

# Utopian Catholic State or Murderous Racist State? Sacralization, Myth, and Politics in the Croatian Ustasha State 1941-1945

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## INTRODUCTION

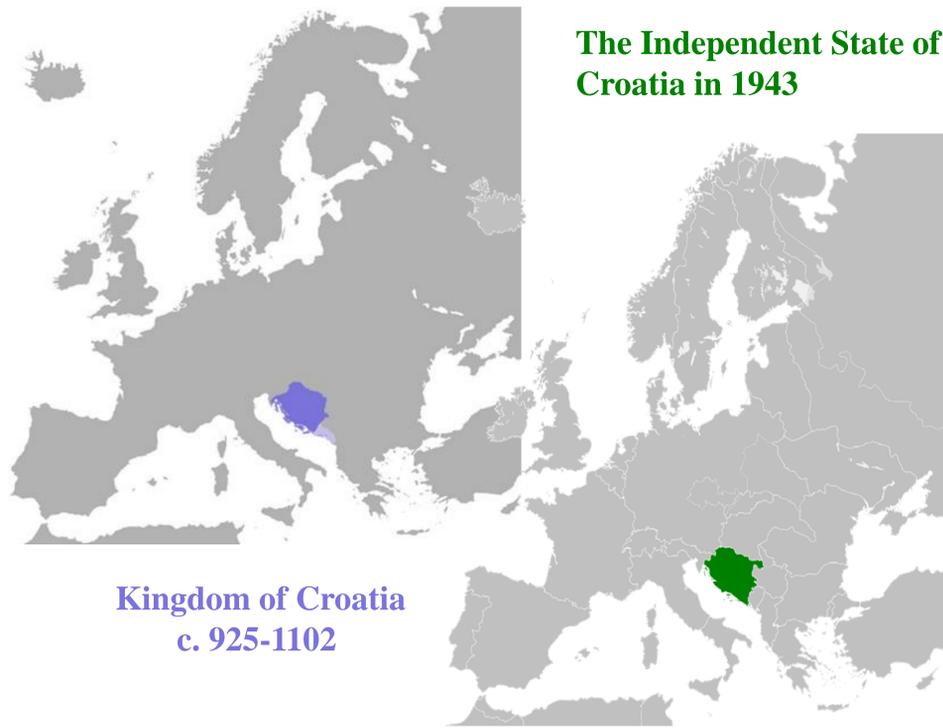
**Background Information:** Ustasha was the Croatian fascist movement that ruled Independent State of Croatia or NDH from 1941-1945. It was considered a puppet state of Nazi Germany, basing much of its ideology on Nazi racial theory. Like the Nazis, Ustasha deemed Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs to be subhuman and a poison to the pure Croatian nation and thus needed to be removed. In addition to eugenical racial theory, the Ustasha ideology was also heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism.

**Research Question:** What are the different ways the Ustasha utilized Catholic values, symbols, and rituals, as well as fascist ideas on eugenics as a form of regime legitimization, nation building and regeneration? How was Croat identity deeply rooted in primordialization (recreation and reconstruction of the past), as well as constructivism, Catholicism, and Croat long struggle in defense of their homeland's freedom and independence?

**Thesis Statement:** It was through the combination of mass terror, genocide, fascist and nationalist ideals, as well as myth, historic memory, and Catholic symbolism that the Ustasha regime resorted to a fantasy heritage to achieve national revival and construct a new consciousness for "Greater Croatia."

## HISTORIC MEMORY AND IDENTITY

- ❖ Ustasha regime could be characterized by primordialization because it was concerned with "creating, recreating, or enhancing identity that is subjective and historically rooted. As the novelist Marko Čović reminded readers of *Hrvatski Narod*, "it had been the fate of Croats through the ages to struggle in defense of their homeland's freedom. The Croats had only earned their right to an independent state through struggle, lost lives, and martyrdom, as the rampart on which their enemies "crushed their teeth, bled, exhausted themselves, and fell."
- ❖ Principle seven of the Ustasha Principles stated that the Croats maintained their state "throughout the centuries up until the end of the [first] world war"; they therefore have the right to restore "their own completely free and independent Croat state" on their "whole ethnic and historic territory", with the right to use all methods (Navan Budak).
- ❖ From the earliest ethnonym "Croatian" in the 9th century until recent times, mythology played an important role in the creation of Croatian national memory and thus in conceptualizing Croatian self-identity.
- ❖ While stories differ in detail, they follow the same pattern: "Croats come to Dalmatia, find the province in the hands of the Avars, fight against them, and conquer the land for themselves."
- ❖ The leading Ustasha daily, *Hrvatski Narod*, proclaimed that "the "resurrection" of the Croatian state after eight and a half centuries was contingent upon "bloodily confronting our eternal enemies, our native Serbs.""



## RACIAL IDEOLOGY

- ❖ Rory Yeomans wrote that, "the Ustasha movement viewed the eradication of all "unwanted elements" as a path to national regeneration—a collective panacea for the nation's cultural, moral, and social ills."
- ❖ The Croat political right believed that the state was engaged in a struggle against a Great Serbian policy which was working to destroy Croatdom. The persecution of Serbs was based on cultural and religious criteria as the Ustasha never introduced any racial legislation against the Serbs like they did in the case of the Jews.
- ❖ The regime introduced a series of "racial laws and edicts drawing heavily on Nazi biological concepts of antisemitism and race. This ultimately began the campaign of mass murder to purify the Croatian homeland of all the "degenerate" and "undesired" elements (Serbs, Jews, and Roma).
- ❖ In contrast to Jews and Serbs' Balkan mixture, Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina were not viewed in a negative light in the NDH; they were actually referred to as "the racially purest, least mixed Croats" by the regime. Since the NDH was situated on the 'crossroads of opposing civilisations', the Croat nation could not fulfil its 'historical mission' if it did not protect its 'racial purity.'"
- ❖ The Jasenovac concentration camp was the largest and most crucial in the systematic and planned genocide of the Orthodox Serbs and Jews. One could say that it became a crime to be a Serb, a Jew, or a Rom. It is estimated that the Ustaša regime murdered between 77,000 and 99,000 people in Jasenovac system of camps between 1941 and 1945.

## CATHOLIC IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS

- ❖ Roman Catholicism defined the Croat nation and provided legitimacy for national purification as religion was an ethnic marker demarcating Serbs from Croats. Orthodoxy was thus hostile precisely because it was Serbian.
- ❖ Ustasha ideology represented a new state religion. Religion served as a distinct marker between the Croat nation and "undesirable elements", especially the Orthodox Serbs.
- ❖ Holm Sundhaussen expressed the notion that "Croats were a God-given, immoral blood community, which conquered its settled areas 1400 years ago and therefore had acquired inalienable territorial rights."
- ❖ Most Croats saw Ante Pavelić as "the hero of the day, the new and only program ... [and] the avenger of a martyred past." To his loyal followers Pavelić was in 1941 "practically a mythical being, a little 'demi-god,' the greatest Croat of all time."
- ❖ Ante Pavelic often referred to the the Old Testament – specifically the concept of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"- to argue that "violence and terror could be used to avenge the supposed sufferings and humiliations of the Croat nation in interwar Yugoslavia. Violence became a self-justifying value where the crucifix, knife, and pistol became Ustasha's Holy Trinity and a symbol of struggle and sacrifice.
- ❖ Ustasha perceived its members as "good and self-sacrificing believers, men of God and the nation" who saw a reflection of themselves and the nation in their priests." It was a common to the Ustasha to make frequent references to the eternal existence of the Ustasha martyr whose soul continued to live beyond the grave.
- ❖ Ustasha regime saw itself as a crusading organization that would return the nation to moral purity and virtue, reversing twenty years of Yugoslav liberal secularism.
- ❖ In an ideological milieu dominated by fantasies of anti-Serbianism, antisemitism and national purification, Catholicism was instrumentalized not as an expression of devotion to the Catholic faith but as a marker of Croatian cultural identity and nationhood.

