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Croatia's Denial of the Right to Remember at Jasenovac

Last month, something utterly astonishing took place, an act so brazen that it should have received far more attention worldwide than it did.

In an incident that speaks volumes about Croatia's commitment to preserving the past, Zagreb denied a request by Serbian President Aleksander Vucic to pay a private visit to Jasenovac, where his grandfather was murdered by the Ustashe during the dark days of World War II.

The right to remember, that most basic and fundamental of liberties that underpins human dignity, was simply tossed aside by Croatian authorities with little regard for the callousness of their actions.

By denying Vucic the opportunity to mourn his family's loss, as well as that of the nation he was elected to lead, Croatia was insulting not only the living but also the memory of the dead.

In effect, the Croatian leadership has turned the Jasenovac memorial into a political tool, a weapon with which to score a few points on an invisible scoreboard.

It is so obvious that it should not even need to be stated, but apparently it must: the mass murder of Serbs and Jews perpetrated by Hitler's fascist allies in Croatia is something that should be above politics and free of manipulation.

The soil of Jasenovac was sanctified by the blood of the countless Serbian and Jewish victims that was spilled there. It can not and cannot become profaned through petty politics.

Jasenovac embodies and symbolizes the cruelty that men are capable of, and it serves as a warning to future generations of the dangers posed by senseless hatred. But as time passes, and new generations mature into adulthood, it becomes ever more essential to keep the memory of the past alive, lest it be lost.

For as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, once noted, "Without memory, there is no identity, and without identity, we are mere dust on the surface of infinity."

Over the years, President Vucic has demonstrated both through words and deeds how much value he places on historical memory, particularly with regard to the Holocaust. In 2020, to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Vucic ordered that a yellow flag bearing the Star of David, similar to the badge that Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust, fly alongside the Serbian national flag outside the presidential office in Belgrade.

Vucic then took to Twitter, where he tweeted a photo of the flag with a caption stating, "This sign

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was a symbol of an attempt to destroy the Jewish people by the Nazis. Today it is a badge of honor. 75 years later. Never again.” It was a simple yet powerful gesture, one that served both to remind and to educate Serbs and Jews alike about their shared suffering.

Contrast this with Croatia’s attempts in recent years to rewrite the historical record, which even prompted the World Jewish Congress in 2018 to petition Zagreb to cease its revisionist policies.

6 | Back in the summer of 2013, when Croatia formally entered the European Union, there were high hopes that its embrace by the rest of the continent would lead to a sincere and honest reckoning with its past. Sadly, those hopes have largely been dashed.

Just three months ago, the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts issued a document calling on the government in Zagreb to block Serbia’s path to EU membership if Belgrade refused to renounce what it called “the myth of Jasenovac”.

Less than 80 years have passed since the demise of Croatia’s fascist Ustashe regime. How quickly and easily some would choose to forget!

Croatia’s entry to the EU was the culmination of a grueling and demanding decade-long process that required the implementation of numerous changes in a variety of fields, ranging from intellectual property law to the free movement of capital. This was done to bring Croatia in line with accepted EU practices.

But however much the Balkan state may have tweaked its legal system and upgraded its food safety and environmental protection standards,

there is one thing Croatia has demonstrably failed to do: come to terms with its disgraceful record of mass murder during World War II.

Most of us are aware of camps such as Birkenau, Dachau, Treblinka and Bergen-Belsen, where the Germans and their henchmen systematically slaughtered millions of innocents.

But how many outside the Balkans have even heard of Jasenovac or the horrors that were perpetrated there by Croatian fascists?

Known as „the Auschwitz of the Balkans,” it was the largest of a network of camps established by the independent state of Croatia, which the Nazis set up on April 10, 1941.

Hitler assigned the task of ruling Croatia to Ante Pavelic, head of the Ustashe movement, which vowed to rid the country of Serbs, Jews and other minorities.

Following in the Germans’ footsteps, Pavelic passed racial laws against the Jews, imposed restrictions on their freedom of movement and banned them from various professions.

Ultimately, the Ustashe murdered more than 30,000 Jews, or 75 percent of the country’s prewar Jewish community.

But it was the two million Serbs then living in Croatia who were the primary targets of Pavelic and his quislings.

With a bloodlust rivaled only by that of their Nazi patrons, the Ustashe set about the task of „cleansing” Croatian soil by torching Serb villages, beheading priests and herding Serbian worshipers into Orthodox churches before setting them alight. Over 200,000 Serbs were forcibly converted to Catholicism, with the active help and encouragement

of the Archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac.

But it was at the Jasenovac camp that the Croats unleashed their most bestial cruelty, by many accounts killing countless thousands in an orgy of indescribable savagery.

Jasenovac had no gas chambers or murder machines, so each killing had to be carried out the old-fashioned way: with knives, bars, axes or even hammers.

If Auschwitz was the epitome of mechanized murder, Jasenovac was the embodiment of manually orchestrated massacre.

In an interview in the Serbian newspaper *Politika*, the late Jasa Almulic, an author and journalist who previously served as president of the Belgrade Jewish community, described Jasenovac as “barbaric,” saying that „the murders were predominantly carried out manually.”

“Very seldom did they use bullets,” he said, „because they believed the victims ’didn’t merit it.” Almulic went on to describe some of the Ustashe’s methods, which included cutting out the eyes of their victims and slitting their throats, throwing live prisoners into brick furnaces and poisoning children.

The Ustashe even employed a special knife they called a “Srbosjek,” or “Serb-cutter,” to slaughter as many Serbs as possible.

There are numerous detailed accounts of the malevolence that was perpetrated at the camp. Eduard Sajer, a Jew from southeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, was imprisoned in Jasenovac in November 1941. His parents and four of his five siblings were murdered there, and in an interview for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, he recounted

some of the Ustashe’s chilling practices, which included the use of blowtorches and welding rods for torturing inmates.

Sajer also described how his younger brother was bludgeoned to death by Croatian guards with a sledgehammer before his own eyes, and how he watched in horror as a group of Jews from Sarajevo were burned alive.

After the war and the establishment of Communist Yugoslavia, the camp was bulldozed and Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito sought to suppress the story of Jasenovac because he didn’t want it getting in the way of creating a new Yugoslav identity.

As a result, Croats were not forced to confront their past or their dark deeds, a reality that continued even after the demise of Yugoslavia and the declaration of Croatian independence.

Indeed, even though Croatian leaders have traveled to Jerusalem to offer words of apology at the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, the legacy of the Ustashe remains very much alive and even admired among some Croats.

A decade ago, large memorial masses were held in two Catholic churches in the Croatian cities of Zagreb and Split for Ustashe leader Pavelic, despite the fact that he was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

Can you imagine a similar event taking place in Rome for Mussolini or in Berlin for Hitler? A popular musical group in Croatia, the Thompson rock band, regularly drew tens of thousands to its concerts, where many young people proudly dressed in Ustashe uniforms. The band also included Ustashe slogans in some of its songs, and has even sung lyrics calling for the elimination of Serbs.

A key part of the problem lies in the fact that the memorial museum erected by Croatia at the Jasenovac site seems to have been deliberately designed to obfuscate the true nature of what took place there.

Dr. Efraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, once described the exhibition at Jasenovac as an „educational disaster”, pointing out that it provided little if any information about who the Ustashe were or what their sinister ideology was.

8 | It is time to compel Zagreb to confront its sinister past. History and its lessons cannot and must not be squelched, regardless of whether it is politically convenient.

The Croatian authorities need to drastically revise the memorial at Jasenovac and stop hiding behind blurry language. Bans should be imposed on holding memorial services for Ustashe officials,

and Holocaust education should be made a priority in Croatia’s schools.

At a time of rising extremism and anti-Semitism across the continent, it is essential that Croatia’s hidden Holocaust, as embodied at Jasenovac, not be shunted aside.

Europe is still in a position to make these demands, and it should not shy away from doing so, especially when even the President of the Republic of Serbia is denied the right to pay tribute to Jasenovac’s victims.

Instead, visits to the site should be intensified and students should be brought to learn about and cherish the memory of the Ustashe’s victims.

It is our collective responsibility to do so, lest the memories slowly drift off into the mists of history, taking the lessons that we and future generations ought to have learned along with them. That cannot be allowed to happen.