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Source / Izvornik: **Studia Środkowoeuropejskie i Bałkanistyczne, 2022, XXXI, 47 - 79**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

<https://doi.org/10.4467/2543733XSSB.22.003.16705>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:111:735908>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-04-02**



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DOI 10.4467/2543733XSSB.22.003.16705

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BLEIBURG AND CROATIAN POLITICAL EMIGRATION – COMMEMORATIONS, INTERPRETATIONS AND USE IN ANTI-YUGOSLAV PROPAGANDA

Summary

The paper presents forms of commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross in the communities of Croatian political refugees in the West and different interpretations of the mentioned events. It also analyzes some cases in which the world public was made aware of the massacres committed by communist Yugoslavia, as well as forms of repression and diplomatic pressure by the Yugoslav authorities to prevent commemorations in Bleiburg.

Keywords: Massacre in Bleiburg, Way of the Cross, commemoration, the Independent State of Croatia, Yugoslavia, Croatian political emigration.

Introduction

The terms Bleiburg tragedy and Way of the Cross (or Death Marches) are used to describe the mass killings of captured members of the military units of the Independent State of Croatia (ISC) and Croatian civilians at the end of World War II (May 1945) by members of the Yugoslav Army (YA), as well as the long marches of the surviving prisoners through Yugoslavia, during which the killings and various forms of mistreatment continued. The ISC army and Croatian civilians retreated from the advancing YA forces toward Austria, intending to surrender to the Western Allies. In the south of Austria, near the town of Bleiburg, they were stopped by British troops who refused to accept their surrender, whereupon they were forced to surrender to the YA¹. The collapse of the ISC and the

¹ Bleiburg, <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?ID=8154>, visited August 4, 2021; Križni put [Way of the Cross], <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?ID=34099>, visited August 4, 2021.



establishment of communist Yugoslavia led to the creation of a large wave of Croatian political refugees of at least several tens of thousands of people (possibly close to a hundred thousand). Many high-ranking and other officials of the ISC authorities, as well as officers and soldiers of its armed forces, fled to the West – those who managed to escape extradition to the YA in Austria and those who were not extradited to Yugoslavia from the Allied POW camps in Italy and Austria. Among the refugees were also members of the Croatian Peasant Party (CPP), a political option that had the almost plebiscitary support of the Croatian people in the interwar period. Many Croats who did not want to live in the Yugoslav state or the communist system left their homeland, but also those who feared being attacked by the regime as so-called class enemies, that is, because of a certain possession or prestige and influence they had². Therefore, in the journals and newspapers of the Croatian political emigration, much was written and polemicized about how and why the ISC collapsed, especially about the surrender in Bleiburg and the events that followed. Moreover, the aforementioned issues were quite present in the political activities of Croatian émigrés, i.e. in anti-Yugoslav propaganda in the West, then in the social life of Croatian political emigration and its collective memory.

This text presents some of the forms of commemoration of the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross and explains the importance of commemorating these events for the collective consciousness and identity of Croatian political emigration. Considerable attention was paid to the different interpretations of the last days of the ISC, i.e. the responsibility for its downfall and the resulting massacres of its soldiers and Croatian civilians. On the one hand, the attitude of those politicians who tried to maintain the idealized image of the ISC is explained. According to the latter, the ISC collapsed solely because of the anti-Croatian Serbs at the head of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) and the hypocrisy of the West, which falsely promised freedom to all nations after its victory. On the other hand, it analyzes the attitude of those émigrés who admitted that the ISC had several weaknesses that also contributed to its downfall. Among the latter, there was no shortage of those who blamed former ISC leader Ante Pavelić for the above-mentioned events, even though they held a number of responsible roles in the ISC's civilian government and military structures and were thus partly responsible for how the ISC functioned and eventually collapsed. In addition to the controversies of the older émigrés, the attitudes towards the collapse of the ISC, the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross of younger political refugees who had no experience of participating in political and military events during World War II, were also analyzed.

In addition, several examples will be presented that illustrate how the Croatian political emigration tried to familiarize politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and the public in the West with the tragic events at the end of World War II, i.e. how they used them to prove that Yugoslavia could not survive without widespread repression. In addition, an overview of some of the countermeasures taken by the Yugoslav communist authorities to prevent the aforementioned activities of Croatian political emigration, more specifically the organization of commemorative events in the Bleiburg field, is provided. The paper was written mainly based on journals and newspapers about the Croatian political emigration,

² W. Krašić, *Hrvatsko proljeće i hrvatska politička emigracija* [„Croatian Spring” and Croatian Political Emigration], Zagreb 2018, 13–32.

several letters from the personal archive of the émigré Branko Salaj, Yugoslav diplomatic reports and relevant literature.

Although this paper covers the period from the end of World War II to the disintegration of communist Yugoslavia, the theme of commemorating the mass crimes committed by the Yugoslav communists against their defeated opponents, in this case, ISC officials and soldiers and Croatian civilians, is still topical and causes heated debates in Croatia, but also in neighboring countries – in Slovenia, where most mass graves are located, and in Austria, where the central commemoration takes place (near the town of Bleiburg). Therefore, in addition to contributions to the history of Croatian political emigration from 1945–1990, this paper could also be useful for current discussions on this topic.

Commemorations

The commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross was seen as an important expression of Croatian national consciousness, as part of the national identity³. From North and South America to Australia and West and Northern Europe, memorial services for the victims were held every May, followed mainly by commemorative rallies that not only reconstructed the events of the end of World War II, but often depicted the Croatian struggle for an independent state. Then, the speakers reminded about the persecutions to which the Croats were subjected in the first Yugoslav state, the crimes of the Chetniks, who carried out ethnic cleansing of part of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina intending to create an ethnically homogeneous Greater Serbia, and the partisans led by the CPY. The latter succeeded in taking power in Yugoslavia at the end of the war and established a totalitarian dictatorship that dealt radically with numerous real and potential opponents. Sometimes the survivors shared their memories and the poems dedicated to the Bleiburg martyrs, as the victims were sometimes called, were read or published⁴.

The main commemorative events took place in southern Austria, in the area where the ISC army and Croatian civilians were surrounded and extradited to YA. Some of the ISC officers and soldiers, officials and civilians who managed to escape, tens of thousands of them, were interned in refugee camps in Austria and Italy under the Allied administration. Most, however, remained in southern Austria, in the British occupation zone, and the largest camp was in Klagenfurt. News of the massacres spread quickly among the refugees, but the British occupation authorities forbade them to go to the Bleiburg field. Therefore, masses for the fallen were held in the improvised wooden churches, namely in the con-

³ Ustaše i četnici [Ustashas and Chetniks], *Danica*, No. 15, April 9, 1975, 2.

⁴ Vinko Grubišić, an émigré, linguist, writer and professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada, has compiled an overview of selected poems dedicated to the Bleiburg victims: V. Grubišić, *Bleiburg u egzilantskoj i domovinskoj hrvatskoj književnosti do 1990*. [Bleiburg in Exile and Homeland Croatian Literature until 1990], *Hrvatska revija*, vol. 1, March 1996, 61–78.

The Croatian émigré Jure Prpić wrote in his poem *The Last May*: “In the darkness around me, my comrades / look at me. I stare, I can hardly breathe / I mourn them and write verses – / The survivor’s pen counts the dead army / I keep looking at the corpses of my dear brothers, / And instead of flowers from the dying May / I write these verses from a foreign land / For all the dead army I hold a posthumous rite”.

J. Prpić, *Posljednji svibanj* [The Last May], *Hrvatska gruda*, May 1975, 2.

verted camp barracks. Nevertheless, the detainees in the Klagenfurt camp spoke intensively about the Bleiburg tragedy and the need to visit the Bleiburg field, which they considered the starting point of the Croatian national tragedy. The first group of Croats (out of nine, only one was not at the Bleiburg field in May 1945) illegally visited the monument to the fallen soldiers in Unter-Loibach, erected for the fallen Germans and Austrians, Wehrmacht soldiers, on November 1, 1951, on All Saints' Day. These Croats, in fact, learned from a local resident who was burying the dead in the cemetery that there were also 16 ISC soldiers in the grave. Therefore, on this occasion, they put up a wooden cross with a glass plate on which it was written that it was erected by the surviving comrades-in-arms in honor of the known and unknown fighters for Croatian independence and "in memory of the heavy and unforgettable tragedy of Bleiburg". After that, they went to the Bleiburg field and made a cross from the remaining weapons, swearing to keep the memory of their fallen comrades and compatriots⁵.

The following year, again on All Saints' Day, the first mass departure of Croatian émigrés to Bleiburg field was organized under the pretext of a soccer match between the local Austrian soccer club and the Croatian emigrant sports club Velebit. After the match, the players and "fans" of Velebit visited Bleiburg field and held a commemorative ceremony. Despite obstacles from the Austrian and British occupation authorities, the Croatian émigrés managed to establish an organization that regularly organized commemorative events for the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy – the Honorary Bleiburg Platoon, which still exists today. An important role in obtaining the necessary permits was played by the priest Vilim Cecelja, head of the Croatian Catholic Mission in Salzburg, who from 1953 until his death in 1989 held a mass every year in the military part of the cemetery in Unter-Loibach. Until 1964, both the mass and the memorial service were held at the said cemetery, while this year, for the first time, a memorial service was held at the Bleiburg field on Mother's Day, which is celebrated on the second Sunday in May. In this way, a clear link was established with the events of May 1945. The following year, with the money donated by many Croats from different parts of the world, part of the land on the Bleiburg field was purchased⁶.

In 1974, the remains of the soldiers in the military part of the cemetery in Unter-Loibach were exhumed and reburied, and the markers placed by the Austrian authorities in 1965, one of which indicated that Croats were also buried there, were removed. This triggered protests by Croatian émigrés, who forced the Austrian authorities to return the remains of three ISC soldiers. However, since the grave was not marked in any way, a monument was erected soon after by Croatian émigrés, which was ceremoniously unveiled in May 1977⁷. The last important event for the commemorations in the above-mentioned places was the erection of a monument on the Bleiburg field, which was solemnly unveiled on the occasion of the commemoration of Mother's Day on May 10, 1987⁸.

As mentioned in the introductory parts of this chapter, in addition to the cemetery in Unter-Loibach and the Bleiburg field, masses and commemorations for the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy were also organized in numerous communities of Croatian émigrés in

⁵ B. Vukušić, *Čuvari bleiburške uspomene [Guardians of the Bleiburg Memories]*, Zagreb 2017, 35–37, 39, 42.

⁶ Ibidem, 47–50, 58.

⁷ Ibidem, 89–93.

⁸ Ibidem, 109.

the West. Although these events followed very similar patterns, a few examples will be singled out below to emphasize the significance of the aforementioned practices and manifestations, but also some peculiarities of certain commemorations.

Thus, the Croats in Cleveland, USA, united in the United Croats of America (UCA) organization, organized a commemoration on May 30, which is celebrated in the USA as Memorial Day, an American holiday that honors military personnel who have died in service. One of the goals of Croatian émigrés was to equate the Croatian struggle for an independent state with the interests of the West, which was a major challenge since the West supported the survival of communist Yugoslavia. Moreover, a number of Croatian émigrés performed various duties in the ISC regime, which was a protectorate of the Axis powers. In this context, Steven Škrtić, an American veteran of World War II and a prominent member of UCA, was scheduled to be one of the speakers at the commemoration. In addition, U.S. government officials and members of organizations of émigrés from Eastern Europe, whose home countries were also ruled by communists, were invited to the commemoration⁹.

These efforts were much more effective in Argentina than in the United States, since Argentina did not declare war on Germany and Japan until late March 1945 and Argentine authorities were strongly anti-communist. The 1969 commemoration in Buenos Aires was attended by General Bartolome E. Gallo, who was also president of the organization Argentine Friends of Nations Enslaved by Communism. He said, among other things, that the Croats who died in the Bleiburg tragedy were martyrs “because they were killed as sacrifices for civilization and against barbarism”. There was also greater media coverage of the commemorations, with leading Argentine newspapers such as *La Prensa* and *La Nacion* reporting extensively¹⁰. The commemoration in Buenos Aires the following year included the laying of a wreath at the monument to Argentina’s national hero, a leader in the struggle to liberate southern and central South America from Spanish colonial rule – General Don Jose de San Martin¹¹.

The commemorations were attended by younger generations of Croats who were either born in Croatia and later emigrated in connection with the aforementioned wave of mass emigration in May 1945, but also those who were born abroad. For example, at the above-mentioned memorial service in Cleveland in 1960, young men and women, as well as boys and girls, dressed in traditional costumes, said a prayer for the fallen¹². Two young Croats played an important role in the commemoration ceremony held in the hall of the Croatian Home in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1969. Although a mass for the fallen was held before all commemorations, the said commemoration also had a kind of religious note; the veneration of the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy took on almost elements of a cult. On the stage in the hall, the outline of the Independent State of Croatia was highlighted, and Bleiburg was marked with a black veil with three roses – red, white and blue – symbolizing the Croatian flag. On the table, covered with the Croatian tricolor and black cloth, there

⁹ Zadušnice u Clevelandu prilikom 15-godišnjice pokolja hrvatske vojske [Funeral services in Cleveland on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the massacre of the Croatian army], *Danica*, May 25, 1960, 4.

¹⁰ Poruka Palima: Hrvatska živi! [Message to the Fallen: Croatia lives!], *Hrvatski narod*, June 13, 1969, 1.

¹¹ Dan hrvatskih narodnih žrtava [Croatian People’s Victims Day], *Hrvatski narod*, May 1971, 1.

¹² Zadušnice u Clevelandu prilikom 15-godišnjice pokolja hrvatske vojske [Funeral services in Cleveland on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the massacre of the Croatian army], *Danica*, May 25, 1960, 4.

was a showcase in which a tank of a Croatian machine gun from the war, several bullets and a clod of earth from the Bleiburg field were placed. Blaža Kostelac, secretary of the organization Croatian Home Guard Youth and a student, said, among other things: “Look here, a handful of this earth in this showcase! Bow to it! It is soil brought from the Bleiburg field, a foreign land, soaked in the blood of our Croatian soldiers... It is our sanctuary! In this piece of land there may be a particle of your father, your husband, son, brother, sister, grandfather...”. Ivica Penavić, head of the Croatian Home Guard Youth, spoke next. At the beginning, he said: “So no, no! No crying, no tears. Today is not a day of tears, today is a battle for the perseverance of Croats! We didn’t come here to just say: Glory to them! Sacrifices are in vain, if they are not connected in spirit. Let us preserve the connection with their souls, so that their energies are preserved, and strengthen in us the power of current national needs”¹³. The described commemoration illustrates that the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy were of inviolable importance for the Croatian émigrés, that they were considered martyrs who made the greatest possible sacrifice on the altar of the Croatian liberation struggle, which inspires and strengthens the young Croatian generations.

There were more similar connections. In a sermon at the mass for the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy at the cemetery in Unter-Loibach in 1964, Vilim Cecelja also said this: “But if the Bleiburg field entered Croatian history with bloody violence, then it is our sacred duty to keep the memory of it alive among the Croatian people; it is our duty to keep putting Bleiburg before the eyes of the Western world, which, unfortunately, in some way participated in its political game behind the scenes. No one can exempt us from this sacred duty, and we would consider ourselves traitors to our history, our people and the destroyed Croatian army if we kept silent about Bleiburg and tried to forget it”¹⁴. A photo of a monument at the cemetery in Unter-Loibach with a large group of people and Croatian flags was on the cover of the May 1980 issue of the Croatian émigré magazine *Hrvatska gruda*. The caption under the photo reads: “The Bleiburg field and this small cemetery in an Austrian village stand for the Great Altar of our homeland, bound and crucified in Serbian and communist slavery, and for the indestructible Croatian people, who will never forget the terrible massacres of over a million of their sons and daughters”¹⁵.

The announcement for the commemoration in Buenos Aires in 1969 stated that all Croats were invited to participate because in this way “they will express the honor of the dead and the continuation of our struggle for the right of our people – the State of Croatia”¹⁶. At the commemoration in the Argentine capital the following year, 1970, the following was heard: “This cult of the dead should be for us a cult of life and hope. The heroism of the people grows from the memory of the heroes of the people. They live in us as an ideological value, as an integral part of the common national ideals!”. About the HBP, the speaker Bogoslav Žubrinić said the following: “The members of this platoon have sworn to guard the graves and to stay with them until their death or – until the fire of freedom is

¹³ Poruka Palima: Hrvatska živi! [Message to the Fallen: Croatia lives!], *Hrvatski narod*, June 13, 1969, 1.

¹⁴ Duhom ne pobjedivi hrvatski borci! [Invincible Croatian fighters in spirit!], *Hrvatska gruda*, February 1964, 7.

¹⁵ Povodom 35. godišnjice pokolja. Slava Bleiburžkim mučenicima! [On the Occasion of the 35th Anniversary of the Massacre. Glory to the Bleiburg Martyrs!], *Hrvatska gruda*, May, 1980, 1.

¹⁶ Međudruštveni Odbor Hrv. Društava i Ustanova [Inter-Society Board of Croatian Societies and Institutions] *Hrvatski narod*, May 15, 1969, 2.

rekindled on the extinguished Croatian hearths!” The shadows of the fallen of Bleiburg will then go home with them!”¹⁷.

Milan Blažeković, one of the most prominent Croatian intellectuals in Argentina, wrote in 1980 about the Bleiburg tragedy and its commemoration and suggested that “after the establishment of an independent Croatian state, the Tomb of the Unknown Hero and the Triumphal Arch in honor of the Bleiburg victims should be erected, in which all the names of the fallen fighters for the Croatian state and the sake of the Croatian state will be engraved”. Further he said about this idea: “Until the erection of the Triumphal Arch, until the establishment of the Croatian state, each of our holy masses in honor of our fallen heroes is a laurel wreath with a ray of light at the foot of the future tomb of the Unknown Croatian Hero, the future Croatian Triumphal Arch. Until this triumphal arch is erected, each of us who participates in the commemoration of the Croatian victims is a living branch in a laurel wreath that we place in spirit on their known or unknown grave, thus keeping the message of the Bleiburg tragedy alive: On the bones of the Bleiburg victims, on the bones of the Croatian soldiers who fell before Bleiburg, on the victims who fell after Bleiburg – only the CROATIAN STATE can be founded”¹⁸.

Although the Croatian people were deeply divided during World War II, the Bleiburg commemorations sometimes tried to maintain a general Croatian meaning. There was no lack of outbursts of anger and hatred towards the Yugoslav communists, including those of Croat nationality, and announcements that they would be punished for the crimes they had committed, but the prevailing opinion among Croatian émigrés was that the new round of violence and revenge would cause even more damage to the Croatian people and the idea of creating an independent Croatian state¹⁹. Thus, Petar Miloš, a former member of the ISC armed forces and one of the leaders of the HBP, said at the commemoration ceremony in Bleiburg in 1971 that the Yugoslavs thought that the mass murder of the Croats would preserve Yugoslavia, but that it would nevertheless disintegrate, “from which the State of Croatia will rise again, which all Croats will accept and defend”²⁰. The latter tendency is also reflected in the name used for the Bleiburg tragedy in the invitation to the commemoration in Buenos Aires in 1971 – the Day of the Victims of the Croatian People²¹. In this context, it should be noted that at the commemoration in Buenos Aires in 1975, a decision was taken to pay tribute to the victims of the Yugoslav monarchist regime in the interwar period and to the émigrés who resisted the Yugoslav communist regime in the guerrilla war after World War II²². Although Croatian émigrés were divided among themselves, they managed to achieve a high degree of unity in the mid-1970s by joining

¹⁷ Nova vjera [A new faith], *Hrvatski narod*, June 1970, 3.

¹⁸ M. Blažeković, Komemoracija Bleiburga [Commemoration of Bleiburg], *Hrvatski narod*, May 1980, 6.

¹⁹ This tendency can also be seen in the poems about the Bleiburg tragedy. See note 4.

The first part of Vinko Nikolić's 1975 poem (see note 57) Croatia is permeated with motifs of death and mourning; the author writes of his beloved homeland, humiliated and drenched in blood, and from which her sons were expelled. The second part of the poem is full of hope, as the author expresses the conviction that the expelled sons will one day return to their homeland and the wounds of May 1945 will be healed. V. Nikolić, *Hrvatskoj [To Croatia]*, *Hrvatska revija*, vol. 3, March 1975, 18.

²⁰ Spomen bleiburžkih žrtava [Memorial of the Bleiburg victims], *Hrvatski narod*, June 1971, 2.

²¹ Dan hrvatskih narodnih žrtava [Croatian People's Victims Day], *Hrvatski narod*, May 1971, 1.

²² Bleiburg: oni umriše da Hrvatska živi! [Bleiburg: they died for Croatia to live!], *Hrvatski narod*, May–June 1975, 1.

together in the previously mentioned umbrella organization CNC. Already at its meeting in New York in 1975, the CNC's executive board decided to declare May 15 a Croatian Day of Mourning. All branches of the CNC, the so-called Local Committees and other Croatian organizations were asked to organize commemorative events for Bleiburg and other victims who had fallen in the struggle for the Croatian state²³.

A further example that should be singled out is the following – on May 15, 1985, a rally for the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross was held in Toronto in front of City Hall, attended by about 1,000 Croats and at which 500 candles were lit for allegedly 500,000 people killed in the postwar period, which was widely reported by the Canadian media. *The Toronto Star*, for example, published a short article titled “Metro Croats mark anniversary”, which stated, among other things: “Metro’s Croatian community is marking the darkest moment in its history this week – the slaughter 40 years ago of half a million unarmed Croatian soldier and civilians”. The newspaper called this event the Croatian Holocaust. In addition to Josip Đuran, a priest of the Croatian parish in Toronto, who gave a speech in Croatian, the young political émigré Marin Sopta addressed the audience in English, ending his speech with the words: “The survival of our nation depends on the establishment of an independent and sovereign state; where Croats will never be exposed to the horror of another Bleiburg”²⁴.

Numerous documents from the Yugoslav security and diplomatic services and institutions also indicate the importance of the commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy for Croatian émigrés. For example, the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs reported in mid-April 1970 that after the central celebration of the ISC’s founding day (April 10) in Munich, Croatian political emigration was extremely committed to organizing the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Bleiburg events. It is said that for this occasion numerous meetings are organized in West Germany, busses are rented, air tickets are booked and accommodations are organized in Austrian hotels and émigrés from Western Europe and overseas are expected²⁵.

Interpretations

Croatian political emigration, despite the common goal of creating an independent and democratic Croatian state, was divided, often conflictual, and its heterogeneous character was exacerbated by new waves of younger political refugees who were in no way involved in the political and military events during World War II. Different views about the recent past of the Croatian people, assessments of the current situation in Yugoslavia, and ideas about how to proceed towards the creation of an independent state were reflected in different interpretations of the events in Bleiburg.

²³ M. Blažeković, Komemoracija Bleiburga [Commemoration of Bleiburg], *Hrvatski narod*, May 1980, 6.

²⁴ 500 svijeća na komemoraciji za žrtve Bleiburga [500 candles at the commemoration for the victims of Bleiburg], *Hrvatski tjednik*, June 11, 1985.

²⁵ Hrvatska – Hrvatski državni arhiv [Croatia – Croatian State Archives] (dalje: HR-HDA) [further: HR-HDA], fond [Fond] 1409 Savjet za odnose s inozemstvom Izvršnog vijeća Sabora Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske [Council for Foreign Relations of the Executive Council of the Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Croatia], kutija [Box] 107, O emigrantskim skupovima [On emigrant rallies], April 14, 1970.

When it comes to the attitudes of older émigrés who were in some way associated with the ISC regime, there was a passionate debate about the responsibility of ISC leader Ante Pavelić for the massacres, then the retreat as the best possible step and retreat towards Austria. Indeed, at the top of the ISC regime there were advocates of resistance against the YA, either in the form of guerrilla warfare or in the form of frontal struggle²⁶. In connection with the aforementioned ideas and criticism of Pavelić's account of the way he governed the ISC in general, part of the émigrés developed the view that the retreat was a wrong step and that it would be better, for example, that all advocates of an independent Croatian state died heroically in defense of Zagreb than that hundreds of thousands of Croats were slaughtered without resistance and with the stigma of being Hitler's last ally. Some claimed that the ISC could even be saved by resisting the YA²⁷. Some critics, however, spoke of the "after the battle everyone is a general" position and used the collapse of the ISC and the Bleiburg tragedy for their own political affirmation, i.e. to prove that Pavelić was unfit to continue to lead the struggle for an independent Croatian state. A number of such people unconditionally supported and followed Pavelić not only during the existence of the ISC, but also in the first years of political exile²⁸.

Danijel Crljen, one of the officials of the ISC regime who negotiated the surrender of the ISC army in Bleiburg with the British, although he separated from Pavelić after the war, due to his mentioned role had a strong need to defend the thesis that further resistance in the homeland made no sense. He described how at the end of the war the ISC government was faced with a choice – "fight to self-destruction" or retreat to the West and surrender "into the hands of the democratic victors"²⁹. He claimed that the defense of Zagreb was impossible due to the lack of weapons and ammunition and the numerous refugees retreating from the YA. The continuation of fighting by ISC military units after the surrender of Nazi Germany was considered a crime under international military rules since the Allies had never recognized the ISC diplomatically, Crljen warned³⁰. He added that the last resistance in the Croatian capital Zagreb could not be compared with the heroic defense of Siget Fortress in 1566 under the leadership of Croatian general Nikola Šubić Zrinski, which prevented the Ottomans from entering the heart of Central Europe, but with "Hitler's dementia resistance in Berlin", whose only goal was to drag as many Germans as possible to their deaths with the Fuehrer³¹.

²⁶ Z. Radelić, *Križari – gerila u Hrvatskoj: 1945–1950* [*Crusaders – guerrillas in Croatia: 1945–1950*], Zagreb 2002, 205–206.

²⁷ I. Oršanić, *Vizija slobode* [*The Vision of Freedom*], Chicago, 1990, 9, 26–27; B. Krizman, *Pavelić u bjekstvu* [*Pavelić on the Run*], Zagreb 1996, 327–328; E. D. Kvaternik, *Sjećanja i zapažanja 1925–1945. Prilozi za hrvatsku povijest* [*Memories and Observations 1925–1945. Contributions to Croatian History*], Zagreb 1995, 11–12; J. Petričević, *Tko je odgovoran za Bleiburg? Jednostrano svaljivanje odgovornosti na strance i hrvatske generale* [Who is responsible for Bleiburg? Unilaterally shift of responsibility to foreigners and Croatian generals], *Hrvatska revija*, vol. 3, September 1965, 278–281; V. Nikolić, *Dr. Ante Pavelić (14 VII 1889 – 28 XII 1959)*, *Hrvatska revija*, vol. 1, March 1960, 52–53; I. Rojnica, *Susreti i doživljaji* [*Encounters and Adventures*], München 1969, 209–238.

²⁸ B. Krizman, *Pavelić u bjekstvu* [*Pavelić on the Run*], 301–355.

²⁹ D. Crljen, *Čimbenici Bleiburškog sloma* [Factors of the Bleiburg Collapse], *Hrvatska revija*, vol. 1, March 1970, 45.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 45–51.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 51.

As for the direction of the retreat, former ISC diplomat and historian Ivo Omrčanin suggested that there was a possibility, albeit a weak one, for the ISC army as well as the Slovene White Guard (an anti-communist paramilitary unit controlled first by the Italians and then by the Germans) to establish cooperation and an alliance with Western Allies to prevent YA forces from penetrating Istria, Slovenian Littoral, and Trieste – areas largely inhabited by Croats and Slovenes which were part of Italy, and argued that the retreat should have been in that direction rather than to Austria³². This was not the only calculation that there was a real possibility for the ISC to join Western Allies, but all were unconvincing as the West and the partisan movement led by the CPY remained in undisturbed allied relations until the end of the war; relations for which the foundations were laid at a conference in Tehran in late 1943³³.

The Croatian Liberation Movement (CLM), founded by Pavelić in 1956, most consistently defended the idealized memory of the ISC period and justified the retreat by claiming that all responsibility for the massacre lay with the British and especially the Yugoslav communists. Pavelić's maneuver was even described as acting in favor of the whole of civilized Europe since he allegedly rejected Stalin's offer of free passage to Trieste in exchange for diplomatic recognition of the ISC. On the other hand, with the British action at Bleiburg, the West betrayed Croatia, which for centuries had been the *antemurale Christianitatis* (Bulwark of Christendom) for defense against threats from the East (Mongols, Ottomans, now communists), it was said. The West claimed that it was fighting for freedom in the war, and the agreement with the Soviet Union in Yalta left 900 million people in "communist slavery", CLM magazine *Hrvatska* [*Croatia*] resonated³⁴. In the mid-1960s, the CLM split into two organizations, and since then there has been the CLM and the CLM – Reorganization. However, in the newspaper of this organization – *Hrvatski narod* [*The Croatian People*] – the same opinion on this issue was published: "The cultural West and the barbarism of the East have joined forces to destroy a nation that deserves more attention and more protection than any other nation because our people defended the West and successfully defended it against the invasion from the East"³⁵. In response to the criticism of Pavelić and the ISC leadership for the retreat and the way it was carried out, the CLM also reacted with criticism, claiming that all those who look for the culprit next to Josip Broz Tito and his communists belittle their responsibility for terrible crimes against the Croatian people³⁶.

In the spring issues, the CLM journals and newspapers were heavily dominated by descriptions of the April 10 celebrations, and texts about the significance of that date, while much less was written about the Bleiburg tragedy. Moreover, there is a visible tendency to write about April 1941 and May 1945, while there were many gaps in the period between these two chronological determinants. With such a choice of topics, the CLM refused and

³² I. Omrčanin, Anglo-američka diplomacija i NDH oko 30. travnja 1945 [Anglo-American diplomacy and the ISC around April 30, 1945], *Republika Hrvatska*, No. 104, December 1975 – January 1976, 16–34.

³³ Teheranska konferencija 1943. [Tehran Conference 1943], <https://enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?ID=60642>, visited August 4, 2021.

³⁴ Velebne proslave dana Nezavisne Države Hrvatske [Magnificent celebrations Independent State of Croatia's Day], *Hrvatska*, No. 496, April 1975, 1–3.

³⁵ Bleiburg, *Hrvatski narod*, May 1972, 1.

³⁶ Slava bleiburžkim žrtvama [Glory to the victims of Bleiburg], *Hrvatska*, No. 485, May 1974, 1.

avoided several unpleasant topics for former ISC officials who led the CLM, from the mass crimes of the ISC regime onward. Showing the ISC exclusively in the context of the Croats' struggle for independence and anti-communism, i.e., wrapping the ISC regime in a "package" acceptable to the West and commemorating the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross, while refusing to admit that the ISC regime committed numerous crimes, could not have resulted in greater success in Western political and intellectual circles and the media. Moreover, the CLM blamed as culprits for the mass crimes against ISC soldiers and Croatian civilians, as well as for the collapse of the ISC, exclusively the Yugoslav communists, the Serbs and the superpowers, who did not allow the Croats to decide in free elections in which state and social system they wanted to live. The responsibility of the ISC leadership for its downfall was not taken into account.

David Bruce MacDonald similarly assessed the CLM's views in the book *Balkan Holocausts?* and noted that in writing about the Ustasha regime, it was emphasized that the resistance nature of the movement", and that "such writings favourably compared the Ustaša to earlier French and American revolutionary movements, with their main goal consisting of defending Croatia against Serbian aggression and against international Communism"³⁷. It should be added that MacDonald, in reconstructing the assessments of Croatian émigrés about the ISC, relied exclusively on those authors who expressed themselves wholly or largely uncritically on this subject³⁸.

It should be said, however, that some émigrés associated with the ISC regime were willing to admit and condemn the regime's crimes, as can be seen from Franjo Nevistić's article entitled "Ustashes and Chetniks. Serbo-Croatian crimes we strongly condemn". Nevistić explained that they were the result of the marginalization of the Croatian people in the first Yugoslav state, the numerous acts of violence against members of the Croatian people and the crimes of the Serbs against the Croats during the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941³⁹. An even more realistic assessment of this issue was given by the historian Jere Jareb, one of the leading figures of the Croatian Academy of America, an organization that brought together Croatian intellectuals in North America, many of whom were political refugees in 1945. He assessed very similarly to Nevistić the position of the Croatian people in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the motives for anti-Serb sentiment

³⁷ D. B. Macdonald, *Balkan holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia*, Manchester, New York 2002, 135–136.

Ustasha – Croatian revolutionary organization founded in the early 1930s under the leadership of Ante Pavelić in response to the violence of the Belgrade royal regime against part of the Croatian people and the marginalization of Croatian territories in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes / Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was a revolutionary and radical nationalist organization that fought for the creation of an independent Croatian state. Since it could find support for the disintegration of Yugoslavia only in those countries that favored a revision of the situation in Europe created by the Versailles Peace Treaty, and in the Croatian surroundings stood out as such Italy, the Ustasha organization took on fascist features. The disintegration of Yugoslavia during the Axis invasion in April 1941 led to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia under the leadership of the Ustasha movement headed by Pavelić. The ISC was thus organized in all basic areas of political and other forms of life along the lines of its patrons – fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The Ustasha movement had little support among the Croatian population until April 1941, as did the radical repressive methods of the ISC regime and its totalitarianism. However, a large number of Croats supported the existence of the ISC, seeing in it the realization of the idea of Croatian state independence.

³⁸ D. B. Macdonald, *Balkan holocausts?*, 135–138, 154–155.

³⁹ Ustaše i četnici [Ustashes and Chetniks], *Danica*, No. 15, April 9, 1975, 2.

among some Croats, concluding that the ISC's policy toward the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina "cannot be defended on the thesis that the Serbs were the first to start an insurrection and slaughter on Croatian territory". "The logical response to such a thesis", Jareb added, "would be that the insurgents should have been punished, not the entire ethnic minority"⁴⁰.

The series of blaming Pavelić was motivated by political conflicts among the émigrés, as mentioned above. One of the reviews that was not burdened by such an intention was that of the émigré Ivo Rumora. He stated that the Bleiburg tragedy was the Croatian national tragedy because of the number of people killed, especially many young people who had no connection with parties and politics. It consisted, on the one hand, in the physical destruction not only of those nationalist Croats, as he said, but also of the democratically oriented ones, and, on the other hand, in the spiritual and ideological capture of that part of the Croatian people who had fought on the side of the partisans led by the CPY under the slogan "brotherhood and unity"⁴¹. In other words, the Yugoslav communists killed (and expelled) a large number of both nationalist and democratic supporters of an independent Croatian state, and on the other hand, those Croats who joined the partisan movement, largely to save themselves from the violence of the Italian army and the Chetniks, were misused by the CPY to seize power and restore Yugoslavia, but with a communist system.

This is how Rumora sees Croatia at the end of the war: "Croatia in 1945, torn between defeat and victory, self-destructed and deceived by enemies, friends and its own politicians and generals, became nobody's and everybody's except its own people's state and free homeland"⁴². He gives a summary view of the Croatian balance in the war and after it with the following sentence: "Neither the Ustasha ISC could be preserved, nor the CPP-Croatia established, nor the Croatian communists managed to create a Croatian state in Yugoslavia!"⁴³. Thus, the ISC had to collapse, at least because it came into being primarily as a consequence of the conquest and dismemberment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by the Axis Powers, although a part of the Croatian people recognized and supported it not as a puppet state of Mussolini and Hitler, but as the realization of the aspiration for an independent state. The creation of a short-lived autonomous territorial unit of Banovina Hrvatska (1939–1941) in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was the crown of the twenty-year struggle of the CPP for the equal position of Croats in the first Yugoslav state. However, a part of the Serbian political elites agreed to its creation due to the threat of war, as they wanted to strengthen the stability of the state, while the majority was profoundly dissatisfied with its creation⁴⁴. After World War II, even after protracted negotiations with Serbian émigré politicians, the CPP leader Vladko Maček failed to reach an agreement on the organization of a new Yugoslav state after the collapse of communism due to strongly opposed views⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ J. Jareb, *Pola stoljeća hrvatske politike* [*Half a Century of Croatian Politics*], Zagreb 1995, 89–90. This book was first published in 1960.

⁴¹ I. Rumora, Svi smo mi krivi za prošlost – ali i odgovorni za budućnost Hrvatske [We are all to blame for the past – but also responsible for the future of Croatia], *Hrvatska revija*, No. 2, June 1975, 246.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Ibidem, 247.

⁴⁴ I. Perić, *Hrvatska u monarhističkoj Jugoslaviji: kronika važnijih zbivanja* [*Croatia in Monarchist Yugoslavia: A Chronicle of Important Events*], Zagreb 2006.

⁴⁵ I. Tepeš, *Hrvatska politička emigracija – HSS* [*Croatian political emigration – CPP*], Zagreb 2021.

Despite its proclaimed federal system, communist Yugoslavia was a distinctly centralized state. A series of reform and decentralization processes in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s, which many saw as the first step toward the creation of an independent Croatian state, was stifled by the violent termination of a popular movement called the Croatian Spring⁴⁶.

After bitter experiences with totalitarian ideologies and systems, foreign invaders and various forms of Serbian domination in both Yugoslav states during the 20th century, the Croatian people finally succeeded in expressing their desire for free elections in the early 1990s – by choosing an independent and democratic state. The Serbian political leadership of the time, unable to impose a high degree of centralization in Yugoslavia, attempted to create, through war and genocide, a Greater Serbia that would encompass large parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, the democratically expressed will of the Croatian people had to be defended by force of arms.

Rumora concluded his analysis by claiming that there was no “true” Croatian side in World War II, that the conflicting ideologies claimed to fight for Croatia, but Croatia and its people suffered the most. He saw the way out of the Croatian fratricidal conflict and the national tragedy, the “abyss” into which Croatia was plunged in 1945, in the general reconciliation of the Croats. The preconditions for its realization were an objective analysis of the events of the first half of the 1940s and the recognition of the mistakes of all the protagonists of World War II, who were still active in the political life of the Croats at home and abroad⁴⁷.

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, Australian *Hrvatski tjednik* [Croatian weekly] published the text with the title “Croatian Political Tragedy”, and the author was listed as a “survivor of the bloody spring of 1945”. In this article, as in Rumora’s case, the author accused all major political parties of harming and destroying the Croatian people. He found the CPP to be naive, aiming for the party’s attempts to achieve equality for the Croatian people within the Yugoslav state. He resented dilettantism and totalitarianism against the Ustasha movement and the ISC regime, attacking the ISC leadership for betraying its army and people. As for the Croatian communists, the author complained about their subservient attitude towards Serbs, adding that their ranks are full of scum and criminals⁴⁸.

The CPP, although the undisputed political representative of the Croatian people in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia split into three parts during World War II – some supported the formation of the ISC, some remained loyal to Maček and waited mostly passively for the end of the war, and some gradually joined the partisans. After World War II, an attempt to resume the party’s work in Yugoslavia failed due to communist repression⁴⁹. However, the CPP continued to operate in political exile in the West and also joined the commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy, especially after Juraj Krnjević became president in 1965. The CPP was a fierce critic of the ISC regime and of many former officials of that regime who

⁴⁶ Z. Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji: 1945–1991: od zajedništva do razlaza* [Croatia in Yugoslavia: 1945–1991: From Unity to Separation], Zagreb 2006, 330–483.

⁴⁷ I. Rumora, *Svi smo mi krivi za prošlost – ali i odgovorni za budućnost Hrvatske* [We are all to blame for the past – but also responsible for the future of Croatia], 247.

⁴⁸ Hrvatska politička tragedija [Croatian Political Tragedy], *Hrvatski tjednik*, No. 383, May 21, 1985, 14.

⁴⁹ Z. Radelić, *Hrvatska seljačka stranka: 1941–1950* [Croatian Peasant Party: 1941–1950], Zagreb 1996.

remained politically active abroad after 1945. However, it assessed the massacre of ISC soldiers and Croatian civilians that followed the collapse of the ISC as a Croatian national tragedy and sent the following messages: “It is now up to us to continue where many have fallen in the struggle for the Croatian state at the hands of the executioners!”⁵⁰. Although the CPP refused to join the initiative for unification of the Croatian political emigration, which culminated in the creation of the Croatian National Council (CNC) in 1974/1975, some party branches together with the branches of the CNC and some other Croatian organizations and societies jointly organized commemorations of the Bleiburg tragedy⁵¹. The Bleiburg tragedy was thus a divisive, but also a unifying factor for the Croatian political refugees. Moreover, the motif of the Bleiburg tragedy was used in numerous appeals for émigré unity. The émigré in Canada, Tomislav Mesić, wrote, among others, that the unity of Croatian émigrés “should be the redemption of our obligations to thousands of skulls of the Bleiburg martyrs!”⁵². Nikola Kirigin, a member of the CNC Parliament from the US, gave a speech in Melbourne, Australia, on the 40th anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, in which he said: “We, sisters and brothers, are our own enemies, we are destroying Croatia with our disunity, desecrating Croatian graves with our disunity, but we, united and only united, can give honor and glory to the Croatian victims”⁵³.

Like the aforementioned Rumora, as well as a number of other émigrés who wrote about the Bleiburg tragedy, Mesić pointed out that in the massacres were executed both high-ranking officers and barely adult young men who, he says, were forced to take up arms in defense of their families because their fathers had already been recruited or killed⁵⁴. The almost unique belief of the Croatian émigrés was that the Yugoslav communists were killing Croats en masse at the end of the war, not because they were ideological and political opponents, but simply because they were Croats. Communist Yugoslavia, in fact, was seen as just a “red” version of pre-war Yugoslavia or Greater Serbia with communist garb. Therefore, it was claimed that the Serbs, as the dominant factor in the CPY and communist Yugoslavia, took advantage of the victory in the war and, under the pretext of confrontation with the “fascists” and “enemies of the people”, destroyed the biological power of the Croatian people and in this way wanted to ensure complete Serbian domination, and not only through the political exclusion of the Croats.

Speaking generally about communist repression in the post-war period, historian Zdenko Radelić claims that it was a consequence of the war won, the desire to build and defend the state and the implementation of the communist revolution. He believes that the events of the war were the main cause of the revenge of the victors over the defeated, but points out that the main reason for the repression was the desire to radically restructure society and social relations, which affected a very diverse number of opponents (ideological, political, class). Also, Radelić explains that the motivation for repression was intertwined with the desire for revenge and the opinion that at the end of the war it is neces-

⁵⁰ Objava [Announcement], *Hrvatski glas*, No. 18, May 7, 1975, 2.

⁵¹ Poziv na Komemoraciju za Bleiburške žrtve [Invitation to the Commemoration for the Bleiburg Victims], *Hrvatski glas*, No. 18, May 7, 1975, 3.

⁵² Bleiburg – prekretnica našeg gledanja [Bleiburg – a turning point in our view], *Danica*, No. 20, May 14, 1975, 1.

⁵³ Lijepa riječi Nikole Kirigina [Nice words from Nikola Kirigin], *Hrvatski tjednik*, No. 384, May 28, 1985, 5.

⁵⁴ Bleiburg – prekretnica našeg gledanja [Bleiburg – a turning point in our view], May 14, 1975, 1.

sary to deal not only with real and current enemies but also with potential ones, those who might oppose future steps of the new authorities. On the national dimension of communist repression, Radelić writes that a lot of data suggest that various forms of repression were carried out by Serbs against Croats primarily or only because of their nationality⁵⁵. However, Croats also participated in the post-war massacres, such as members of the 11th Dalmatian Brigade of the YA⁵⁶.

Speaking about some other common assessments of Croatian émigrés about the Bleiburg tragedy, it should be noted that they understood by the Bleiburg tragedy not only killed but also expelled Croats after the war. Moreover, this was only the beginning of the genocidal process of the Belgrade regime against the Croats, which continued with various forms of repression, but also with the policy of expulsion, referring to the expelled Muslims from Sandžak and Bosnia and Herzegovina who emigrated to Turkey because they were considered as part of the Croatian people, as well as to the departure of several hundred thousand labour migrant (so-called *gastarbajteri*, after the German word *Gastarbeiter*, meaning “guest worker”) to Western Europe⁵⁷. Vinko Nikolić, founder and editor of the highest quality journal of Croatian political emigration – *Hrvatska revija* [*Croatian Review*] – wrote in his autobiographical book *Tragedija se dogodila u svibnju* [*Tragedy Happened in May*], in which he described his experiences in the first year of exile, that he believes in a “future Croatia” that will have neither the form it had during World War II nor the form it had in communist Yugoslavia, but that the term “before Bleiburg” and “after Bleiburg” will be used to refer to events in recent Croatian history. He also included the displaced and not only the killed Croats in the Bleiburg tragedy, as he believed that Croatia lost several generations of its compatriots because of this event⁵⁸. The newspaper *Hrvatski tjednik*, which was started by younger Croatian émigrés, also wrote the following: “And we are in the state of Bleiburg, after forty years we are in the state of Bleiburg and we will remain in it until the day when we restore everything that Bleiburg destroyed”⁵⁹. For Croatian émigrés, communist Yugoslavia was a state based on crime, a state that was maintaining itself by committing further crimes against the Croats.

Like some older émigrés, younger ones tried to shed as much light as possible on the events of the last days of the ISC, especially so that disasters like the Bleiburg tragedy would not be repeated in the future. *Nova Hrvatska* [*New Croatia*], the highest quality newspaper of younger political refugees, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, published a series of documents from the British archives, trying to clarify the role of the British in the aforementioned events. While the British actions at Bleiburg were interpreted by older émigrés as treason, violation of international law, or traditional British sympathy for the Serbs and hostility towards the Croats, *Nova Hrvatska*

⁵⁵ Z. Radelić, Rat, država, nacija i revolucija: bitne pretpostavke komunističke represije u Hrvatskoj [War, State, Nation and Revolution: Important Preconditions of Communist Repression in Croatia], in: *Represija i zločini komunističkog režima u Hrvatskoj* [*Repression and Crimes of the Communist Regime in Croatia*], ed. R. Horvat, Zagreb 2012, 21, 23, 25.

⁵⁶ Ubijanja u Kočevskom rogu [Killings in Kočevski Rog], <http://www.hic.hr/dom/387/dom14.htm>, visited August 4, 2021. B. Vukušić, *Čuvari bleiburške uspomene* [*Guardians of the Bleiburg Memory*], 25.

⁵⁷ J. Petričević, Trideset-godišnja bilanca nove Jugoslavije [Thirty-year balance of the new Yugoslavia], *Hrvatska revija*, No. 2, June 1975, 179–188.

⁵⁸ D. Dedić, Od Bleiburga do pobjede [From Bleiburg to Victory], *Hrvatski tjednik*, No. 382, May 14, 1985, 6.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

pointed out that the British were confused, did not know the “who’s who” among the numerous military units they conquered, their various state institutions and military command levels were uncoordinated, and that their main goal was to prevent chaos in the territory they occupied⁶⁰.

For the editors of *Nova Hrvatska* there was another reason to clarify the role of the British in the extradition of the ISC army and Croatian civilians to YA, i.e. to refute the thesis that the British and the West in general were enemies and despisers of the Croats. The West supported the survival of Yugoslavia and its regime because it was a communist state that had been expelled from the Soviet bloc and could serve as an example for other states in Eastern Europe that wanted to get rid of Moscow’s domination. Moreover, from the Western point of view, Yugoslavia held an important geostrategic position, as it prevented the Soviets from reaching Adriatic Sea, thus the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the West would not support a breakup of Yugoslavia even after the collapse of the communist regime. For all these reasons, Washington, London, and other Western capitals cared little about the violation of personal freedoms in Yugoslavia, and about the desire of some nations to establish independent states, especially the Croats. Therefore, in the early 1960s, some Croatian political émigrés began to believe that proponents of an independent Croatian state should stop hoping for help from the West and rely primarily on themselves, even resorting to violence. Soon, some groups came up with the idea of seeking allies among the communist states (especially in Albania and Bulgaria, which claimed parts of Yugoslav territory) and even in Moscow. The possibility was reckoned with fact that the eastern parts of Yugoslavia could be annexed by the Soviets and the western ones, including Croatia, would form a neutral zone, like Austria or Finland. There were even ideas about the creation of an independent Croatian state with a communist regime and in alliance with the Soviet Union. The editorial board of *Nova Hrvatska* as well as a number of other political émigrés were appalled by such ideas and the attempts to establish contacts with the East, believing that the Croatian people would face another catastrophe through a pact with another totalitarian regime, i.e. Soviet communism after Italian fascism and German Nazism during World War II⁶¹.

It was assessed that regardless of the current position of the West, efforts to create an independent Croatian state must be based exclusively on democratic foundations, which can best be seen from the words of *Nova Hrvatska* editor-in-chief Jakša Kušan that “the West, not the East, is the more natural ally of Croatia, because the West is the bearer of democracy, and even if today it stands on the position of a united Yugoslavia, tomorrow it will have to recognize the democratically expressed will of the Croatian majority because of its democratic principles”⁶². In the context of the described political opinion, the editorial board of *Nova Hrvatska*, using the example of the events in Bleiburg, i.e. the role of the British in them, tried to deconstruct the thesis that the West is an implacable, eternal and *a priori* opponent of the Croatian people and the idea of an independent Croatian state.

⁶⁰ Istina o Bleiburgu [The truth about Bleiburg], *Nova Hrvatska*, No. 9, 1975, 4, 10–15.

⁶¹ See more about this in: W. Krašić, *Hrvatsko proljeće i hrvatska politička emigracija* [„Croatian Spring” and *Croatian Political Emigration*], 13–32, 139–206, 303–312.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 57.

The attitude of some younger émigrés, who were mostly critical of the ISC and emphasized their closeness to the West and the ideals of democracy, to all of the events at the end of the war is perhaps best reflected in the text of the Jakša Kušan, “In the Shadow of the Celebrations of Victory over Nazism”. Kušan writes that while the end of the war brought peace, it also brought numerous injustices and threats to all humanity. With the victory over Hitler, the world was relieved, and so were the Croats, Kušan continues. The wounds of the war had to be healed, especially in the small nations, but sincere anti-fascists who were not communists were deceived throughout Central and Eastern Europe. As, “the communist dictatorship took over, that of the sisters of Nazism”, Kušan pointed out⁶³. Yugoslavia, the dungeon of the people, was restored, which the Croatian people never recognized or accepted in free elections, and the Yugoslav communists ended the war in “orgies of bloody vengeance” that left bloody traces from Bleiburg to Macedonia, Kušan described. He then stated: “In the light of these insights, it is not very easy for us Croats to celebrate the victory over Nazism, although with our past, our culture, our understanding of life and, above all, our political orientation, we were always opponents of Nazism”⁶⁴. This was also proven during the war, Kušan believed, and suggested that at the time of celebrating the victory over Hitler, the Croats should remind the world that in these events for the Croats “one evil replaced another”. “Because the victory of communism in our country is nothing but the defeat of everything we call Western civilization, culture and democracy,” Kušan concluded⁶⁵. This is an example of condemning the crimes of the Yugoslav communists and commemorating the victims, but without any attempt to rehabilitate or glorify the ISC regime, and the entire text has a very strong democratic dimension. It should also be noted that some younger émigrés who thought this way or similarly, in commemorating the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross, had a tendency to approach the subject objectively instead of mythologizing it, which the older émigrés did, turning the Bleiburg tragedy into a kind of Croatian version of the Serbian myth of defeat in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.

The other part of the younger generations of émigrés also refused to accept the victim role – the one who believed that all possible means, including the use of violence, were necessary for the establishment of an independent Croatian state⁶⁶. For them, the Bleiburg tragedy was above all proof of the resilience of the Croatian people, who survived such a heavy blow, because despite the genocide and the subsequent oppression by the Yugoslav communist regime, the new Croatian generations grew up ready to fight for freedom and an independent Croatian state⁶⁷. Some researchers claim that the alleged desire for revenge for the Bleiburg tragedy, nurtured by some of the émigrés, contributed to their radicaliza-

⁶³ Pod sjenom proslava pobjeda nad nacizmom [In the Shadow of the Celebrations of Victory over Nazism], *Nova Hrvatska*, No. 10, 1975, 4.

The Croatian émigré Jure Prpić writes in the poem Croatia – 1945: “The bells are ringing in Europe: / – Peace has come / In Croatia the guns are barking, / – a bloody festival... /?”. J. Prpić, *Hrvatska – 1945* [Croatia – 1945], *Hrvatska gruda*, May 1975, 4.

⁶⁴ Pod sjenom proslava pobjeda nad nacizmom [In the Shadow of the Celebrations of Victory over Nazism], *Nova Hrvatska*, No. 10, 1975, 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ Dosta je bilo plakanja nad prošlošću! [Enough crying over the past!], *Hrvatski tjednik*, No. 381, May 7, 1985, 8.

⁶⁷ D. Dedić, Od Bleiburga do pobjede [From Bleiburg to victory], *Hrvatski tjednik*, No. 382, May 14, 1985, 6.

tion, which manifested itself in attacks on the Yugoslav diplomatic missions abroad, assassinations of Yugoslav diplomats, and attempts to carry out diversions or even an uprising in Yugoslavia⁶⁸. These young émigrés, however, did not need subsequent encouragement in this form; their advocacy, and then to a lesser extent their use of violence, was motivated by the direct repression of the Yugoslav communist regime, which they felt firsthand. Moreover, they turned to advocacy and use of violence largely out of desperation, knowing that both Cold War blocs supported Yugoslavia's survival, and thus believing that they could rely only on their own forces and should react in the same way against the Belgrade regime, which responded to any form of discontent with the use of brutal force⁶⁹.

This section of the Croatian political emigration also criticized the older émigrés, claiming that the Bleiburg defeat was renewed in their political opportunism, i.e., in their obedient adherence to the policies of the West, which supported communist Yugoslavia. Some were particularly harsh in their criticism, such as Ante Primorac, one of the leaders of the 1971 student movement, who fled abroad after the collapse of Croatian Spring. Extremely dissatisfied with the fact that some older émigrés referred to him and his peers as “children of Broz”, implying that they had adopted a communist mentality, he decided “to say clearly what the Croats of my generation think: I will tell the Argentine gentlemen that they betrayed Croatia in 1945, because at that time it was necessary – in order to leave something for the future generations of Croats – to carry Croatian flags and not those that led hundreds of thousands of Croats to the executioner's knife!”⁷⁰. In this criticism, Primorac alluded to the book by former ISC minister and émigré Vjekoslav Vrančić *S bielom zastavom preko Alpa (With a White Flag Across the Alps)*, in which he describes his failed mission to convince the Allies to accept the surrender of the ISC government and army⁷¹. Primorac called his political opponents “Argentine gentlemen” since most of the high-ranking civilian and military ISC officials who managed to escape from the Yugoslav communists found refuge in Argentina.

Bruno Bušić, Croatian intellectual who had been persecuted by the Yugoslav regime since his elementary school days, also saw the burden of the past, reconciliation with the role of eternal victim, reconciliation with the role of an object, whose fate is always governed by someone else as an extremely aggravating and unfavorable feature of a part of Croatian emigration. Bušić was forced to flee abroad after serving his prison sentence, death threats and brutal beatings in the center of Dubrovnik in the mid-1970s. He soon became one of the most prominent Croatian political emigrants, and was assassinated by the Yugoslav Security Services in Paris in 1978. Discussing the possibilities of his engagement in actions of Croatian political emigration, he wrote to his friend Rudolf Arapović:

⁶⁸ M. N. Tokić, *Avengers of Bleiburg: Émigré Politics, Discourses of Victimhood and Radical Separatism during the Cold War*, *Politička misao* 55, No. 2, 2018, 71.

⁶⁹ W. Krašić, *Hrvatski pokret otpora: hrvatske državotvorne organizacije i skupine: 1945–1966 [Croatian Resistance Movement: Croatian Independence Organizations and Groups: 1945–1966]*, Zagreb 2018; B. Vukušić, *HRB: Hrvatsko revolucionarno bratstvo: rat prije rata [CRB: Croatian Revolutionary Brotherhood: War Before War]*, Zagreb 2010.

⁷⁰ A. Primorac, *Kosovski mit, Bleiburg i emigrantski „starčevićanci” [Kosovo myth, Bleiburg and emigrant „Starčevićans”]*, *Hrvatski list*, No. 1–2, 1980, 25.

⁷¹ V. Vrančić, *S bielom zastavom preko Alpa: u misiji hrvatske državne vlade za predaju Hrvatskih oružanih snaga [With a White Flag Across the Alps: in the mission of the Croatian state government to surrender the Croatian Armed Forces]*, Buenos Aires 1953.

“To found a new political party, to join the existing ones or to dissolve the existing ones does not even occur to me. All these existing and future parties are nothing but the way we repeat a long lamented jeremiad with certain names and programs, the way we repeat what we want from others with a disgusting masochistic cry”. He added the following: “Croatian emigrant media constantly support and renew Croatian refugee frustration”⁷².

After the collapse of communist Yugoslavia and the emergence of an independent and democratic Republic of Croatia, the possibility was created to freely express memories of the Bleiburg tragedy, as well as views and opinions on this event, which led to numerous autobiographical and journalistic texts and books on this subject. It also became the subject of interest of many scholars in Croatia, who, however, focused primarily on reconstructing the retreat of the ISC army and Croatian civilians, the negotiations with the British and the surrender to the YA, the crimes and the places where they were committed, as well as the directions in which the YA units led the prisoners back to Yugoslavia and the crimes committed on that occasion. One of the topics that received a lot of attention was the number of people killed, because the estimates, of which a considerable number were given by Croatian émigrés, differed by hundreds of thousands. Thus, although these books and treatises are not primarily related to the remembrance culture of Croatian émigrés to the Bleiburg tragedy, they are related to the topic of this paper by shedding light on numerous events from this complex and, above all, by reducing the number of victims to a realistic frame. Historian Martina Grahek Ravančić certainly stands out among Croatian scholars who have written about the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross with the number and quality of her books and articles⁷³.

Rare exceptions include the essay by Viktorija Kudra Beroš, who analyzed articles published in the journal *Hrvatska revija* from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, and the essay by Tatjana Šarić, who critically evaluated articles published in the same journal, but for the period from 1951 to 1990⁷⁴. Numerous émigrés, of different ideological and political affiliations wrote for *Hrvatska revija*, and thus the views expressed on the Bleiburg tragedy varied widely, as did the issues related to the aforementioned topic to which émigrés paid attention. Similar to what was stated in this chapter, *Hrvatska revija* also wrote about topics such as: the causes of the collapse of the ISC, the question of guilt and responsibility for the Bleiburg tragedy, the course of events in the last days of the ISC, and the number of victims of the Bleiburg tragedy. Šarić highlighted a number of texts by the authors who attribute the main responsibility for the collapse of the ISC and the Bleiburg tragedy to

⁷² R. Arapović, *Bruno Bušić: meteorski bljesak na hrvatskomu obzorju* [Bruno Bušić: a meteor flash on the Croatian horizon], Washington 2003, 119.

⁷³ See for example: M. Grahek Ravančić, Controversis about the Croatian victims at Bleiburg and at “death marches”, *Review of Croatian History*, Vol. II, No. 1, 2006, 27–46. See also the article by Vladimir Geiger, in which he gives a comprehensive overview of the historiographical and journalistic literature on the events in Bleiburg, including the texts of some Croatian émigrés: V. Geiger, Osvrt na važniju literaturu o Bleiburgu 1945 [Important Literature on Bleiburg Event since May 1945], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, No. 1, 2003, 189–216.

⁷⁴ The journal *Hrvatska revija* began to be published as an organ of Matica hrvatska, the oldest Croatian cultural institution, in 1928 in Zagreb. In 1945, the publication was suspended, and it was restarted in 1951 in Buenos Aires by Croatian intellectuals Vinko Nikolić and Antun Bonifačić. Since 1955, Nikolić has been publishing *Hrvatska revija* independently. Since the mid-1960s, the journal has been published in Europe, the longest in Barcelona. With the establishment of the independent Croatian state, the publication was transferred to Zagreb, and the journal is still published today.

Pavelić and the top of the ISC regime. Special mention should be made of Jure Petričević, a Croatian political émigré who lived in Switzerland and was a harsh critic of the use of any ISC legacy in the struggle for an independent and democratic Croatian state, although he was briefly an official of the ISC regime. He warned that the mentioned trend would lead the Croatian people to a new catastrophe, similar to Bleiburg⁷⁵.

Kudra Beroš characterized the memory and commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy as a cultural trauma of Croatian political emigration. She writes the following about the concept of cultural trauma in this context: “Traumatic events structured as cultural trauma connect different points of loss: loss of war and surrender, loss of home and homeland (ISC) leading to exile, loss of social position and personal losses suffered in war and after its completion”⁷⁶. The author warned that both a part of the Croatian political emigration and the Yugoslav communist regime were selective in “constructing common memories” – communist Yugoslavia “erased the mass killings of defeated enemies (Others) from collective memory, focusing on the memory of the victims of Ustasha crimes, which represent a traumatic event and victory over fascism as part of a common history”, while some Croatian émigrés erased “the context of the emergence of the ISC and the context of World War II from their collective memory and created ‘subaltern memories’ as victims of communism and Yugoslavia, where Bleiburg became a cultural trauma and as such a privileged discursive fulcrum or pivot of the national identity of postwar Croatian political emigration”⁷⁷. Thus, the selective attitude of part of the Croatian political emigration to the ISC and then to the Bleiburg tragedy was largely due to the fact that the Yugoslav communist regime propagated its extremely tendentious and selective “truth” and persecuted and defamed those who questioned it, both in the country and abroad. Subjectivism was also fueled by the trauma of political exile and the efforts of some officials of the ISC regime to “cover up” the crimes committed by that regime with the crimes of the Yugoslav communists.

Some foreign authors, such as the already cited MacDonald, have written about the way a part of the Croatian people perceived the Bleiburg tragedy, and then Croatian émigrés in the West. The latter researcher devoted most of his attention to the question of the number of dead and the efforts of Croatian émigrés to present this number as high as possible. He believes that these efforts were a consequence of the desire of the anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist Croats to present the image of the Croatian people in Yugoslavia “as an unwilling participant in the SFRY, more a prisoner than a constituent nation”⁷⁸. Moreover, according to MacDonald, with the “Croatian Holocaust”, i.e. the Bleiburg tragedy, the Croats were given a kind of means to compete with the “Serbian Holocaust”, i.e. the victims of the Ustasha camp at Jasenovac, where tens of thousands of Serbs were killed during the war, while Serbian historians, publicists and politicians presented various exaggerated figures that exceeded one million Serbs allegedly killed⁷⁹. Finally, MacDonald believes that the Bleiburg tragedy was used as a means of atoning for the “sins” of the Ustasha

⁷⁵ T. Šarić, Bleiburške žrtve na stranicama *Hrvatske revije* [The Victims of Bleiburg in the Pages of the Journal *Hrvatska revija*], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, No. 2, 2004, 509.

⁷⁶ V. Kudra Beroš, Bleiburg kao kulturna trauma [Bleiburg as Cultural Trauma], *Etnološka tribina* 43, vol. 50, 2020, 131.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ D. B. Macdonald, *Balkan holocausts?*, 171.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, 162–165, 171.

regime, or as he puts it: “The sins of the Ustaša could be cleansed by their martyrdom at Bleiburg”⁸⁰. In some other parts of the book, the author writes about the Bleiburg tragedy in the same tone, emphasizing again and again the efforts of some survivors, but also high officials of the Croatian government in the 1990s, to rehabilitate the Ustasha regime and the ISC with Bleiburg⁸¹. So MacDonald writes about efforts to convert “Ustaša war criminals... into innocent victims of Serbian aggression”⁸².

In the article entitled “Bleiburg: The Creation of a National Martyrology” Pal Kolsto comes to similar conclusions as MacDonald, but focuses on the commemorations of the Bleiburg tragedy in the period after the establishment of the Republic of Croatia⁸³. He points out a fact that MacDonald overlooked, so he writes that “...the killing of the repatriated NDH soldiers was indeed a war crime of very large proportions”, adding to this another important fact: “The question nevertheless remains: how has it been possible to gloss over the fact that a number of the men who were killed were killers themselves? An important part of the answer is clearly the fact that whatever crimes they had committed, in a technical sense they were innocent victims by dint of being killed without due process of law”⁸⁴.

While MacDonald limited himself to writing about the mistreatment of the Bleiburg victims in order to rehabilitate the ISC regime, which has also been discussed in this paper, Kolsto only touches on a topic that is of cardinal importance for understanding the need of Croatian émigrés in the past and part of the Croatian people today to commemorate the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross. Apart from the fact that Kolsto states that it was a war crime committed by the YA against captured soldiers (but also against civilians), it is important to emphasize that a large number of those killed were just young adults mobilized in the last parts of the war, who did not participate in the crimes and many of whom did not even take part in the war operations. Historian Ivo Goldstein wrote about the members of the military units of the Ustasha regime who participated in the crimes, especially in the Jasenovac camp, and who were massacred by the YA at the end of the war. He also stated the following: “The vast majority of the soldiers killed on the Way of the Cross were recruits who could not be charged with any war crime”⁸⁵. It must also be remembered that among those killed were civilians, including children and women, some of whom were raped and brutally tortured⁸⁶. Moreover, it is necessary to repeat Radelić’s

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 171–172.

⁸¹ Ibidem, 174–177.

⁸² Ibidem, 174.

⁸³ P. Kolsto, Bleiburg: The Creation of a National Martyrology, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 7, September 2010, 1153–1174. Similar to MacDonald and Kolsto, Christopher Molnar also writes about the mythologization and misapplication of the Bleiburg victims: Ch. A. Molnar, *Memory, Politics, and Yugoslav Migrations to Postwar Germany*, Bloomington 2019.

⁸⁴ P. Kolsto, Bleiburg: The Creation of a National Martyrology, 1171.

Abbreviation NDH stands for Nezavisna Država Hrvatska in Croatian, meaning Independent State of Croatia.

⁸⁵ I. Goldstein, Zločin i kazna (ili – kakva je veza Jasenovca i Bleiburga) [Crime and punishment (or – what is the connection between Jasenovac and Bleiburg)], in: *Jasenovac: manipulacije, kontroverze i povijesni revizionizam* [Jasenovac: Manipulations, Controversies and Historical Revisionism], ed. A. Benčić, S. Odak, D. Lucić, Jasenovac 2018, 69.

⁸⁶ Since many critics of the commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy dispute the fact that women and minors were killed in addition to the captured soldiers, part of the testimony of Ivan Gugić, a member of the XI. Dalma-

conclusions that one of the motives for the massacres, besides revenge, was confrontation with actual and potential (!) opponents of the communist revolution and that part of the crimes were committed by members of the YA mainly because the victims were Croats, i.e. for chauvinist motives.

Finally, it is not far-fetched to draw a parallel between Western Europe and Yugoslavia, as noted by the aforementioned Grahek Ravančić and Vladimir Geiger, a historian who published some of the best works on the number of victims in Croatia during World War II and the postwar period – a challenging and controversial topic in Croatian historiography that arouses great public interest. The two authors warn that there were sporadic cases of revenge in Western Europe during the first days of liberation in some countries and that political and military officials of the defeated Axis states and fascist organizations were treated on the basis of judicial and administrative measures⁸⁷. They then conclude: “The basis of denazification in a democratic Europe was that proceedings must be based on law and due process, and that revenge must be avoided and prevented by all means”⁸⁸. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, the treatment of the defeated was based only in part on judicial and administrative procedures, which were usually formalities, since all power in the country was in the hands of the communists, “and the mass killings immediately after the war were organized and carried out by the state, and not by vengeful individuals or groups”⁸⁹. Similar to Radelić, they point out that unlike Western Europe, in Yugoslavia, where the communist revolution took place, the actual guilt of the victims was far less important than the CPY’s desire to establish its totalitarian rule and destroy all actual and potential opponents⁹⁰.

Thus, the previously stated assessments of foreign, Western authors are incomplete. They limited the commemorations of the Bleiburg tragedy, as well as analyses of interpre-

tian Brigade of the YA, recorded after he fled abroad in 1953, should be consulted. Among other things, Gugić said how he witnessed the mass killings at Kočevski Rog in Slovenia: „There were 10 or more trains a day, with sealed (closed) wagons, always at least 10, sometimes even 20. And they brought people from Ljubljana and maybe from other areas. Almost all of them were male soldiers, but there were also some women who were raped in the pit before being shot. There were also some underage young men, 15 to 16 years old”... „As for the women, I can say that I saw 10–15 of them, but during my service I saw only a portion of these unfortunate prisoners, and there were certainly more than 15 of these women. They were not taken to our barracks, but dressed to the execution site; they were raped near the pits and [the executioners – author’s note] later bragged about it”... „They were separated from their husbands, who were Croatian officers and were killed near Kočevje”... „Apart from the women, I saw perhaps up to 200 boys, aged 14–16, wearing the uniforms of the Ustasha youth. They were killed to the last one, except for the boy already mentioned, who was saved by a Slovenian captain. All of them said they were innocent and had done nothing, and many were crying”. Ubijanja u Kočevskom rogu [Killings in Kočevski Rog], <http://www.hic.hr/dom/387/dom14.htm>, visited August 4, 2021.

At the Huda jama site in Slovenia, the victims were killed in a particularly barbaric manner, as they were walled up alive in an abandoned mine shaft. Archeological excavations in 2008 and 2009 identified a total of 1,416 victims, mostly Croats and a small number of Slovenians. Twelve women were identified among those murdered.

Politika je zaustavila istraživanje Hude jame [Politics has stopped researching the Huda jama], <https://www.dw.com/hr/politika-je-zaustavila-istra%C5%BEivanje-hude-jame/a-45506383>, visited June 3, 2022.

⁸⁷ M. Grahek Ravančić, V. Geiger, Jasenovac i Bleiburg između činjenica i manipulacija [Jasenovac and Bleiburg between facts and manipulations], in: *Jasenovac: manipulacije, kontroverze i povijesni revizionizam [Jasenovac: Manipulations, Controversies and Historical Revisionism]*, ed. A. Benčić, S. Odak, D. Lucić, Jasenovac 2018, 51.

⁸⁸ Ibidem.

⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

tations of events from the end of World War II and the postwar period of some Croatian authors, including some émigrés, to those who directly and indirectly tried to use the Bleiburg tragedy to rehabilitate the ISC regime. In addition, they, only to a lesser extent, engaged in the analysis of those who were killed and what role they played in the war, and did not take into account the fact that the main motive for the mass killings was not revenge but the implementation of the communist revolution as well as that part of the crime was nationally motivated. As in the past in political exile in the West, today in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina there are people who exclusively want to pay tribute to the massacred members of their families – recruited young men and innocent civilians, without any political connotations⁹¹.

All Croatian émigrés envisioned the future Croatian state as democratic, and a large part of them distanced themselves from the crimes and totalitarian nature of the Ustasha regime. Nevertheless, it is clear from a number of examples that for a large number of Croatian émigrés the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy were inseparable from the ISC, which they considered a legitimate expression of the desire for an independent Croatian state, even though it was impossible in the democratic West to wage a successful Croatian liberation struggle on the basis of the ISC legacy. It was also impossible to build the broadest possible front from the ranks of the Croatian people on the same basis in the homeland. However, the existence of the ISC was for them the proof that the Croatian state can and must exist, that the Croatian state is the only framework that guarantees the survival of the Croatian people, and that no Yugoslav state (monarchist, communist, democratic) can be an alternative. Today, when the above-mentioned goal – an independent and democratic Croatian state – has been achieved, there is no more justification and understanding for the use of the legacy of the ISC in the way it was used by Croatian émigrés in the struggle for an independent Croatian state. On the other hand, what is necessary for strengthening the democratic atmosphere in Croatian society is the scientific reappraisal of both parts of Croatia's totalitarian past (ISC 1941–1945 and communist Yugoslavia 1945–1990) and the unhindered possibility of commemorating the victims of all totalitarian and radical nationalist regimes and movements.

Use in anti-Yugoslav propaganda

The Croatian political emigration made efforts not only to keep the memory of the Bleiburg tragedy alive through commemorations or the publication of the memoirs of survivors, but also to acquaint politicians, intellectuals, journalists and the public in the West with these events in order to prove the unsustainability of Yugoslavia. Thus, the books

⁹¹ For an example of criticism of the Bleiburg commemorations since the founding of the independent Republic of Croatia, see these papers: V. Pavlaković, D. Brentin, D. Pauković, The Controversial Commemoration: Transnational Approaches to Remembering Bleiburg, *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2018, 7–32; V. Pavlaković, Deifying the Defeated: Commemorating Bleiburg since 1990, *L'Europe en Formation*, 357, 2010, 125–147. On the perception of the Bleiburg tragedy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially among Croats in that country, see the paper: A. Čusto, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Cultural Memory of Bleiburg, *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2018, 111–130. For comparison, see the collection of episcopal sermons delivered during the 2003–2020 commemorations at the Bleiburg field: *Bleiburg – a call for dialogue and reconciliation: sermons delivered by Croatian bishops at annual commemorations of the Bleiburg tragedy 2003–2020*, Zagreb 2021.

about the Bleiburg tragedy were printed in foreign languages. The first was printed as early as 1946, by Theodore Benković, and was entitled *The Tragedy of a Nation. An American Eye-Witness Report*⁹². One of the best known was Josip Hećimović's 1962 *Tito's Death Marches and Extermination Camps*. Ivan Prcela was co-editor of the 1970 book *Operation Slaughterhouse*. The aforementioned Omrčanin published the book *The Massacre of Croats by Tito Communist in 1945* in 1975. In 1963, the book *Bleiburg Tragedy* was published in Spanish. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, the book *GENOCIDE – Never to be Repeated* was published, edited by Ante Beljo, a Croatian political émigré from Canada. In addition to the text in Croatian, the book also contained an English translation. According to some sources, the first non-Croat to write about Bleiburg was Julius Epstein in his book *Operation Keelhaul. The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present*, published in 1973. The author was a contributor to The Hoover Institution on War at the prestigious Stanford University. In his book he cited the books of Hećimović and Prcela and the testimony of Croatian political émigré Vladimir Josip Bosiljević about the massacres, which he submitted to the U.S. Congress and which was listed in Congressional Records on August 21, 1964 by MP Michael A. Feighan from Cleveland. In 1974, Lord Nicholas Bethell published the book *The Last Secret*, in which he also wrote about the extradition of the Cossacks to the Soviets and the ISC army and Croatian civilians to the Yugoslav communists⁹³. Foreign-language texts about the Bleiburg tragedy were also published in Croatian émigré journals and newspapers, which circulated in thousands of copies throughout the Western world and had the potential to reach a large number of readers through Croatian émigrés⁹⁴.

The well-known Croatian priest Krunoslav Draganović, who was abducted by the Yugoslav Security Service in 1967, also collected testimonies of survivors and researched the events in Bleiburg⁹⁵. Probably the first use of the events in Bleiburg and in the postwar period in general in anti-Yugoslav propaganda, which had a greater impact in the West German and European media, was at the trial of Croatian émigrés in Bonn in 1963 and 1964 for the attack on the Yugoslav trade mission in Mehlem. Berislav Deželić, who headed the committee responsible for the defense and fundraising of the defendants, sent a request to the Red Cross to dig the graves of ISC soldiers and civilians, which was also accompanied by the press. It should be mentioned that Deželić was seriously wounded in the assassination attempt by the Yugoslav Security Service a year after the trial⁹⁶.

It was clear from the previous parts of this paper that Croatian émigrés sought to identify their actions with the views and interests of the West, primarily on anti-com-

⁹² For this information, the author thanks Assistant Professor Ante Delić.

⁹³ Ustaše i četnici [Ustashas and Chetniks], April 9, 1975, 2.

⁹⁴ See e.g. The Massacre of 150,000 Prisoners and Civilians in Mai–August 1945 on Tito's Order, *Hrvatska gruda*, March 1964, 1. In the prestigious scientific journal – Journal of Croatian Studies, still published in the US, in the issue 18–19, selected British documents about the surrender of the ISC army and Croatian civilians were published with a detailed introduction and comments. The authors of the text were the already mentioned J. Jareb and I. Omrčanin. Godišnjica pokolja Hrvata [Anniversary of the Massacre of Croats], *Hrvatska gruda*, May 1979, 1, 4–6.

⁹⁵ B. Vukušić, *Tajni rat Udbe protiv hrvatskih iseljenika iz Bosne i Hercegovine [Udba's Secret War Against Croatian Emigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina]*, Zagreb 2002, 467–499.

⁹⁶ W. Krašić, A failed assassination attempt on the Deželić family in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1965 by the Yugoslav Security Service, accepted for publication in *Zbornik Janković*, No. 5 for 2020.

munist and anti-Soviet bases, but also émigrés from other nations from Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. When it comes to the Bleiburg tragedy, connections were made between this event and the massacre of captured Polish army officers and Polish intellectuals perpetrated by the Soviets in the Katyn Forest after the occupation and partition of Poland between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Croatian émigrés wrote that the world public was very well acquainted with the Katyn massacre, but not with those which followed the surrender of ISC soldiers and Croatian civilians on the Bleiburg field. Although the ISC was on the side of the Axis powers, while Poland was the first victim of Nazi aggression, the common denominator in the perception of Croatian émigrés was that both mass crimes were committed by communists – by Soviets against Poles and by Yugoslavs against Croats. The Polish émigrés set an example for the Croats by familiarizing politicians, intellectuals, and journalists in the West, as well as the general public, with the Katyn massacre. So they invested a lot of efforts to inform the West at least to a similar extent about the Bleiburg tragedy. They assumed that this might persuade the West, especially the United States, to stop helping and supporting communist Belgrade⁹⁷.

Much more irritated for communist Yugoslavia were the in the initial part of the text described commemorative ceremonies at the cemetery in Unter-Loibach and on the Bleiburg field. But the fact that the CPP association called Croatian Support and Educational Association “Matija Gubec” from Klagenfurt also contributed a lot to the organization of the commemorations is almost completely unknown to the public today⁹⁸. The Yugoslav Security Service made great efforts to obstruct the commemorations in various ways. In addition to a number of forms of misinformation and attempts to spread discord in the HBP, the most radical methods of repression were the 1966 planting of explosives in an inn where a luncheon was to be held after the commemoration, during which no one was killed due to program delays, and the assassination of Niko Martinović, one of the HBP’s leading figures, in 1975, about three months before the 30th anniversary of the events in Bleiburg⁹⁹. The possibility of preventing the commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy by the most radical methods was announced in a study on the activities of Croatian political emigration in Austria by the Yugoslav Security Service. Indeed, in the chapter on proposals for measures that Yugoslavia should take to limit or prevent various actions of Croatian political emigration, it states as follows: “The SDB [State Security Service] will continue its efforts to thwart all hostile intentions and plans by all available means”¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁷ T. Mesić, Zataja zločina [Concealment of Crime], *Danica*, May 30, 1956, 2.

⁹⁸ Vijenci na grobovima palih hrvatskih vojnika [Wreaths of flowers on the graves of fallen Croatian soldiers], *Hrvatski glas*, No. 21, May 28, 1975.

Matija Gubec was the legendary leader of the peasant uprising in northwestern Croatia and the neighboring Slovenian lands in the 16th century.

⁹⁹ B. Vukušić, *Čuvari bleiburške uspomene: počasni bleiburški vod: 1952–2017* [Guardians of the Bleiburg Memory: Honorary Bleiburg Platoon: 1952–2017], Zagreb 2017. How the Yugoslav Security Service managed the set of explosives, read here: Ch. A. Nielsen, The Yugoslav State Security Service and the Bleiburg Commemorations, *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2018, 56–59. On the murder of Niko Martinović and the efforts of communist Yugoslavia to prevent commemorations in Bleiburg, see: F. T. Rulitz, *The Tragedy of Bleiburg and Viktring*, 1945, DeKalb 2016, 137–146.

¹⁰⁰ HR-HDA-1409, kutija [Box] 108, Aktivnost neprijateljske emigracije i naši odnosi s Austrijom [The activity of hostile emigration and our relations with Austria], July 20, 1972, 8.

The Austrian press wrote extensively about the murder, claiming that Martinović had been a non-violent man who had worked to organize memorial services at Bleiburg field. It was also mentioned that he received anonymous letters with threats as well as anonymous phone calls, apparently supported by the Yugoslav Security Service. The Austrian press said that Martinović wanted to organize a “silent march” of Croats from all over the world to mark the 30th anniversary of the massacres, questioning whether he should have been killed because of it. The Austrian media wrote about Martinović’s funeral, recalling the massacres committed by YA units at the end of the war. This triggered sharp reactions in the Yugoslav press, which accused the Austrian authorities of allowing “Ustashes” to gather and denigrate Yugoslavia¹⁰¹. Although communist Yugoslavia killed one of the Croatian political émigrés most responsible for organizing the commemorations of the Bleiburg tragedy, which weakened the HBP, this move dealt another blow to Yugoslavia’s reputation, as foreign media, especially the Austrian ones, paid great attention to the case and wrote in passing about the massacres of Yugoslav communists at the end of World War II. While there was a vow of silence about these events in Yugoslavia due to the regime’s repression, Belgrade failed to prevent the memory of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross, although it used both threats and killings.

In addition, Yugoslav diplomacy exerted strong pressure on Austrian authorities to ban commemorative events, which was very successful on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, as Austrian diplomatic missions refused to issue entry visas to Croatian émigrés in the Western world. Croats who still managed to come from the West Germany were sent back, just as Croats from other parts of Austria were not allowed to attend. Thus, barely 40 émigrés gathered on this important anniversary, and the largest group there were Austrian police officers. The treatment of the Croatian political émigré of Muslim religion, Hamid Hromalić, a 78-year-old man, was particularly painful. Hromalić arrived in Klagenfurt on an Austrian visa from West Germany on May 10, 1975, where he was arrested by Austrian police at 9 p.m. and, after three hours of interrogation, was expelled from Austria at midnight along with another Croat. In addition, he was banned from entering Austria for three years. Hromalić was not helped by the fact that as a young man he had fought for the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy on the Eastern and Italian fronts in World War I¹⁰². A similar practice was repeated in 1985, when Austria drew up a list of over 900 Croatian émigrés who were banned from attending the commemoration ceremony¹⁰³. Austrian authorities did not restrict or ban rallies of Croatian émigrés in May, but also on other occasions when they wanted to pay tribute to the victims. The ban on rallies and commemorations at the cemetery in Bleiburg on November 1, the Catholic holiday of All Saints’ Day, was signed by the Ministry of the Interior in 1972¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰¹ Udbrno ubojstvo Hrvata Martinovića u Klagenfurtu [UDBA’s murder of the Croat Martinović in Klagenfurt], *Hrvatska revija*, Vol. 1, March 1975, 165–166.

¹⁰² Ovogodišnje hodočašće na Bleiburg [This year’s pilgrimage to Bleiburg], *Hrvatska Država*, No. 241, June 1975, 2.

¹⁰³ Do vrata u poteškoćama [Till the neck in troubles], *Hrvatski tjednik*, No. 382, May 14, 1985, 2.

¹⁰⁴ HR-HDA-1409, kutija [Box] 108, Ambasada Beč i Generalni konzulat Celovac: zabrana okupljanja i komemoracija na ustaškom groblju u Bleiburgu [Embassy Vienna and Consulate General Celovac: ban on gatherings and commemorations at the Ustasha cemetery in Bleiburg], October 30, 1972, 1.

Yugoslav diplomats not only exerted pressure on the Austrian authorities, but also intervened with representatives of the Catholic Church in Austria, demanding that masses and church halls not be used for anti-Yugoslav manifestations¹⁰⁵. Yugoslav diplomacy, for example, persistently tried to have priest Cecelja transferred to a less important station in Austria or outside of Austria¹⁰⁶. Some data suggest that the Austrian Security Services also aimed at this, as it was interested in reducing the intensity of the activity of Croatian political emigration as much as possible, both because of relations with Yugoslavia and because of the general security situation in Austria¹⁰⁷.

Despite the repressive measures of the Austrian authorities, Croatian political emigrants managed to gain the support and help of some Austrian political parties to organize various rallies in memory of the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy. Thus, on May 11, 1985, Association “Matija Gubec” organized a folklore event in Klagenfurt under the auspices of Mayor Leopold Guggenberger, the chairman of the local section of the conservative party (Austrian People’s Party), but also Kurt Peterle, the first deputy of the socialist party (Social Democratic Party of Austria) and Walter Candussi, the second deputy of the liberal party (Freedom Party of Austria). Numerous Croats from Western Europe and overseas managed to come to the event, and besides Austrian guests, representatives of Bulgarian and Hungarian emigrants were also present. The next day, a mass was held in front of the church in the Bleiburg cemetery, where a Burgenland Croats choir performed Croatian church music¹⁰⁸. The latter are an autochthonous Croatian minority in Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic, founded in the 16th century by refugees from Croatian territories fleeing plunder and conquest by the Ottomans¹⁰⁹. It was a significant success of the Association “Matija Gubec”, because different societies and institutions of Burgenland Croats had connections with Yugoslavia, mainly cultural.

Although various organizations of Croatian political émigrés, including branches of the CPP, organized joint commemorative events for the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross at North America, there was a kind of rivalry between the “Matija Gubec” Association and the HPB. Members of the HPB had criticized the “Matija Gubec” Association’s cooperation with the Burgenland Croat cultural associations, claiming that they were pro-Yugoslav because they visited Yugoslavia and participated in various cultural events. The mentioned event of the “Matija Gubec” Association was boycotted by HPB members, and they even spread the information that the CPP under the leadership of Krnjević advocated the restoration of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia under the Serbian Karađorđević dynasty¹¹⁰. A 1973,

¹⁰⁵ HR-HDA-1409, kutija [Box] 108, Generalni konzulat Celovac: razgovor s biskupom dr. Kostnerom u vezi moguće komemoracije na ustaškom groblju u Pliberku [Consulate General Celovac: conversation with Bishop Dr. Kostner regarding a possible commemoration at the Ustasha cemetery in Pliberk], November 13, 1972.

¹⁰⁶ HR-HDA-1409, kutija [Box] 108, Aktivnost neprijateljske emigracije i naši odnosi s Austrijom [The activity of hostile emigration and our relations with Austria], July 20, 1972, 5.

¹⁰⁷ HR-HDA-1409, kutija [Box] 108, Ambasada Beč i Generalni konzulat Celovac: zabrana okupljanja i komemoracija na ustaškom groblju u Bleiburgu [Embassy Vienna and Consulate General Celovac: ban on gatherings and commemorations at the Ustasha cemetery in Bleiburg], October 30, 1972, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Švedska – privatni arhiv Branka Salaja [Sweden – Branko Salaj’s private archive] (dalje: Pabs) [further: Pabs], Letter by Association „Matija Gubec” to Branko Salaj, July 3, 1985.

¹⁰⁹ gradišćanski Hrvati [Burgenland Croats], <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=22976>, visited September 11, 2021.

¹¹⁰ Pabs, Letter by Association „Matija Gubec” to Branko Salaj, July 3, 1985.

report by the Yugoslav Consulate General in Klagenfurt also spoke of “intolerance” between the two organizations of Croatian émigrés, which was evident during separate visits to the cemetery during the commemoration of the Bleiburg tragedy that year¹¹¹.

Belgrade’s pressure on Vienna was so strong that Yugoslav Foreign Minister Raif Dizdarević threatened to boycott the 30th anniversary of the Austrian State Treaty, which was also signed by Yugoslavia. In addition to restricting the commemoration with various repressive measures, the Austrians even banned a press conference on Juraj Krnjević, who was in no way associated with the ISC regime. It was a kind of precedent that was extensively commented by the prestigious *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and the criticism of such a concession by the government of a democratic state to the communist one in a respected media was seen as a certain victory for the Croatian political emigration¹¹².

It is significant to point out that the mentioned “Matija Gubec” Association was in contact with Otto von Habsburg and had his support in making the Bleiburg tragedy known to the world public¹¹³. Otto von Habsburg was the eldest son of the last ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Charles I. He was a member of the European Parliament since 1979 and some Croatian émigrés, including president of CPP Juraj Krnjević, believed that a member of the dynasty that ruled the Croatian lands since the 16th century could bring information about the Bleiburg tragedy to the top of European politics through this institution. It should be noted that it was not reckless to rely on the help of Otto von Habsburg, as he harbored sympathies for the Croatian people, which was especially evident during the establishment of the Republic of Croatia in the 1990s, when he strongly advocated its international diplomatic recognition¹¹⁴. The “Matija Gubec” Association was also in contact with Bernard Braine, a Conservative Party member of British Parliament who chaired the Foreign Policy Committee for Central and Southeast Europe in 1985¹¹⁵. With the excuse that he could not attend the commemoration, Braine wrote the following in the letter to the “Matija Gubec” Association: “I am fully aware of the tragedy which befell on the Croatian people in 1945/46. Your esteemed countryman, Dr. Juraj Krnjević was present when I presided at the unveiling ceremony in London of the memorial to the Victims of Yalta. My thoughts and prayers will be with you all at the ceremonies”¹¹⁶.

Conclusion

This paper has shown, if only through a few examples, that preserving the memory of the massacres committed by the Yugoslav communists against captured ISC soldiers and

¹¹¹ HR-HDA-1409, kutija [Box] 108, Generalni konzulat Celovac: informacija o crkvenoj proslavi „Majčinog dana” [Consulate General Celovac: information on the church celebration of „Mother’s Day”], June 27, 1973.

¹¹² Pabs, Letter by the „Matija Gubec” Association to Branko Salaj, July 3, 1985. On the measures taken by the Yugoslav Security Service against the Croatian émigré’s efforts to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, see: Nielsen, *The Yugoslav State Security Service and the Bleiburg Commemorations*, 63–68.

¹¹³ Pabs, Letter by Otto von Habsburg to Association „Matija Gubec”, May 28, 1985.

¹¹⁴ Pabs, Letter by Association „Matija Gubec” to Branko Salaj, July 3, 1985; Habsburg, Otto von, <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=23998>, visited September 11, 2021.

¹¹⁵ Pabs, Letter by Association „Matija Gubec” to Branko Salaj, July 3, 1985.

¹¹⁶ Pabs, Letter by Bernard Braine to Association „Matija Gubec”, May 10, 1985.

Croatian civilians was one of the focal points of the social life of Croatian political émigré communities in the West. Many political refugees almost shared the fate of those killed, many lost family members, and for all those who had fled abroad in 1945, the extradition of the ISC army and civilians to the Yugoslav Army meant the end of a period in their lives and the beginning of a trauma that would accompany them for the rest of their lives. Thus, every Croatian political emigrant carried the “sign of Bleiburg” in their consciousness and memory¹¹⁷. Remembering the mentioned events and commemorating the victims was a duty of inviolable importance for the survivors.

The situation described above also affected the political activity of Croatian refugees, so that the mass crimes of the Yugoslav communists were used as an argument for the claim that Yugoslavia was not viable without the application of extensive and crude repression. Yugoslavia, and in reality the disguised Greater Serbia, was portrayed as a state born of mass crime against the greatest enemy of the Yugoslav state idea – the Croats. The Croatian political emigration could not seriously threaten the Yugoslav communist regime, but this form of anti-Yugoslav propaganda was unpleasant for Belgrade, especially the commemorations in Bleiburg. Therefore, Yugoslavia did not regret investing a lot of effort to achieve a ban or at least restrictions on the commemorations through diplomatic pressure, and it did not shy away from murdering those who organized them every year.

Interpretations of the collapse of the ISC and the massacres that followed were decidedly burdened in two respects. First, many of them were full of blaming, often exclusively, some of the factors – the Yugoslav communists, the great powers (especially the Allies), or Ante Pavelić. Secondly, the fact that there was no independent Croatian state at the time and that critics of the Ustasha regime still saw the ISC as the realization of a centuries-old dream of an independent Croatian state limited the scope for an objective view of the events discussed here. Radical criticism of the ISC would be seen as counterproductive in the struggle for an independent Croatian state at the time. Nevertheless, some of the examples presented in this paper, especially that of Jere Jareb, show that there was the strength, ability, and courage to speak out realistically on issues that many émigrés avoided, such as the mass crimes of the Ustasha regime. Therefore there were political emigrants who condemned both the victims of the Ustasha regime and those of the communist massacres of the post-war period.

Some younger emigrants had attitudes on this subject that can almost fully be accepted even today and that fit into the norms of 21st century civilization. Moreover, Kušan’s 1975 text can rightly be placed in the framework of European resolutions condemning totalitarian regimes (fascist, Nazi, and communist) – those of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Such and similar retrospectives show that a part of Croatian political emigration, declared by communist Belgrade to be totally Ustasha and fascist, commemorated the victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and the Way of the Cross without trying to rehabilitate the ISC regime. This kind of approach is essential today, but in a number of cases it is deviated from, often as a reaction to the inconsistent application of the provisions

¹¹⁷ An officer of the ISC armed forces wrote the following in his memoirs about the retreat to Austria, the refusal to surrender to the YA, and the escape: „My experiences from those days have so engraved themselves on my being that in these 24 years almost not a day has passed when I have not thought of them”. F. Pušković, *Kako sam doživio Bleiburg* [How I experienced Bleiburg], *Hrvatski narod*, May 15, 1969, 5.

of the above-mentioned European resolutions when it comes to condemning the Yugoslav communist regime and dealing with this part of recent Croatian history. The lack of condemnation and distancing from one totalitarianism – Yugoslav communism – leads some to try to affirm the other – the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia. Although a way out of the captivity of this sinister vicious circle seems complicated and even impossible to many, remembering the intricacies of Gordian Knot, a consistent adherence to the above-mentioned European resolutions would resolve this situation in the manner of Alexander the Great. Some Croatian émigrés, on the other hand, offered an almost identical recipe for dealing with the burden of totalitarianisms decades before the collapse of communism and the advent of the European resolutions condemning totalitarianisms.

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