western press in accessing reliable information from within the NDH, often relying on second-hand reports and even Nazi propaganda. The British and American newspapers reported on atrocities, but their coverage

**Keywords:** American, British, Croatia, NDH, Press, Serbs

### ***Introduction***

The pivotal year of 1941 marked a profound transformation in the Balkans as Yugoslavia, under the pressure of a swift military defeat, disintegrated, leading to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). Formed in April 1941 by the ultra-nationalist Ustaše movement, with the backing of Nazi Germany,<sup>1</sup> the NDH emerged amidst the

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Kiril Feferman, "Nazi 'divide et impera'": Comparing Soviet and Yugoslavian cases in 1941," *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 34, 1 (2016), 97–108; Nada Kisić Kolanović, "Siegfried Kasche: njemački pogled na Hrvatsku 1941. godine," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, br. 43, 3 (2011), 773–800.

chaotic landscape of World War II, particularly following the invasion and subsequent dismemberment of Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany and its allies.<sup>2</sup> The rapid collapse of Yugoslavia and the sudden rise of the NDH surprised and perplexed many international observers, including the British and American press.<sup>3</sup>

From its inception, the NDH embarked on a radical population policy that swiftly escalated into a systematic campaign of genocide. This genocidal agenda primarily targeted the Serb and Jewish populations, driven by the Ustaše's extremist nationalist and racial ideologies.<sup>4</sup> The regime's actions, characterized by mass killings, forced conversions, and deportations, were integral to its efforts to ethnically cleanse the territory under its control.

Separated from the epicenter of events in former Yugoslavia, particularly in Croatia, the British and American media grappled with the challenge of piecing together accurate accounts of the events unfolding within the boundaries of the NDH. Despite the scarcity of reliable information and the inherent challenges posed by conflicting sources, fragments detailing the NDH's brutal treatment of the Serbian population, as a unique feature characteristic of this regime in German-dominated Europe, gradually surfaced.

This study sheds light on the ways the British and American press came to terms with the Croatian regime's actions against Serbian civilians. It examines different coverage and looks into varied explanations provided by the newspapers in the two countries in reporting on the violence unleashed by the NDH that resulted in the murder of ordinary civilians, targeted violence against Serbian Orthodox clergy, the practice of hostage-taking and led to the disproportionately high number of Serb civilians.

The article is founded upon the examination of forty-four pertinent articles published in the British and American press during the year 1941. Among the British newspapers scrutinized are *The Observer* (London), *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), as well as publications spanning the British Empire such as *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, later known as *The Globe and Mail*), *The Palestine Post* (Jerusalem), and the *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong). In the United States, the analysis includes newspapers such as the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), the *Daily Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, *The Sun* (Baltimore), and *The Washington Post*.

The article is structured into two chapters, delineating the coverage of pro-Serbian and pro-Croatian narratives, albeit acknowledging occasional ambiguities in this strict catego-

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<sup>2</sup> Ivo Goldstein, "The Independent State of Croatia in 1941: On the Road to Catastrophe," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, br. 7, 4, (2006), 417–427.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Luckhurst, "An Unworkable Policy Which Encourages The Enemy to Fight to The Last Gasp," *Journalism Studies*, br. 16, 6, (2015), 887–903.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., *Ustaška zverstva: zbornik dokumenata (1941–1942)*, priredio Milan Koljanin, Novi Sad: Arhiv Vojvodine: Izdavačka ustanova Eparhije Bačke; Banjaluka: Arhiv Republike Srpske, 2020; Milan Koljanin, „Идеологија и политика уништења Срба у НДХ,” *Vojnoistorijski glasnik*, br. 1 (2011), 66–91; Tomislav Dulić, "Mass killing in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–1945: a case for comparative research," *Journal of Genocide Research*, br. 8, 3, (2006), 255–281; Jonathan Steinberg, "Types of Genocide? Croats, Serbs and Jews, 1941–5," *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, David Cesarani (ed.). London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 175–193.

rization. Each chapter follows a chronological progression to illuminate the evolving discourse. Furthermore, the conclusion delves into the ostensibly distinct viewpoints espoused by British and American newspapers.

## **Pro-Serbian coverage**

The inaugural British article addressing the attitudes of the Independent State of Croatia towards the Serbs, titled “Serbs Arrested in Croatia,” was published on 13 April 1941.<sup>5</sup> It underscored the significant challenge of accessing primary information regarding events within the NDH, necessitating the reliance on Ankara radio broadcasts, which, in turn, cited sources in Budapest. As per the report, several prominent Serbian officials were detained in Croatia and detained as hostages.

On 9 May, the *Los Angeles Times* contributed a brief article addressing a decree issued by the Croatian government, mandating that Serbs residing in Zagreb vacate certain neighborhoods within a 48-hour timeframe.<sup>6</sup> The rationale provided by the NDH for this directive, aimed at “combating Serbian influences,” was highlighted within the report. Of special interest is the source on which the article was based, DNB, *Die Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro*, the official Nazi press agency.

Of significant importance is a substantial article published on 11 May in the *New York Times*.<sup>7</sup> This article extensively addressed military developments throughout occupied Yugoslavia, with particular emphasis on Nazi Germany’s strategies to suppress the emerging Serbian rebellion. It noted the purported merciless treatment of Serbs remaining in Croatia by the Croats, although specific details were lacking. Notably, the article stood out not only for its breadth of coverage but also because it relied on firsthand reporting by a journalist who directly observed the initial phases of the German occupation.

Another noteworthy article, dated 19 May, was published in the *Washington Post*.<sup>8</sup> Authored by the final American journalist stationed in Yugoslavia, this piece notably refrained from mentioning any mistreatment of Serbs by Croats, instead focusing on the plight of Serbian prisoners-of-war and Jews coerced into labor gangs in Belgrade under German authority. This article exemplifies a recurring theme in the coverage, attributing the mistreatment of Serbs primarily to German forces.

On 17 July, the *South China Morning Post*, based in British-administered Hong Kong, released a report that stood out for its coverage.<sup>9</sup> This brief article contained exclusive infor-

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<sup>5</sup> “Serbs Arrested in Croatia,” *The Observer*, 13 April 1941, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> “Croats Order Serbs Out of Capital City,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May 1941, p. 9.  
See also Filip Škiljan, „Progon Srba iz Zagreba i oduzimanje srpske imovine 1941. godine,” *Tokovi istorije*, br. 1 (2013), 85–115.

<sup>7</sup> “RAY BROCK, “Nazis Held Ready to Crush Serb Guerrillas and Jews: Nazi plan to crush Serbs is reported,” *New York Times*, 11 May 1941, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Kay, “Jews, Serb Prisoners Forced To Clean Up Belgrade’s Debris,” *The Washington Post*, 19 May 1941, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> “Revolt Suppressed: Serbs and Jews Break From Croatian Camp Budapest, July 15,” *South China Morning*

mation on the policies of the NDH towards Serbian civilians, unavailable elsewhere in the English-speaking world, despite being attributed to the United Press. Drawing from sources in Budapest, the report detailed the escape of 100 Serbian and Jewish prisoners from what was described as "an improvised Croatian concentration camp"<sup>10</sup> amidst a broader uprising. It noted that 50 of these escapees were subsequently recaptured and subjected to court-martial proceedings.

This marked the initial emergence of reports detailing the particularly radical phase of the NDH's anti-Serbian policies, catching readers unprepared. However, its publication in a newspaper neither British nor American suggests a degree of skepticism among major newspapers towards disseminating such sensational news. Furthermore, readers were left in a state of uncertainty regarding the origins of these camps, the criteria and legal justification for incarcerating individuals there, and the extent of their proliferation.

The article published by *The Globe and Mail* from Toronto, dated 23 July, brought attention to the alleged execution of 80,000 Serbs by Nazis and Croats.<sup>11</sup> This marked the first instance in the Western press where such a substantial estimate of Serbian civilian casualties was mentioned. However, understanding how the newspaper arrived at this figure proved challenging, if not impossible, without delving into the broader context of the radical policies implemented by the NDH towards the Serbs. Regrettably, this crucial background information was absent from the report. This pattern of fragmented reporting, lacking essential contextualization, was evident in an article published by *The Scotsman* on 28 July. The piece referenced "the merciless measures taken by the Germans and their Croatian vassals," particularly highlighting the shooting of 119 Serbian civilians.<sup>12</sup>

On 13 August, the *New York Times* reported on a plot uncovered in Croatia, resulting in the execution of twenty Serbs and Jews.<sup>13</sup> Another incident involved the execution of 102 individuals held hostage in Zagreb, accused of involvement in what was labeled as "a Communist plot." In addition to reaffirming the Croatian narrative attributing the murder of Serbian and Jewish civilians to their purported ideological allegiance (Communist), it is noteworthy to trace the convoluted path through which this news reached the pages of the American newspaper: from Budapest to Rome (where the *New York Times* maintained a correspondent post) via the Vatican's newspaper, *The Osservatore Romano*.

On 4 November, provincial British newspapers, including the *Derby Daily Telegraph*, *Leicester Evening Mail*, and *Liverpool Evening Express*, as well as the American

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*Post* (Hong Kong), 17 July 1941, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Milan Koljanin, "The Role of Concentration Camps in the Policies of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in 1941," *Balkanica*, br. 46 (2015), 315–340.

<sup>11</sup> Brighman Daniel T., "Nazis, Croats Execute 80,000 Serbs; Pace of 'Blitzkrieg' Slowed 50 Per Cent in Past Four Weeks Defense Tough," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 July 1941, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> "Valiant Serbs: Guerrilla Forces in the Mountains Growing GERMANS SHOOT CIVILIANS," *The Scotsman*, 28 July 1941, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> "122 More Serbs Executed: Vatican Paper Reveals Plot in Croatia – Revolts Spread," *New York Times*, 13 August 1941, p. 3.

*New York Herald Tribune* three days later, provided detailed accounts of atrocities committed in Croatia.<sup>14</sup> They reported on the murder of priests, including four bishops and 100 Orthodox priests, in Noshia, Croatia. Additionally, it highlighted the flogging and banishment of the Archbishop of Zagreb to Belgrade. The article underscored the broader Axis persecution of the Yugoslav people, citing a staggering death toll of approximately 340,000 Serbs by 1 October. The information was attributed to sources in Ankara.

A remarkably high estimate of Serbian civilian casualties, totaling “200,000 men, women, and children,” was cited in an article by the significant *Liverpool Daily Post* on 20 November.<sup>15</sup> This report garnered attention on the front page, a noteworthy occurrence for the British media, which was predominantly preoccupied with warfare on other fronts. Additionally, the article mentioned the execution of 5,000 hostages in the last three months. However, the question of culpability for these atrocities arises. According to the newspaper, these individuals were slain in “the Axis-controlled ‘Independent’ State of Croatia.” Implicit in this statement is skepticism regarding the true extent of the NDH’s independence within the Axis-dominated landscape of Europe.

Finally, a brief note that appeared in *The Observer* in mid-December is worth mentioning. Strikingly devoid of any direct or even indirect sources regarding events in the Balkans, the British media was compelled to rely on German communiqués. On 14 December, this newspaper reported on the execution of “a hundred Jews, Communists, and anarchists following attempts against the German troops of occupation.”<sup>16</sup> Apart from the information hunger, in which the Western media found itself regarding the events in the Balkans, the article also underscores a trend of attributing all blame for the persecution of Serb civilians in the NDH to Germany, while Croatia remained unscathed.

## **Pro-Croat**

The initial, pertinent American article surfaced on 13 April, employing an indirect route to obtain information, relying initially on Italian media and ultimately sourcing from Hungarian outlets. According to this report, Serbs, led by General Dusan Simovitch, were implicated in what was described as the “wholesale slaughter” of Croats in Sarajevo, purportedly in retaliation to the declaration of the Independent State of Croatia. Addi-

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<sup>14</sup> “Priests in Croatia Murdered.” *Derby Daily Telegraph* (Derbyshire, England), 4 November 1941, p. 8; “Four bishops and 100 Orthodox priests of the Orthodox Church at Croatia have been murdered.” *Leicester Evening Mail*, 4 November 1941, p. 8; “Yugoslavs Capture Town.” *Liverpool Evening Express*, 4 November 1941, p. 1; “Serbian Church Puts Massacre Toll at 340,000: Reports Bishops Tortured and Slain by Nazi-Backed Croat Regime of Pavelich.” *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 November 1941, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> “200,000 Serbs Killed.” *Liverpool Daily Post*, 20 November 1941, p. 1. See also “Luckless Serbs.” *Northern Whig* (Antrim, Northern Ireland), 20 November 1941, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> “Germans to shoot 100 Jews and Communists.” *The Observer*, 14 December 1941, p. 6.

tionally, the *New York Times* reported instances of Croatians being subjected to torture and death in various locations across Serbia.<sup>17</sup>

Following the outbreak of the Serbian uprising, the *Christian Science Monitor*, based in Boston, assumed a leading role in pro-Croat coverage. Its report on 15 August 1941, offered a comprehensive account of a significant event unfolding in Croatia: the execution of 75 individuals on the preceding day.<sup>18</sup> These executions were purportedly in response to a mutiny that transpired in a concentration camp situated in Travnik, Bosnia. The individuals were reportedly condemned for their alleged involvement in spreading Communist propaganda and distributing leaflets. The direct association between the perceived "crimes" and the ensuing punishment suggested a degree of justification for the actions taken. Moreover, the uncritical citation of Croatia as the source of this information hinted at pro-Croat sympathies within the newspaper.

One month later, the same newspaper published a lengthy report on the resurgence of a guerilla fighting with a long and telling title, "Anti-German Terrorism Flares Anew in Croatia: More Arrests Serbs Burn Village."<sup>19</sup> The article detailed attacks targeting German and Croatian military personnel, mostly by the Chetniks, and expanded on the Croat "response": systematic house searches, indicating the extent of security measures implemented by the authorities in response to the perceived threat. The source of this information was attributed to Berlin, highlighting the international nature of the news coverage during this period. At the same time, presumably, to counter-balance the general anti-Serbian overtone of the article, it also mentioned BBC broadcast, in which the attackers were referred to as "patriots".

A month later, the same newspaper released a lengthy report on the resurgence of guerrilla warfare with a detailed and revealing title: "Anti-German Terrorism Flares Anew in Croatia: More Arrests Serbs Burn Village."<sup>20</sup> This article provided a comprehensive account of attacks aimed at German and Croatian military personnel, predominantly carried out by the Chetniks. However, according to the report, the Croatian side responded merely by systematic house searches and patrolling streets. In this instance, the choice of source was undeniably Berlin itself, repeatedly signaling where the newspaper's sympathies lay in this conflict. At the same time, presumably in an attempt to mitigate the general anti-Serbian sentiment prevalent in the article, it also referenced a BBC broadcast wherein the attackers were labeled as "patriots."

In its edition, dated 23 September 1941, this newspaper reported on the execution of 50 Communists and Jews in Croatia.<sup>21</sup> These individuals were accused of being the "intellectual originators" behind a bomb attack in Zagreb. The language used bore a striking resemblance to a Nazi police report from the Reich. Indeed, *The Christian Science Monitor* had no qualms about acknowledging that its source was the Berlin radio.

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<sup>17</sup> "Serbs Said to Slay Croats," *New York Times*, 13 April 1941, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> "Seventy-five Persons Executed in Croatia." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 August 1941, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 September 1941, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 September 1941, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> "Nazis Execute 50 Communists, Jews in Croatia." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 September 1941, p. 3.

Just a day later, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* highlighted an incident where Serbs hiding in the hills allegedly killed 104 Croatian soldiers.<sup>22</sup> Citing sources from the Associated Press in Zagreb, the perpetrators were branded as Serbian “outlaws,” portraying a narrative of lawlessness and disorder, justifying measures taken by authorities to restore law and order, such as “the execution of 50 individuals by Zagreb.” This news, alongside the report from the NDH regarding the court-martial and execution of two members of the official Ustashi assault squads “for despotically murdering and rubbering Serbs,” appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the two articles’ overall tone exhibited a slightly greater degree of balance when contrasted with that of *The Christian Science Monitor*.

## Conclusion

The primary factor elucidating the divergent approaches adopted by British and American media regarding the mistreatment of Serbian civilians by the Independent State of Croatia in 1941 is rooted in their respective engagements with the ongoing war. The United Kingdom was entrenched in conflict with Nazi Germany. Hence, there was a gradual recognition that the NDH had aligned itself with Germany, which shaped British perceptions, leading to heightened scrutiny and criticism of the NDH’s actions.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, the United States was incrementally approaching a decisive juncture in its relationship with Nazi Germany, maintaining its officially non-belligerent status until early December 1941. The US neutrality influenced its perspective on the NDH. Additionally, considerations of peace between Serbian Americans and Croatian Americans within the US context played a role in shaping American attitudes towards the NDH.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the US government viewed Yugoslavia as within the British sphere of influence, contributing to its nuanced understanding of the geopolitical dynamics at play in the region. Ultimately, the United States administration, through fostering amicable relations with the Yugoslavian government-in-exile, initially prioritized maintaining a pan-Yugoslav facade.<sup>26</sup> This

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<sup>22</sup> “Serbs in hills hideout kill 104 Croat soldiers: Defy Bombs; Win Recruits; Zagreb Executes 50.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 September 1941, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> “Serbian Bands Refuse to Yield, Kill 104 Croats: 50 Put to Death for Long-Distance-Call Bombing of Zagreb Phone Exchange.” *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 September 1941, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Mark C. Wheeler, *Britain and the War For Yugoslavia, 1940-1943* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Quarterly, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> Ольга Аршинцева, Александр Сковородников, „Югославия в европейской политике Великобритании в 1938-1941 гг.“ *Izvestiya of Altai State University*, br. 2 (106), (2019), 48-53; Rob McCormick, “The United States’ Response to Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, br. 3, 1 (2008), 79, 83-85.

<sup>26</sup> Ivo Tasovac, *American foreign policy and Yugoslavia, 1939-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, c1999), 146-147.



commitment posed a significant obstacle to endorsing reports that highlighted the NDH's egregious mistreatment of the Serbian population.

This discrepancy explains the largely consistent stance of the British media, heavily influenced by anti-German sentiment, regarding the treatment of Serbian civilians by the NDH in 1941. In contrast, the discourse within the US media was multifaceted, occasionally featuring pro-German sympathies and often characterized by the perception of a distant and non-engaged observer.

The Independent State of Croatia was effectively cut off from the rest of the world, making it increasingly challenging to obtain any information about events within its borders, especially sensitive information concerning the mistreatment of Serbian civilians by the NDH. This information deficit was particularly evident in the British media, which had to rely on messages relayed through various intermediaries. In contrast, the US media still had access to first-hand information from nearby Italy or Hungary. However, due to the lack of reliable sources and the proliferation of unconfirmed rumors about widespread atrocities against the Serbian (and Jewish) population by the NDH, both American and British media resorted to citing official Croat or German sources.

Overall, 1941 marked a year in which Western newspapers found themselves poorly informed and ill-equipped to adequately cover the escalating ethnic cleansing of Serbs by the Independent State of Croatia, which rapidly evolved into a genocidal campaign.

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## Резиме

### **ПОНАШАЊЕ НЕЗАВИСНЕ ДРЖАВЕ ХРВАТСКЕ ПРЕМА СРБИМА ЗА ВРЕМЕ ДРУГОГ СВЕТСКОГ РАТА: ПЕРСПЕКТИВА БРИТАНСКЕ И АМЕРИЧКЕ ШТАМПЕ, 1941**

У раду се истражује начин на који су британске и америчке новине извештавале о третману Срба од стране Независне Државе Хрватске (НДХ) за време Другог светског рата. НДХ, основана 1941. године, уз подршку нацистичке Немачке, брзо је усвојила радикалне и геноцидне политике усмерене против српског становништва. Оне су укључивале масовна убиства, принудну конверзију и депортације, што је био део усташких напора да се тај терен етнички очисти.

Рад је утемељен на прегледу 44 чланка објављена у британској и америчкој штампи током 1941. Анализира како се штампа, удаљена од самих догађаја, борила са извештавањем о бруталним акцијама НДХ. Британски медији, дубоко увучени у рат против нацистичке Немачке, постали су критичнији према НДХ видеви је у истој равни као силе Осовине. С друге стране, америчка штампа, која је била под утицајем званичног неутралног става које су заузеле Сједињене Америчке Државе и њихове сложене домаће динамике која је укључивала српску и хрватску заједницу, заузимала је различите и понекад амбивалентне перспективе.

У раду се наглашавају изазови са којима се сусретала западна штампа у приступању поузданим информацијама унутар НДХ, често се ослањајући на извештаје из друге руке па чак и на нацистичку пропаганду.

Британске и америчке новине су извештавале о злоделима, али њихови извештаји су често били фрагментарни и недостајао им је пун контекст геноцидних политика НДХ против Срба. Овај недостатак јасноће дозвољавао је различите наративе и опште потцењивање опсега насиља које се дешавало у Хрватској у то време.

**Кључне речи:** америчка, британска, Хрватска, НДХ, штампа, Срби