

# Anti-Semitism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia: The Case of Croatia

**Ana Ćirić Pavlović**

Jewish Studies Specialist;  
Center for Society Development  
(Belgrade and Budapest);  
ana.pavlovic@ymail.com

УДК 316.644:323.12(497.5)

DOI 10.7251/TOP2016101P

COBISS.RS-ID 6055960

**Abstract:** This essay will analyze the genesis of the anti-Semitic tendencies in the territory of Croatia in the period between two world wars, as well as its culmination in the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War. The emphasis will be on various theoretical explanations of a virulent Jew-hatred that emerged in Croatia. Some of these explanatory units are religious antisemitism, cultural code, and group conflict theories. Moreover, the Holocaust perpetrated here has its specificity. Namely, nowhere in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia did the native population massively participate in the annihilation of domestic “threats” as in this country. Serbians, Jews, Roma, and Croatian opponents of the regime perished in the exterminations camps of the infamous puppet creation, which are considered the only death camps in Europe that were not conducted by the Nazis. Memory of these monstrous times still haunts regional inter-ethnic relations and will continue until the proper examination of these tragic events.

**Key words:** Antisemitism as a Cultural Code; Croatian Antisemitism; Croatian Catholic Church; Jews as a Business Competition; Ustaše; Extermination Camps of Croatia

## Introduction

After the Great War and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, Croatia became a part of another entity, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The estimations are that, just before the Second World War, in the city of Zagreb Jewish residents comprised about 5% of the population. It was 9.467 Jews, out of which 8.712 were Ashkenazim

(Neologues), 625 Sephardim, and 130 Orthodox Jews.<sup>1</sup> The constitutions of the new state formally granted Jews legal equality with other ethnicities. Notwithstanding, at least in the first few years, the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim received a rather different treatment from the new government. The Bosnian Sephardim were regarded as an autochthonous element having lived four centuries in the region. Likewise, the Serbian Sephardim were called “ours” and their loyalty was never questioned since they fought with the Serbian army in the First World War. Conversely, the Ashkenazim were mainly considered “foreign” because their mother tongue was German or Hungarian.<sup>2</sup> Even though some of them lived for decades in Croatia, Vojvodina and Bosnia, the government “felt that they had not gained the right to acquire citizenship”, and they were deported as foreigners.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, some inconsistent and paradoxical phenomena could be observed in the examined country. The Sephardim lived in relative isolation from the non-Jewish society while keeping their customs, and thus conversions and intermarriages were very rare. By contrast, the Ashkenazim from Croatia and Vojvodina adopted the local language very quickly and were more assimilated in national, religious and cultural terms. And yet, they were perceived as more foreign than the Sephardim. With the creation of the new state, they no longer belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and they had to find a solution for the aforementioned antagonistic position.<sup>4</sup> Zionism and the creation of the Jewish state emerged as a solution not only for them, but for most of the European Jewry living in the parts of the former Austria-Hungary, Germany, and other places where anti-Semitism was more pronounced. Consequently, the level of acceptance of the non-Jewish environment was unequal for the two Jewish groups. Their dissimilar position was very well reflected in the fact that the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim had different conceptions of Zionism since from the very beginning of the Kingdom the Ashkenazim felt more threatened and were more receptive to radical forms of Zionism.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1979, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Ivo Goldstein “The Jews in Yugoslavia 1918-1941: Anti-Semitism and Struggle for Equality”, <[web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02\\_goldstein.pdf](http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02_goldstein.pdf)> (21 April 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Goldstein, “The Jews in Yugoslavia...”, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Ćirić Pavlović, “Sephardi Pride: Jewish Civil Society and Associational Networks in interwar Sarajevo”, in *Balkania* (Beograd), ed. Miguel Rodríguez Andreu, no. 6 (2015), 114-15, at: <[www.balkania.es](http://www.balkania.es)> (27 January 2016).

The genesis of the Croatian anti-Semitism is an important issue because it culminated with the creation of extermination camps on its territory during the Second World War run by the local, quisling regime, which was responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of lives. Due to various historical circumstances, the latter is not sufficiently explored, not only in the history of the Shoah but in the history of the region likewise. The aim of this paper is to analyze the development of anti-Semitism in interwar period in Croatia by applying some of the main explanatory theories of anti-Semitism. Namely, the focus would be on the religious aspect, a cultural code and group-conflict theories as the explanation of the rise of anti-Jewish sentiments in this country. I argue that the “possibilist” explanation, which takes into account the specificities of every country, would be the best approach to examine the evolution of anti-Semitic tendencies in Croatia.

### **The Croatian Catholic Church and Jews**

The explanation for anti-Semitism in Croatia could be observed from the religious point of view. In Zagreb, the Jewish population made up a fair proportion of the non-Catholic minority, and therefore they were the significant Other in the predominant Catholic environment. A general trend was to identify Croat nationality with Catholic confession. However, in the Interwar period and later, during the Holocaust in Croatia, the catholic clergy took a rather divergent position when it comes to the “Jewish problem”. The following passage describes the priesthood’s influence and activity in the given period

The majority of Croatians were uneducated peasants who looked for spiritual and political guidance primarily from the village priest, who at best was semi-educated, often interpreted daily events in his Sunday sermons in a simplistic and vulgarized manner. The more the tension between the various nationalities in Yugoslavia rose, the greater the number of priests who were carried away by extremist moods. Not a few of them, including high-ranking officials, aided the Ustasha’s conspiratory terrorist activities.<sup>6</sup>

The Yugoslav government favored a moderate catholic priesthood and believed they found a supporter of Yugoslav idea by appointing Alojzije

---

<sup>6</sup> Menachem Shelah, “Cristian Confrontations with the Holocaust: The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican and the Murder of Croatian Jews”, in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1989), 324-25.

Stepinac as the head of the Catholic Church. After all, he had fought with the Serbian army at Salonika during the First World War. Nevertheless, soon Stepinac, according to his diary, became very suspicious of the Belgrade government, Orthodox Church and displayed an aspiration for the separation of Croatia.<sup>7</sup> The Vatican, and subsequently, the Croatian clergy were fervent opponents of Communism, which was an additional reason for the allegiance with the Nazis. In October 1940, the official Church organ, *Hrvatska straža* (Croatian Guard), issued an article which expressed sympathy “with Germany’s struggle for justice and renewal” and added that “it is a known fact that Croatian nationalists supported National Socialist Germany from the very beginning of her struggle”.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, an anti-Semitic tone was adopted by *Narodna politika* (National Policy), a daily published by the Croatian Popular Party, adhered to a Catholic orientation. In this paper, a reader could find out that the “Jew Trotsky” had introduced Bolshevism in Russia or that Croatia and Slavonia were an Eldorado for Jews. They were accused of being a threat not only to the local economy, but to the cultural institutions as well.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding, among the Croatian Church officials existed not one opponent to racism. The principal Catholic weekly, *Katolički list* (Catholic paper), published a series of “articles condemning racism in all its aspects”.<sup>10</sup> Even Archbishop Stepinac condemning racism and led a committee which helped Jewish refugees from the Third Reich. But in his diary, which was not published until 1990, he wrote in 1935 that “The Church has nothing good to hope for either from the left or from the right and no longer believes in justice in this state ruled by the masons and the Jews”.<sup>11</sup>

The Catholic Church in Croatia and the Holy See itself would assume a rather controversial role regarding genocide perpetrated during the Second World War in the extermination camps of the Independent State of Croatia. They openly supported the removal of the main enemies, Jews and Serbians, from the economic, social and cultural scene of Croatia, often performing their forceful conversions but some of the priesthood opposed to the murder of Jews, and principally defended converted Jews and mixed

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 325.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ivo Goldstein, “The Catholic Church in Croatia and the ‘Jewish Problem’, 1918-1941”, in *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2003), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 125-26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 126.

families.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, after the war not one of dozens of Catholic priests participating in the murders was punished. What is more, the Croatian Church hid many Ustaša war criminals and smuggled them from Yugoslavia into their new homelands in Spain, South America and Arab countries.<sup>13</sup> Despite all this, it would be rather imprecise to denote Croatian anti-Semitism as solely a religious one. The church officials had different stands on the issue, and even the same personality would occasionally change his attitude on racial and Jewish matters.

### **Group-conflict between Jews and Croats and Anti-Semitism as a Cultural Code**

As Shulamit Volkov argues, “anti-Semitism, diffused in the various social elements and expressed in their organizations, was not new in the immediate prewar years, nor was it unique to Germany”.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in Croatia it fulfilled several functions and was not necessarily connected to racism. Firstly, it was used as a strong mobilizing and integrative factor of the population of different provinces, and building an identity of a young and immature Croat nation. Secondly, the anti-Semitism in this area had a specific political role as well. Like in Germany, the anti-Semitism was combined with nationalism. In this way, the growing xenophobia was directed towards the distinctive elements of Croatian society, and those were mostly Serbians and Jews. Finally, one ought to consider the cultural implications of the Jew-hatred as well. It served as a cultural code and a sign of belonging to the Croat nation and Catholic faith. In the words of Volkov, it had “a unique function in defining the borderline between the two opposing camps which dominated in the public life”.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, one could argue that, indeed, the anti-Semitism in Croatia in the époque between the wars, was the continuity of the one that emerged in this area while it was a part of Austria-Hungary. The argument for this claim could be found in the aforementioned different treatment of the Ashkenazim in Croatia or Vojvodina than their Sephardi brethren.

---

<sup>12</sup> Shelah, “Christian Confrontation with the Holocaust...”, 337.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Shulamit Volkov, “The Written Matter and the Spoken Word: On the Gap between Pre-1914 and the Nazi Anti-Semitism”, in Francois Furel (ed.) *Unanswered Questions: The Nazi Germany and the Genocide of the Jews*, Schocken Books, New York 1989,39.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 41-3.

ren in Serbia or Bosnia. Moreover, if we compare, for instance, the predominant Catholic surroundings in Croatia and multinational and multi-confessional in Bosnia, it is clear that the circumstances were more favorable for Jews in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this country, there was not one dominant nation but the three of them, which significantly reduced the pressure on local Jews to assimilate. The anti-Semitism was always more outspoken in the environments where Jews were the significant Other, in comparison with the Christian majority. The latter situation was evident in most countries of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, which, along with other cultural legacies, preserved the same attitude towards their Jewish minority. In the Empire itself, Jews were urban population, which used the opportunity of legal emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century and progressed rather rapidly in terms of upward social mobility.

Likewise, the Jews of Croatia, mostly Ashkenazim, who decades before came from the other parts of the Empire, showed similar tendencies. The Zagreb Jewish community, both by occupation and wealth tended to belong to the middle class, and was the wealthiest in the Kingdom, on an absolute and a relative scale. The vast majority of them may be considered as bourgeois by virtue of their income, occupations and education.<sup>16</sup> Here, the group-conflict explanation for the anti-Semitism is rather well applicable. The Jewry of Zagreb, and of other parts of Croatia as well, demonstrated rather fast upward social mobility and their occupational and educational structure followed the one of Jews in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, their major occupations were merchants, various kinds of office workers, physicians, lawyers, and engineers.<sup>17</sup> Given that they were urban population, their progress was more visible, and could provoke the competition with the non-Jewish inhabitants within the same branches of occupation.

Social discontent of Jewish social mobility was evident during the 1930s in Croatia. Even before, in the 1920s anti-Semitic incidents existed such as the one in June 1922 when a group of students handed to the academic senate a petition containing 340 signatures (out of 870 Zagreb medical students) which demanded that all foreign Jewish students be banned from Zagreb University and the introduction of *numerus clausus* for local Jews.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, they were following the similar discourse of the Berlin,

---

<sup>16</sup> Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia...*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein, "The Catholic Church in Croatia and the 'Jewish Problem'...", 122.

Vienna, Budapest and Krakow universities at that time. Some other examples were the drawing of swastikas on Jewish shops in October 1932, or pamphlets calling for the boycott of Jewish shops, physicians and lawyers in March 1933, with the warning that Zionists should not provoke “or else they could share the fate of their racial friends in Germany”.<sup>19</sup> A leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, most popular Croatian political party in the interwar period, Stjepan Radić, was a staunch anti-Semite, blaming the Jews for the pervasive impoverishment of the Croatian people, appealing for the plunder and banishment of the Jewry from Croatia.<sup>20</sup>

One should bear in mind that the end of the 1920s was the time of the Great Depression, which impoverished the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The general deprivation created personal disillusion that could have been resolved by the scape-goat mechanism, that is to say, by blaming the Other. It should be added that the first printed copy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the Kingdom appeared precisely in Zagreb’s bookstores. The immediate popularity of the forgery provided a certain mystification of Jewish achievements, along with the deeply rooted belief of the Jewish omnipresence and even omnipotence. What is more, Jews made a significant effort to adapt to Croatian society by learning local language and being fairly secularized, and even being ardent Croatian supporters. Nevertheless, these attempts had a rather limited success. The Croats of Zagreb were less prone to accept them as equals than, for instance, the Serbs in Belgrade or Muslims in Sarajevo.<sup>21</sup>

However, both Bosnia and Serbia had their anti-Jewish champions as well. In the interwar period in Bosnia-Herzegovina all three dominant ethnic groups, namely Croats, Muslims and Serbians had fervent proponents of antisemitism.<sup>22</sup> In the Nazi occupied Serbia, anti-Jewish campaign was actively led by the domestic collaborators such as prime minister of the quisling Serbian government, Milan Nedić, and Dimitrije Ljotić, a founder of the fascist movement *Zbor*. Even some officials who refused collaboration with the Nazis, namely bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, believed in the omnipresent Jewish conspiracy. The crucial and decisive difference between antisemitism in Serbia and Croatia lays in the involvement of the domestic

<sup>19</sup> Milan Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918-1941*, Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 2008, 214-15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 53-4.

<sup>22</sup> Laslo Sekelj, *Vreme beščasća: ogledi o vladavini nacionalizma*, Akademia Nova i Institut za evropske studije, Beograd 1995, 65

population in the mass murders. In the NDH it was not only the collaboration with the Nazis as in Serbia, but the puppet state independently perpetrated genocide over Jews as a part of a wider persecution and annihilation of their nemesis: Serbians, Jews and Roma. In fact, the system of the Jasenovac concentration camp was probably the only one in Europe excluded from the Nazi jurisdiction.<sup>23</sup>

The Ustaše movement, created in 1932 in Italy, was not anti-Semitic from its beginnings. Their main goal was to create an independent and Great Croatia by military means and against the Yugoslav state.<sup>24</sup> With the intensification of the connections among them, the Nazis and the fascists, their ideology mutated and gained more racial and anti-Semitic elements.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, their ideology was a “mixture of German Nazism and Italian Fascism adapted to the specific Croatian environment”.<sup>26</sup> This meant the adoption of racism as well, and they redefined the Croatian man as a Nordic-Dinaric type<sup>27</sup>, which paved the way for the Holocaust when they seized power.

Lastly, but equally important for the matter, is the issue of the social alliance with Nazi Germany. It was undoubtedly yet another incentive for the Ustaša’s anti-Semitism for the so called Independent State of Croatia was neither independent nor was a real state but a Nazi-puppet creation. The only way it could have been created was with the support of the Third Reich. The main stereotype presented in the Croatian public sphere was the myth about Serbian hegemony in collaboration with Jews, thus those two “foreign elements” had to be removed from the Croatian society. The Ustaše’s regime, during the period of their rule in Croatia 1941-1945 (which at the time was enlarged for the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina), committed such atrocities against its victims (Serbians, Jews, Roma, Croatian anti-fascists) that “even Nazi SS reports labelled them as ‘bestial’”.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>24</sup> Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam...*, 222.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>26</sup> Ivo Goldstein, “The Independent State of Croatia in 1941: On the Road to Catastrophe”, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2006), 417.

<sup>27</sup> Nevenko Bartulin, “The Ideal Nordic-Dinaric Racial Type: Racial Anthropology in the Independent State of Croatia”, in *Review of Croatian History*, no. 1 (2009), 189.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart J. Kaufmann, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, The Cornell University Press, New York 2001, 169.



## Conclusion

The anti-Semitism in Croatia and the subsequent Holocaust committed by the Ustaše regime, could not be interpreted as the product of only one of the abovementioned causes but rather of their joint influence. Other parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were not immune to anti-Semitism either, however it obtained the endemic form only in Croatia. The answer resides in the combination of various factors, such as the religious, historical circumstances incarnated in the frustration of the Croatian nation, and the consequent alliance with the revisionist faction, that is to say, with the Nazis.

Some catholic priests participated in the murders, but it could not be prescribed to be a general position of the Roman Catholic Church. The question can be raised if the church's officials could have used their enormous influence to give relief to the minorities taken to the death camps. Furthermore, this religious congregation only reaffirms the controversy by holding a mass every 28th of December for the soul of the notorious leader of Ustaše, Ante Pavelić. Another polemic decision is the announcement of the Alojzije Stepinac's canonization, which is strongly opposed by the Serbian Orthodox Church because of his alliance with the Ustaše regime. Nowadays, the matter is discussed between the highest clergy of both Vatican and Serbian Church.

At the same time, although Jews comprised only about five percent of the capital town, Zagreb, they were perceived as a business threat. Their fast upward social mobility was additionally exaggerated with the mystifications of alleged Jewish omnipotence and the complot against Christians. As soon as the social climate became more favorable for the anti-Semitic currencies, and the alliance with Hitler was announced, the local frustration was set free, making a precondition for the creation of a mass-scale murder of minorities, namely Serbians, Jews, and Roma.

Moreover, a careful examination of the mass-murders committed by the so-called Independent State of Croatia is important for several reasons. First of all, the notorious outcome of the death camps created by the Ustaše regime remained largely underexplored and the perpetrators mostly unpunished. This was undoubtedly even more pronounced with the history whitewashing by the Croatian nationalist regime in the 1990s. In public discourses, the genocidal government of Ante Pavelić was declared as representative of a genuine Croatian spirit, with a convenient omission that he was a Nazi ally, main responsible for genocide in Jasenovac, a Balkan Au-

schwitz, and in other extermination camps alike. After decades of a relative silence under the socialist motto of “Fraternity and Unity” between the Yugoslav nations, the suppressed discussion about these crimes led to yet another fraternal bloodshed in the 1990s. The investigation of this infamous chapter of Balkan history would shed light not only on the lesser known Holocaust and the Jewish communities that lived in this area but it would be an important step further for the reconciliation of people of the South-East European region as well.

## Bibliography

- Bartulin Nevenko, “The Ideal Nordic-Dinaric Racial Type: Racial Anthropology in the Independent State of Croatia”, in *Review of Croatian History*, no. 1 (2009).
- Danon Jakov, Stošić Verica M., *Memoari na holokaust Jevreja Krajine*, Jevrejska opština Banjaluka, Banjaluka 2010.
- Goldstein Ivo, “The Independent State of Croatia in 1941: On the Road to Catastrophe”, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2006).
- Goldstein Ivo, “The Catholic Church in Croatia and the ‘Jewish Problem’, 1918–1941”, in *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2003).
- Goldstein Ivo, “The Jews in Yugoslavia 1918-1941: Anti-Semitism and Struggle for Equality”, at <[web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02\\_goldstein.pdf](http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02_goldstein.pdf)> (21 April 2014)
- Freidenreich Harriet Pass, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1979.
- Kaufmann Stuart J., *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, the Cornell University Press, New York 2001.
- Koljanin Milan, *Jevreji i antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918-1941*, Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 2008.
- Pavlović Ana Ćirić, “Sephardi Pride: Jewish Civil Society and Associational Networks in Interwar Sarajevo”, in *Balkania*, ed. Miguel Rodríguez Andreu, (Beograd), no. 6 (2015), at <[www.balkania.es](http://www.balkania.es)> (27 January 2016)
- Sekelj Laslo, *Vreme beščašća: ogledi o vladavini nacionalizma*, Akademia Nova i Institut za evropske studije, Beograd 1995.
- Shelah Menachem, “Cristian Confrontations with the Holocaust: The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican and the Murder of Croatian Jews”, in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1989).

Volkov Shulamit, "The Written Matter and the Spoken Word: On the Gap between Pre-1914 and the Nazi Anti-Semitism", in *Unanswered Questions: The Nazi Germany and the Genocide of the Jews*, ed. Francois Furel, Schocken Books, New York 1989.

## Ana Ćirić Pavlović

### Antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji: Slučaj Hrvatske

**Sažetak:** Ovaj esej analizira genezu antisemitskih tendencija na teritoriji Hrvatske u periodu između dva svjetska rata, kao i njihove kulminacije u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj za vrijeme Drugog svjetskog rata. Naglasak je stavljen na različita teoretska objašnjenja virulentne mržnje prema Jevrejima koja je nastala u Hrvatskoj. Neke od korišćenih eksplanatornih jedinica su religiozni antisemitizam, kulturni kod i teorije grupnog konflikta. Takođe, holokaust počinjen na ovim prostorima ima svoju specifičnost. Naime, nigdje u bivšoj Kraljevini Jugoslaviji domaće stanovništvo nije toliko masovno učestvovalo u istrebljenju domaćih „prijetnji“ kao u ovoj zemlji. Srbi, Jevreji, Romi, kao i Hrvati koji su se protivili režimu, nestali su u eksterminacionim logorima ove neslavne marionetske tvorevine, koji se smatraju jednim od najgorih primjera smrti u Evropi kojima nisu upravljali nacisti. Sećanje na ova čudovišna vremena još proganja regionalne međuetničke odnose i nastaviće se sve dok se podrobno ne istraže ovi tragični događaji.