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Rakov Potok during the Second World War

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Historical Background

After the end of the First World War, Croatia became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which also included the territories of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Slovenia. It was a parliamentary monarchy ruled by the Serbian Karađorđević dynasty. From the start, the new state was unstable. Debates over national identity and the political structure of the kingdom were constant. In an attempt to centralize power and suppress growing dissent, King Alexander declared a dictatorship on January 6, 1929.

This move came shortly after the assassination of Stjepan Radić, a prominent Croatian politician, in the Belgrade parliament in 1928. This act, done by Puniša Račić, was a culmination of the political crisis in the state, caused by state centralism, economic crisis, and similar challenges. With the dictatorship, the king dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution, and banned all political parties. The country was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and reorganized into nine administrative regions. Although the monarchy was formally restored with a new constitution in 1931, real power remained centralized in Belgrade, and the dominant ideology emphasized Yugoslav unity, in practice, often favoring Serbian interests.

In this tense political climate, several opposition movements emerged, especially in Croatia. Among them was the Ustaše movement, a radical, nationalist, and separatist organization officially founded in 1930. The Ustaše called for an independent Croatian state, governed exclusively by ethnic Croats, and rejected Yugoslavia outright. Over time, the movement grew increasingly extreme and began planning terrorist attacks.

Due to the regime's repression, many Ustaše leaders — including Ante Pavelić — went into exile. They forged alliances with Croatian émigrés in Austria and Hungary and established contacts with radical and terrorist groups, including Italy's and Hungary's fascist elements, as well as VMRO, a Macedonian separatist organization operating from Bulgaria. After a key meeting with VMRO leaders in Sofia, Pavelić's asylum in Vienna was denied, and he relocated to Italy, where he would remain until 1941.

In Italy, Pavelić was welcomed by Mussolini's fascist regime, which supported the Ustaše as a tool to pressure Yugoslavia, especially over unresolved territorial claims along the Adriatic coast. The Ustaše set up official operations in Italy, publishing their programs and founding training camps for armed units. The most important camp outside Italy was in Janka Puszta, Hungary, near the Yugoslav border.

The Ustaše's most infamous act during this period was the assassination of King Alexander in Marseille in 1934, carried out with VMRO's help. While the assassination shook Yugoslavia and altered international relations, it also led to a backlash: Hungary withdrew support, Italy

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imprisoned Pavelić and exiled other Ustaše members to Lipari island, effectively sidelining the movement.

After his release from prison in 1936, Pavelić attempted to revive the Ustaše, and by 1938, their propaganda became openly anti-Serbian and antisemitic, views that would later become central to their regime's policies.

The Outbreak of War and the Creation of NDH

On March 25, 1941, the Yugoslav government, led by Cvetković and Maček, signed an agreement in Vienna to join the Axis powers. This was a diplomatic victory for Hitler, who hoped to bring Yugoslavia into his sphere of influence peacefully, especially as the Nazis prepared for the invasion of the Soviet Union. The deal came with generous terms for Yugoslavia, unlike for other Axis-aligned states.

However, the agreement provoked widespread discontent at home. Just days later, on March 27, a group of military officers led by Dušan Simović staged a coup d'état, deposing the government and the regent. Simović became prime minister and annulled the agreement with the Axis, preparing Yugoslavia for war.

Germany responded swiftly. On April 6, 1941, the Luftwaffe bombed Belgrade, marking the beginning of the so-called April War. It was a short and devastating campaign. Within eleven days, on April 17, Yugoslavia surrendered. The country was divided between Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria.

One of the key outcomes was the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which encompassed modern-day Croatia and the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as parts of western Serbia. Initially, Hitler considered offering leadership of the NDH to Vladko Maček, the leading Croatian politician at the time, but Maček refused to collaborate with the Axis. Instead, Mussolini proposed Ante Pavelić, who accepted the role.

For Pavelić and the Ustaše, this was a long-awaited opportunity. On April 10, 1941, in the evening, they entered Zagreb. Slava Ogrizović, witness to that event, describes it like this: "Only in the late afternoon of the same day did the trucks with Ustaše finally storm in. They were shouting, drunkenly howling, or singing their anthem, which we heard for the first time then. Although we were bitter toward those fascist lackeys, we couldn't help but laugh at the anthem, because it ended with: *'And the Ustaša on the battlefield, wounded, breathes his last…*"[1] The same evening, one of the Ustaše leader, Slavko Kvaternik, proclaimed the NDH via Radio Zagreb, just hours after German forces entered the city. Zagreb, now the capital of the new state, witnessed scenes of celebration. Some residents welcomed the Germans with flowers, viewing the event as the birth of Croatian independence. Witness accounts from the

[1] Slava Ogrizović, *Zagreb se bori*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1977.:13.

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time reflect this sentiment. Vera Winter, a young girl in 1941, recalled her mother saying: “My mother was happy. I have to admit that. She was happy. She said: ‘Well, yes, the Germans are here, and in a way it is an occupation, but we have an independent Croatian state.”[2]

Another resident, Dragica Vajnberger, remembered that people were unaware how close the German army was until it suddenly appeared in Zagreb’s streets, heavily armed and met with cheers.[3]

But this initial enthusiasm quickly faded. The NDH, a puppet state under Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, immediately implemented policies of terror and persecution. Racial laws were adopted. Arrests, deportations, and executions of Serbs, Jews, Roma, political dissidents, and anti-fascist resistance members began within days. The Ustaše established detention centers and concentration camps, quickly embedding a reign of terror across the new state.

As the capital, Zagreb played a central role in this system. Government offices, propaganda apparatus, and Ustaše leadership were based there. Laws were enforced with particular severity in the city, often more rigidly than in the rest of the NDH. Zagreb was both an administrative hub and one of the earliest locations where repression and violence became institutionalized.

The Establishment of the Ustaša System of Terror

The first months following the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia were marked by extreme chaos in Zagreb and across the country, most visibly through widespread persecution and terror against civilians. Virtually every representative of the new authorities — and even their subordinates — was given unchecked power to arrest, torture, and kill Jews, Serbs, political opponents, so-called “illegals” - members of the resistance, trade union activists, and other civilians, all without any accountability.

This initial wave of spontaneous violence was soon institutionalized. A network of specialized agencies and organizations was created to systematize repression and carry out torture and executions. These institutions were responsible for the deaths of many Zagreb residents, as well as thousands of other citizens across the NDH.

On April 30, 1941, the regime issued racial laws targeting Jews and Roma, defining who qualified as "Aryan" and regulating how different groups were to be treated. Although Serbs were not included in these racial laws, separate legislation outlined the Ustaša regime’s

[2] Vera Winter, Vera Winter - video - croatianmemories.org, accessed 30 May 2025
[3] Dragica Vajnberger, Dragica Vajnberger - video - croatianmemories.org, accessed 30 May 2025

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policies toward them. Both sets of laws became the foundation of state-sponsored persecution and laid the groundwork for systematic terror.

One particularly important document, the so-called "July Orders", instructed local Ustaša authorities to accelerate arrests and deportations of targeted groups, regardless of mitigating factors such as religious conversion to Catholicism, intermarriage, or other benefits In practice, these orders served as a legal basis for mass arrests and deportations of the aforementioned groups to concentration camps.

Even during their exile in Italy, the Ustaše had clearly identified Serbs as their primary target. Their goal was to create an ethnically "pure" Croatian state in which there would be no place for certain national or religious minorities. While the numbers of Jews and Roma in the NDH were relatively small, Serbs made up roughly one-third of the population and were spread throughout the country. In many areas, they represented a significant — and sometimes majority — segment of the population, and therefore posed a central challenge to Ustaša ideology.

Almost immediately after the founding of the NDH, laws were enacted that criminalized Serb identity and gave legal cover to Ustaša plans. What followed were mass arrests, accusations, and imprisonment of Serbs deemed enemies of the new regime. A series of decrees systematically restricted their rights and freedoms. The Ustaše developed a so-called "threefold solution" to the Serbian question: forced conversion to Roman Catholicism, expulsion or deportation to Serbia, and physical extermination.

The first wave of arrests of Serbs began as early as April 20, 1941, targeting prominent and affluent members of the Serbian community in Zagreb. Many of them were sent first to the Kerestinec camp and then transferred to the Jadovno camp, where they were executed. Just a week later, another large-scale operation was carried out, allegedly to preempt a planned uprising on Đurđevdan (St. George's Day, May 6). Large numbers of Serbs were arrested in Zagreb and throughout the country. Detainees from various regions were brought by train to the capital, where decisions regarding their fate were made. From then on, arrests continued regularly — sometimes of individuals, sometimes in small groups — but almost daily.

At approximately the same time, arrests of the Jewish population of Zagreb started. First, young people, intellectuals, and other prominent Jews. Ustaše told them that they were going to work, while in reality they were arrested and deported to the Danica concentration camp, and from there to the Gospić system of camps, where the majority of them were killed. Many of them were also detained in Kerestinec and transit camps in Zagreb.

Although the systematic deportation of Roma began in May 1942, individual arrests and deportations had already occurred previously. Most Roma were sent to the Jasenovac camp system, especially to Jasenovac III (the Brickworks) and the Uštica camp, where they were

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executed shortly after arrival. Within just a few months, during the spring and summer of 1942, almost the entire Roma population in the NDH was annihilated.

Illegal movement - resistance in Zagreb

After the initial enthusiasm many citizens expressed toward the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia and what was perceived as Croatian independence, public sentiment quickly began to shift. People started to notice that family members, friends, and neighbors were being arrested or taken away. The Ustaše often carried out these actions at night, entering homes and taking entire families, or selected individuals, without explanation. Many of them disappeared and never returned home. These raids were loud, public, and increasingly frequent in the early days of the regime, leaving an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Faced with growing terror, many citizens felt compelled to act. Some began offering help to those targeted, while others joined or supported the emerging resistance against the occupying forces and their system of violence.

This turning point is vividly captured in the testimonies of Slavica Kanić Detelić and Vera Winter, who reflected on their personal transformations and decisions to join the resistance movement. Kanić Detelić, who initially greeted the formation of the NDH and the arrival of German troops in Zagreb with joy, soon became disillusioned. “In the end,” she recalled, “I saw it with my own eyes and had the opportunity to witness how people were being persecuted, how that freedom, that supposed something, didn’t actually exist. That the Ustaše were the ones in control.”[4]

Vera Winter echoed this shift in perspective: “I was there, and I must admit that I chose a side... Not at that very moment! But soon after, when I saw how Jews were being arrested in Zagreb, and in my neighborhood, there were several Jewish families. The way they carried out those nighttime raids, when someone came into the house... We called them all ‘Gestapo,’ even though some of them were actually Croats.”[5]

In the wake of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's collapse, the only organized network capable of mounting resistance belonged to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) and its youth wing, the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ). At the time, the CPY had around 4,000 members, and SKOJ roughly 30,000 across the country. In Croatia, it was these networks that initiated the first acts of resistance, beginning with clandestine meetings and later moving into armed struggle following Germany’s violation of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on June 22, 1941.

[4] Slavica Kanić Detelić, Slavica Kanić Detelić - video - croatianmemories.org, accessed 30 May 2025
[5] Vera Winter, Vera Winter - video - croatianmemories.org, accessed 30 May 2025

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Still, many of those who chose to resist had no formal connection to the Communist Party or its youth organizations. They were motivated by empathy, a desire to help the persecuted, and a determination to oppose the Ustaše regime. Some eventually joined the CPY or its affiliated groups, while others remained politically unaffiliated. While the early resistance movement was primarily composed of committed leftists, over time it grew to include individuals of diverse political backgrounds, united by a common opposition to terror.

The social and political makeup of the resistance was remarkably diverse. It included intellectuals, writers, artists, musicians, and others, as well as workers, peasants, students, and even high school pupils. Men and women of all ages participated: Croats, Serbs, Jews, and members of other nationalities. Their roles varied widely. Some wrote and distributed underground leaflets, worked in clandestine printing presses, or on illegal radio broadcasts. Others served as couriers between resistance cells, sheltered fugitives, passed along letters and messages, or contributed financially through initiatives such as the “Red Aid.” Every act of support, no matter how small, carried immense risk, not just for the resisters themselves, but also for their families, landlords, neighbors, and friends. For this reason, those involved operated in secrecy, referring to themselves as members of the “illegal movement.” Activities were carried out underground, carefully hidden from the Ustaše, German forces, and other police formations. Secrecy, discipline, and courage were crucial; anyone arrested faced the grave responsibility of not revealing others.

Despite these dangers, it is estimated that one in four citizens of Zagreb at the time was involved in the illegal movement. This astonishing number speaks not only to the scale of repression but also to the widespread determination to resist fascism and the Ustaše regime.

As the NDH consolidated its rule and intensified its terror, military partisan units began to form across the country. These groups typically assembled in forests and mountain areas, where they could more easily evade detection. People who fled their homes, whether from cities or Ustaše-occupied villages, and those already engaged in resistance, joined these units to fight militarily against the regime. Over time, these formations grew significantly, becoming for many, particularly Jews and Serbs, the only viable means of survival. The partisan movement welcomed individuals of all ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. Men, women, and even children contributed in various roles to the broader National Liberation Struggle.

It was these partisan units that ultimately liberated cities throughout Croatia and Yugoslavia. This was a defining feature of the Yugoslav resistance: the country was not liberated by the Red Army or Allied forces, but by its own partisans. Zagreb itself was liberated on May 8, 1945, by several partisan brigades, marking both the end of the war and the triumph of the resistance.

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Soon after, this victory was enshrined in official commemorations and became part of a state-sponsored narrative, celebrating the heroic struggle of the partisans and their fight against occupation and fascism.

Zagreb During the Second World War

After the Ustaša takeover, the newly formed Independent State of Croatia (NDH) reorganized its territory into administrative units called *velike župe* (large counties). As the capital, Zagreb was excluded from the Prigorje county and designated a separate administrative unit directly subordinated to the central government. At the same time, the city council, which had previously governed alongside the mayor, was dissolved, and significantly more power was granted to the mayor, who could now make autonomous decisions on virtually all matters concerning the city.

The Ustaša authorities appointed Ivan Werner as mayor, a man with no political experience. Before assuming this position, Werner had worked as a butcher at the Dolac open market and was known as a respected tradesman. His appointment reflected the regime's intent to rule the capital through a loyal and easily controlled figure.

While the NDH government was still being formed, German forces — the first to enter Zagreb and effectively its rulers at the time — immediately stormed the offices of the Jewish Community of Zagreb and seized homes belonging to prominent Jews and wealthy citizens. These properties were repurposed into military headquarters, administrative offices, and soldiers' quarters. Almost immediately, food and luxury goods began to be exported from Zagreb to the Third Reich.

From late May 1941, mass arrests of Jews began in Zagreb, and detainees were deported to camps already in operation. In addition to Jews, early targets included intellectuals opposed to fascism and the Ustaša regime, political dissidents, and members of the resistance movement. By early July 1941, mass arrests and expulsions of Serbs had begun in the city as well.

As the arrests started almost immediately in April, the Ustaše needed a temporary holding facility before deporting people to other camps across the NDH. For this purpose, they repurposed the Zagreb Fairgrounds (*Zagrebački zbor*), a large complex of exhibition pavilions flanked by railway lines, including a dedicated industrial rail line. This site became the first transit camp in Zagreb, operating for about four months. Because it was located in the very center of the city, residents in surrounding buildings could see what was happening inside. Its central location also complicated logistics, particularly deportations. Consequently, in August 1941, the Ustaše shut down the Fairgrounds camp and opened a new transit camp on the city's outskirts, using the buildings of the Kristalum factory in the Zavrtnica neighborhood. This camp remained in operation for only a few months before closing in October 1941.

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After the closure of these two camps, Zagreb no longer had a dedicated transit camp. Instead, detainees were held in the city's various prisons and deported directly from there.

People detained in Zagreb's camps typically remained there for four to five days before being selected and transported to other camps in the NDH. Initially, prisoners were sent to the Danica camp near Koprivnica — the first Ustaša camp — and later to the Gospić camp system, which included Gospić, Jadovno, Slana, and Metajna. From the summer of 1941 onward, most deportees were sent to the Jasenovac camp system.

Shooting Sites in Zagreb

One of the forms of mass killing carried out by the Ustaše regime was execution by shooting. The victims, Jews, Serbs, Roma, political opponents, members of the resistance, and other civilians, were initially taken from transit camps and, later, from prisons, to be shot on the outskirts of Zagreb. Based on existing records, this practice likely began in the summer of 1941, probably in July.

Although the executions took place in wooded areas and locations outside the city center, they were neither hidden nor secret. On the contrary, they were publicly announced in newspapers and on posters displayed throughout the city, intended to intimidate the population and deter dissent. This created an atmosphere of constant fear and anxiety among citizens. Eva Grlić described the psychological impact in her testimony: "Those days in Zagreb were very, very unpleasant. First, every day, large posters appeared on billboards—this one was shot, that one was shot, 10 people were shot, 15 people were shot. The first were those from Kerestinec—Bude Borjan… I think he was among the first, with Adžija. I remember them. The Ustaše always claimed it was revenge, I don't even know for what."[6]

Slava Ogrizović describes how these posters and announcements worked, and how that atmosphere of fear and terror in the city: "From every billboard, from houses and fences, the death penalty screamed out. We read the lists with horror, searching for familiar names. But soon after the arrival of the Germans and the Ustaše, we stopped pausing in front of the notices. Namely, police provocateurs would mix into the groups of outraged citizens. They would first grumble angrily, then loudly curse the Poglavnik, the Ustaše, the Germans. If anyone from the group took the bait and also expressed their outrage, they would be arrested immediately."[7]

These announcements functioned as propaganda, often including false or distorted information. Victims were typically labeled as leaders or organizers of resistance actions and

[6] Eva Grlić, Eva Grlic - Testimony | IWitness, accessed 30 May 2025
[7] Slava Ogrizović, *Zagreb se bori.* Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1977.:16-17.

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were said to have been executed as a form of retaliation, although these people were most often innocent and didn't have any connection with the actions and diversions that happened.

After arrest, detainees were first gathered in transit camps or prisons, where selections were made. Some were deported to concentration camps throughout the NDH, while others were marked for execution at designated shooting sites. The criteria for these selections remain unknown. However, in many cases, the killings were retaliatory acts following resistance operations in the city.

One example of this is the shootings in retaliation done after the successful action at Botanički vrt, that intended to show that the resistance to Ustaše in Zagreb is strong by killing young Ustaše members. As the perpetrators managed to infiltrate the crowd in the city center, leave their weapons and escape, the ustaše took prisoners from the prisons and shot them at Dotrščina. In her interview, Mirjam Gross explained that her aunt, uncle, and young cousin were part of that group. "My father's brother Hinko, his second wife, and their daughter Verica Gross, they were trying to flee to Italy. But they didn't succeed. They were taken off the train and imprisoned in Zagreb, I think on Savska Street. At the time, I didn't know anything about it. Then there was a sabotage action in the Botanical Garden, and they executed hostages in retaliation. Among those hostages were them — and they were shot in Dotrščina. … And my Verica was 17 years old. That's the hardest part for me. I wasn't that close to the rest of the family, but she was like a sister to me, and I carried the burden of her death my whole life. I always imagined what that moment was like — when she looked up at the sky for the last time."[8]

Another example was shootings after a successful sabotage operation that destroyed the main post office in Zagreb, the perpetrators managed to escape the city and join partisan units elsewhere. Despite the swift arrival of police and Ustaše security services, no one involved in the action was captured. In response, the regime rounded up about 100 people—Jews, Serbs, and suspected resistance members—and executed them at one of the established shooting sites. Similar reprisals followed other acts of sabotage or resistance, regardless of whether those arrested were connected to the events.

In some cases, victims were subjected to formal proceedings, though often rushed and devoid of fairness, and sentenced to death. Charges ranged from collaboration with the National Liberation Movement (NOP) and espionage to financial support for the resistance, distributing leaflets, or even minor infractions. NDH criminal laws, particularly the *Legal Decree on the Protection of the People and the State*, permitted the death penalty for a wide array of offenses, including insulting the Poglavnik (leader), the state, or the Ustaša movement, spreading so-called "disturbing" information, or uttering subversive remarks.

[8] Mirjam Gross, Mirjam Gross - Testimony | IWitness, accessed 30 May 2025

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The largest known execution site in Zagreb was Dotrščina, a forested area on the eastern slopes of Mount Medvednica, close to Maksimir Park. In fact, witnesses of the time used the name Maksimir for the shooting site, not Dotrščina, and it was notorious for all the prisoners. Research estimates that around 7,000 people were executed there during the Second World War. Most were buried in mass graves at the site.

The second major shooting location was Rakov Potok, more precisely the Stupnički Lug woods, located on the southern outskirts of the city.

Rakov Potok: A Site of Executions on the Outskirts of Zagreb

Rakov Potok is a village located on the southern outskirts of Zagreb, approximately a 30-minute drive from the city center. The area lies on the slopes of the Samobor mountain range and is largely covered by forest, with a sparse population even today. During the Second World War, the number of inhabitants was even smaller, making the surrounding woodlands a secluded yet accessible location for covert operations. Although the executions took place in the nearby Stupnički Lug forest — technically within the territory of Stupnik — the name *Rakov Potok* became commonly used for the site of mass killings, a convention that remains in use today.

The choice of Rakov Potok as a shooting site was likely made in the summer of 1941. Its relative proximity to the city, coupled with its isolation and lack of visibility to the public, made it an ideal location for extrajudicial executions. The site remained active until the end of the war on 8 May 1945, although the majority of mass shootings ceased by December 1943. From that point on, the Ustaša regime increasingly resorted to public hangings as a method of reprisal and intimidation.

Due to the strategic position of Rakov Potok, near the wartime frontlines and situated along important transport routes, the area also contains multiple mass graves from different periods and for various categories of victims. These include partisans, civilians, and members of other military formations.

Victims were typically selected from among the detainees held in Zagreb's camps and prisons. They were executed in retaliation for acts of sabotage, resistance, or attacks on Ustaša or German forces. Eyewitness accounts reveal that the condemned were often transported to the site in open trucks, deliberately exposing them to public view. This spectacle was intended to spread fear among the population and discourage participation in resistance activities. According to testimonies, these transports took place almost nightly, reinforcing the constant sense of terror that defined life under the Ustaše regime.

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Slava Ogrizović, a member of the resistance, vividly described this atmosphere of fear in one of her wartime recollections. After being arrested during a secret meeting to recruit women into the anti-fascist movement, she wrote: “We appeared cheerful. We claimed this misunderstanding would be resolved today, that we would be sent home. But we all knew — at any moment they could take us to Rakov Potok, where people were killed in various ways, most often with a mallet to the head, or else they’d send us to the camps in Jasenovac or Stara Gradiška, or shoot us as hostages in retaliation for some partisan action.”[9]

As previously discussed, the general public was aware of the executions and knew the locations where they occurred. People who were arrested and imprisoned understood that there was always a real possibility of being taken to one of these sites and executed. This awareness is confirmed by numerous testimonies, memoirs, and other historical sources. Several witnesses also recalled that during interrogations, often accompanied by torture, beatings, and other forms of violence, police and other officials would explicitly threaten detainees with execution at Rakov Potok if they refused to plead guilty or reveal the names of their contacts and collaborators. One such account comes from Štefica Serdar Sabolić, who was accused of aiding the resistance. After her arrest, she was taken to the prison on Petrinjska Street in Zagreb, where she underwent repeated interrogations. Although she initially gave the authorities a fabricated story, she remained consistent and refused to divulge any real information. Eventually, one of the interrogators threatened that she would be taken to Rakov Potok and executed unless she confessed and named her associates.[10] For many prisoners, the names Rakov Potok and Dotrščina became synonymous with death.

Victims executed at Rakov Potok were buried in mass graves on site. Typically, these were shallow pits dug by local villagers, each holding between 20 and 30 bodies. Unfortunately, due to a lack of systematic research and the absence of surviving witnesses, we know very little about the individuals who were killed there. Most documented victims of Rakov Potok are members of the resistance and other prominent antifascists and communists, whose identities were preserved primarily because of their prominence in resistance during the War, but also post-war heroic narratives of partisan victory and many different state-sponsored commemorations.

However, as research on Dotrščina has shown, it is likely that those executed at Rakov Potok came from diverse social and political backgrounds. There were also most likely Serbian and Jewish victims, as well as other political opponents. Furthermore, victims of Rakov Potok included workers, peasants, intellectuals, students, women and men alike, communists and socialists, but also social democrats, members of the Croatian Peasant Party, and ordinary

[9] Slava Ogrizović, *“U zatvoru”*, U: Ahmetović, Lutvo, ur. *Zagreb 1941-1945*, zbornik sjećanja. Zagreb: Gradska konferencija SSRNH, Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, Školska knjiga, 1982.: 343.
[10] Štefica Serdar Sabolić, Stefica Serdar Sabolic - Testimony | IWitness, accessed 30 May 2025

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citizens suspected of aiding the resistance. Some were from Zagreb; others came from surrounding towns and villages, like Lasinja and others in the Kordun region.

Estimates of the number of victims buried at Rakov Potok range between 400 and 700[11], though some believe the figure could be considerably higher. It is possible that some bodies were relocated or buried elsewhere, making accurate counts difficult. This uncertainty is underscored by broader data: historians estimate that approximately 18,000 people were executed by shooting in Zagreb during the war, with around 7,000 believed to have been shot at Dotrščina alone.[12] These figures suggest that the number of victims at Rakov Potok may have been significantly underestimated. A team of researchers from the Croatian State Archive in 1980 started a project of researching victims of Dotrščina, Rakov Potok, and other killing sites, with the aim of collecting names and creating biographies of the victims. Until today, they managed to confirm only 98 victims of Rakov Potok, while in their research, they estimate that around 500 victims were shot in the location.[13] Unfortunately, given the incomplete documentation and deliberate obfuscation of evidence, we may never know the full scale of atrocities committed at Rakov Potok. Still, preserving the memory of this site and recognizing the diversity and humanity of its victims remains a vital part of understanding Zagreb's wartime history.

Memorialization of Rakov Potok: Between Remembrance and Oblivion

Sometime during the 1960s, a memorial park was established at the site of executions in Rakov Potok. The exact year when the park was created is not known, but as the Yugoslav culture of remembrance of the Second World War places of executions was developing in the 1960, when also Dotrščina memorial park was developed, as well as others all over the country, we can guess that it was the case with Rakov Potok too. It was designed by a multidisciplinary team of authors who developed a comprehensive concept, including monuments, landscaping, and plant design. The site was intended as a place of remembrance and reflection for its visitors.

The memorial complex consists of a stone monument near the roadside, bearing the inscription: **"**See where four hundred victims of fascism from 1941 rest, Rakov Potok." This

[11] Lučić, Branko. *Spomenici i spomen obilježja radničkog pokreta i narodne revolucije u Zagrebu.* Zagreb, Regionalni zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture u Zagrebu, 1981.: 76.

[12] Mataušić, Nataša. "O spomen-parku Dotrščina", *dotrščina.hr*, TEKSTOVI – DOTRŠČINA, accessed 30 May 2025

[13] Grakalić, Marijan. "Projekt Dotrščina Arhiva Hrvatske", *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 1988.: 237- 241.: 239.

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monument functions both as a signpost and a solemn warning, directing visitors toward the forested area behind it, where a memorial ossuary contains the remains of the victims.

Inside the woods stands another monument, inscribed with a verse in metal letters: "In the dreadful blaze they quietly reaped us, Like dead wheat that barely rustles, We follow in the footsteps of the living, And no one will stop us." These lines come from *The Pit* (*Jama*), a powerful anti-fascist poem written by Ivan Goran Kovačić, a Croatian poet, partisan, and victim of war himself, killed in 1943. The choice of this poem highlights the memorial's purpose: to give voice to those who were silenced and to connect the landscape of death with the continuing struggle for justice and memory.

However, the fate of this memorial reflects the broader political shifts in Croatia following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the 1990s, a state-led campaign sought to erase many symbols associated with the socialist past, antifascism, and the People's Liberation Struggle. As part of this process, more than 3,000 memorials, monuments, and commemorative plaques across Croatia were removed, destroyed, or left to decay. Though the Rakov Potok memorial park was not physically damaged and remains intact, it was effectively abandoned. Overgrown with vegetation and hidden deep in the woods, the site has fallen into obscurity. No official commemorative events are held there, and even local antifascist groups appear to have ceased visiting it.

An attempt to revive the memory of Rakov Potok came in 2023, when the Virtual Museum Dotrščina, an initiative aimed at preserving the memory of Dotrščina's victims, extended its efforts to Rakov Potok. They invited artist Rosana Ratkovčić to create an artistic intervention at the site, which was opened to the public.[14] The event briefly reignited interest in this forgotten place. However, after the intervention concluded, Rakov Potok once again slipped into silence and neglect.

In contrast, the site has gained renewed attention in certain historical revisionist narratives. These accounts seek to reinterpret the events at Rakov Potok, claiming that it was not a site where Ustaša victims were executed by fascist authorities, but rather a place where communists and partisans allegedly carried out retaliatory killings of Ustaša members and their sympathizers, particularly during the chaotic final days of the war. Even if the revisionists do not deny the shootings that happened by Ustaše in the period from 1941 to 1943, they do not mention these crimes, but only focus on the others. These narratives aim to cast doubt on the antifascist legacy of the site and reframe historical memory along nationalist lines, even to rehabilitate Ustaše in the eyes of Croats.

[14] Šimpraga, Saša, "Izvedba memorijalnog performansa u čast žrtava fašizma na Rakovom Potoku", *h-alter*, Izvedba memorijalnog performansa u čast žrtava fašizma na Rakovom Potoku (na rubu Zagreba) - H-Alter, accessed 30 May 2025

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Today, the memorial park at Rakov Potok stands at the intersection of memory and erasure. It is both a physical space of mourning and a symbol of contested history, shaped by shifting political contexts, forgotten by institutions, yet still carrying traces of the violence and resistance that marked it during the Second World War. Whether it will be reclaimed as a site of remembrance or continue to be co-opted and neglected remains an open question—one that speaks to broader issues of historical responsibility, collective memory, and the politics of forgetting.

Biographies

Krešo Rakić (1919–1941)

Krešo Rakić was born on 27 October 1919 in Metković, a town in southern Dalmatia. He spent his early childhood there before moving with his family to Zagreb in 1932. In the capital, he continued his education and quickly became involved in activism by fighting for the rights of his colleagues in high school and other students, spreading leaflets, and taking similar actions. In 1936, at the age of 17, he joined the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ), marking the beginning of his political engagement.

With the outbreak of the Second World War and the establishment of the Ustaša regime in 1941, Rakić became an active member of the underground resistance movement. He learned how to produce bombs and other explosives, and his apartment in Petrova Street became both a training site and a storage facility for sabotage materials.

Rakić took part in *Operation Stadium*, a powerful act of solidarity that took place on 26 May 1941 in Zagreb. At the time, the Ustaša authorities had shut down schools and universities, requiring students to attend mandatory military training at the Maksimir stadium. On the day of the gathering, one of the organizers ordered Jewish and Serbian students to separate from the rest. In a coordinated act of defiance, SKOJ members, including Rakić, joined the segregated students and walked out with them, an action that prevented potential arrests and sent a strong message of resistance.

A month later, Rakić participated in the burning of the same stadium and was also involved in the sabotage at the Botanical Garden. During that operation, his role was to block police officers from shooting at his comrades from a nearby overpass on Miramarska Street. He managed to escape after the action and went into hiding.

Despite his youth, Rakić participated in numerous smaller actions and offered continuous support to the resistance. On 21 September 1941, he was arrested while distributing communist leaflets. He was first imprisoned in the Ustaša police headquarters at Zvonimirova 2, and later transferred to the notorious "Sing Sing" prison, known for the brutal torture of

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resistance members. That same night, he was taken to Rakov Potok and executed along with 17 others. His remains were buried in the memorial ossuary at the site.

In recognition of his bravery and contribution to the resistance, Rakić was posthumously declared a National Hero of Yugoslavia in 1952. For decades after the war, his name adorned schools, streets, and monuments. However, most of these commemorations were removed or renamed during the 1990s, and today, his story is largely forgotten by younger generations.

Dragica Hotko (1914–1941)

Dragica Hotko was born in Zagreb on 6 October 1914. She worked as a commercial assistant at the Kästner & Öhler department store, later renamed *Nama* (People's Department Store), located in the city center.

In 1937, she joined SKOJ, and two years later became a member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Dragica was not only committed to her own activism but also encouraged her family and others to join the growing resistance movement. She inspired her father to become involved, and he later survived the war and spoke about her courage.

With the onset of war, Dragica emerged as one of the key organizers of the resistance in Zagreb. She played a leading role in collecting and distributing "Red Aid" (*crvena pomoć*), donations of money, food, and other goods intended to support families of imprisoned or persecuted resistance members.

On 21 August 1941, she was arrested and imprisoned in the Ustaša police facility on Petrinjska Street. On 11 September, she was executed at Rakov Potok along with a group of fellow detainees.

Unlike many others, Dragica Hotko's name has not been entirely erased from public memory. A street in the Trnje neighborhood, where she lived, still bears her name. A commemorative plaque also remains on the building of her former workplace. Most recently, in 2022, a *Stolperstein* (stumbling stone) dedicated to her was placed near her former home in Trnje, as part of a European initiative to remember victims of fascism through personal, place-based memorials.

Marija Habulin (1912–1941)

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Marija Habulin was born in 1912 in Poznanovec, a village in the Croatian Zagorje region, where she completed her primary education. She later moved to Zagreb to attend a commercial academy and remained in the city thereafter. Employed at the insurance company *Croatia*, she was introduced to progressive and leftist ideas through her work and contacts, which ultimately led to her involvement with the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY). She officially joined the Party in 1934 and became active in its underground operations in Zagreb.

In 1935, following Party directives, Marija was sent abroad to support its activities internationally, first in Vienna, and then in Paris. There, she played a key role in organizing Yugoslav and other international volunteers for the Spanish Civil War. In September 1937, she joined the war effort herself. During her time in Spain, Marija served as secretary of the historical commission of the International Brigades, worked in the health services in Albacete, and later in a hospital in Girona.

Following the end of the war, Marija was among many foreign fighters interned in French camps. After her release, she returned to Zagreb but was soon arrested and imprisoned in the notorious “Glavnjača” prison in Belgrade. She was sentenced to 14 months and served her time in Požarevac prison. Upon her release in March 1941, she resumed her involvement in the resistance movement in Zagreb.

Marija quickly came under the surveillance of Ustaša authorities, who considered her a known and dangerous communist. To avoid arrest, she fled to her brother’s house in Poznanovec. However, in the close-knit community of her native village, her presence was soon discovered. Local police, informed by neighbors, arrested her on 13 August 1941. After being held in Zlatar prisons, she was transferred to Zagreb, where she was recognized as a high-profile threat. On 11 September 1941, Marija Habulin was executed at the Rakov Potok execution site.

After the war, a street in Zagreb was named in her honor, though the name was removed during the 1990s. In 2022, a Stolperstein (Stumbling Stone) was laid in the Trnje neighborhood to commemorate her life and sacrifice, offering a small but powerful reminder of this brave woman who stood up against fascism.

Rudolf Domany (1909–1941)[15]

Rudolf Domany was born in 1909 in Orahovica, a town in the Slavonia region of Croatia, where he completed his primary education. He continued his studies abroad, attending universities in Paris and Vienna, and ultimately earned a degree in economics. After completing his education, he returned to Zagreb and found employment at the “Našička” factory, followed by work at the “Baum Brothers” leather wholesale.

[15] More about Rudolf Domany can be found in testimony of Eva Grlić, Eva Grlic - Testimony | IWitness, accessed 30 May 2025

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Rudolf's younger brother, Robert, was actively involved in the workers' movement and had close ties to the communist circles, which influenced Rudolf to join the movement as well. It was through these connections that Rudolf met his future wife, Eva Israel (later Domany and Grlić), whom he married in 1940.

In the spring of 1941, just a month before the outbreak of the war, Rudolf and Eva welcomed their daughter, Vesna. After they got married, they rented an apartment in the center of Zagreb that became a hub for various underground activities. The apartment housed illegal printing equipment used for producing leaflets and other propaganda materials for the resistance movement. It also served as a meeting place for activists and occasionally provided shelter for those in hiding.

In June 1941, Rudolf, Eva, and their one-month-old daughter were arrested at their home following a denunciation by a neighbor. Both Rudolf and Eva were of Jewish origin, and Rudolf was a known member of the resistance movement. They were taken to the Zagreb Fairground camp but were released after just one day, likely due to the presence of their infant daughter. However, only days later, Rudolf was arrested again and detained at the prison on Račkog Street 9.

Following the sabotage attack at the Botanical Garden (Botanički vrt), Rudolf was executed as a hostage at Rakov Potok alongside ninety others. The whole Domany family, including Rudolf's brother Robert, his parents, and grandparents, were killed during the war, older members in the camps, as they were Jews, Robert in one of the battles, as he was a member of a partisan unit.

Rudolf's name was commemorated on a plaque in Zagreb's city center alongside fellow trade union members who were killed during the war. This plaque was removed during the 1990s and was not returned after. Additionally, the Domany brothers are honored with a street named after them in the Knežija neighborhood of Zagreb.

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