

THE EXPOSED SECRET:

THE STORY OF FORCED REPATRIATION OF SLOVENES

AFTER WORLD WAR II

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Death, destruction and human tragedy are unfortunate inevitabilities of war. However, a nation does not expect to receive such blows at the hands of the Allies as was the case with the Slovenian Homeguards (*Domobranci*) following World War II. After several years of fighting both a civil war within Yugoslavia, as well as dealing with the ongoing Nazi turmoil in Europe, the *Domobranci* fled to Austria at the end of the war in order to seek shelter from Great Britain, who was expected to aid them in their fight against a postwar establishment of a communist dictatorship by Tito and his partisans. Boarding trains that the British occupation forces promised would transport them towards Italy for rearmament, the *Domobranci* were unknowingly boarding their own hearses. The trains were taking them back into Slovenia where they would meet the inevitable demise- a bullet in the back of the head. Through deception the British repatriated over anticommunist fighters and anticommunist civilians back to their pursuers to be slaughtered and buried in mass unmarked graves.

The communists took every possible measure to ensure that those who returned to Slovenia were slaughtered with the utmost secrecy. The partisans took no chances in order to consolidate their political power and were satisfied that their opposition had been

eliminated. Fewer than half a dozen miraculously survived this ordeal. Although their forced repatriation by the British government was a well kept secret from the western world for half a century, this tale of treachery was eventually made known. There has been no chastisement of those who orchestrated the slaughter of the Domobranici; the individuals who murdered them not with guns, knives, and blades, but with lies and deceit.

The subject of forced repatriation of human beings at the end of the Second World War is so multifaceted that it presents an array of problems for those who would attempt to unravel its secrets studying it. Unlike the study of the Jewish Holocaust, now considered a single interdisciplinary field, post-war repatriation is still mostly studied in non-english text and only from the historians on the victim's side. For British historians, repatriation is generally considered on an abstract citation of a provision in the Yalta Agreement. There is no field of "Repatriation Studies" and each exploration must rely on a single discipline, such as History or Political Science, to explore a single aspect without really considering the whole.

While a multi-disciplinary approach is warranted, history can perhaps best focus on cause and effect. Forced repatriation did not "just happen." While there were many causes, the actual cornerstone of implementation, indeed of legalization, was the Yalta Agreement. Although the effects of repatriation were great and varied, this paper seeks to explore but a single effect of the whole agreement: the forced repatriation of Slovenes.

The War was filled with secrets. The Yalta Conference once again brought British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin together to discuss post-war Europe. They had met from

February 4th to the 11th in 1945, but it wasn't until 1947 that the document in its entirety was divulged for both militaristic and political concerns.

The Big Three at Yalta with the stroke of a pen made global decisions, the aftershocks of which are still being felt today. The Big Three viewed the war in black and white terms: Nazis against Allies. Even a former foe, Joe Stalin, was now a temporary Ally; wartime propaganda made him our friend, "Uncle Joe". But the war was hardly black and white, as the wartime news led everyone to believe. Individual countries were not black and white; individual people were not black and white. The average person or soldier had little concept of World History 101, of the disastrous effects of the treaty after world war I, had little idea even of what was actually going on during the war, most probably least of all in Yugoslavia.

The primary objective at the time of the Yalta agreement was to accomplish a sense of unity among the Allies. This unity would hopefully provide for a basis of which we could build a stable peaceful Europe and World. The US and Great Britain were more than willing to make any concessions that would help to create a semblance of unity, even if it meant forcible repatriation.¹ This sense of guarded cooperation in hopes to create détente between the allied countries had its risks in its strong value of trust. While the Big Three stated that they wished to "respect the special interests of other nations," many countries were soon to find out that they were only pawns that would be barter among these big powers.²

While the Yalta Agreement did not include specifically what was to be done with POWs or refugees it did make known that Tito was going to head the political leadership

¹ Athan G. Theoharis The Yalta Myths University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 1970 page 14

² Athan G. Theoharis page 219

in Yugoslavia. This naïve appeasement was discussed and decided upon, but it was never entirely spelled out in the signed public documents.³

During World War II Yugoslavia was torn with internal struggles. On March 25, 1941, to avoid Nazi invasion, Yugoslavia joined the military alliance of Germany, Italy, and Japan. But there were wide-spread protests to the move. On March 27, 1941, there was an officers' coup, with the result that Yugoslavia withdrew from the above alliance, and on of April 5th, 1941 signed a defense agreement with the USSR. However, the very next day, April 6th, Germany, supported by Italians, Hungarians, and Bulgarians, invaded Yugoslavia. On 17th of April, Yugoslav army officers signed the capitulation. A reason for such a rapid defeat is that the country was internally torn apart by nationalist tensions and class contradictions, and like Poland was no match for modern warfare or the blitzkrieg.⁴

King Peter and his government fled in fear via a circuitous route to England. The country was already overrun by Germany, and by fleeing to England they had the great possibility of having their form of government returned to Yugoslavia at the end of the war. The vestige of the Yugoslav army took refuges into the mountains under the leadership of Draza Mihajlovic. This is where they were grouped into units and called the Cetniks. Mihajlovic was in command of the Yugoslav Royal Army. He had retained his loyalty to the Western Allies as well as Yugoslav King Peter II throughout World War II.⁵ He was labeled as a “conservative, royalist, Serbian nationalist whose political objective was to recreate a Yugoslavia ruled by his kind and dominated by Serbs.”⁶

³ Diane Shaver Clemans Yalta New York-Oxford University Press 1970

⁴ The Library of Congress Studies “Yugoslavia History” December 1990www.geographic.org

⁵ Bor. M. Karapandzic Kocevye: Tito's Bloodiest Crime Iskra Munchen Germany 1965 page 14

⁶ R.J. Crampton Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century New York, Routledge 1997 page 201

At the same time the communist party was beginning to form loosely coordinated guerrilla units within Yugoslavia's forests. Active resistance started with the invasion of Germany on the territory of the Soviet Union, and under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito the proletarian shock brigade was formed. At first there was only one such group but by the summer of 1942 there were five units each with a thousand men strong.

Where ever the partisans marched, they would set up Peoples Committees, and in due time gained support from a portion of the Yugoslav people. Their numbers were continually on the rise. They had "promised reconciliation between the ethnic groups..."⁷ but brought only further turmoil.

Many families within Yugoslavia were forced to hide in order to escape death. It was policy that for every German soldier killed, 100 Serbs would be massacred, and for every German soldier wounded, there were 50 Serbs to be killed. Most of the times, these were peaceful peasants, who were simply rounded up in their villages, and murdered as a crowd. This policy forced the villagers to flee into the mountains and the forests, and there to engage in an armed resistance to the Germans; joining both the Domobranci and the Partisans.

Besides fighting the Nazis each resistance group, according to its philosophy being either communist or anti-communist, also had to fight each other in order to survive the present and remain viable to determine the future of post-war Yugoslavia. Both the Partisans and the Domobranci fought each other as well as the Germany occupying forces. Both groups used "the war to liquidate (their) domestic enemies."⁸

However at war's end, it was Tito and his partisans that proved triumphant, in

⁷ R.J. Crampton page 202

⁸ R.J. Crampton page 203

large measure due to the fact that midway through World War II, British shifted their support from Mihailovich to Tito. The westward-moving Russian Red Army into Yugoslavia also gave its aid to Tito as opposed to an anti-communist force. In the eyes of the western-media Tito was the savior of Yugoslavia, viewed as being anti-Nazi, not pro-communist. Also the partisan's numbers were great and they were able to over-power the forces of the Domobranzi. Tito's forces were strong enough to control the country and keep opponents out. Tito was labeled as a "liberator from the axis", "reconciler of the Yugoslav peoples" and as a result was able to create a socialist republic under his rule. Most of Tito's enemies were killed, so there was little opposition.⁹ Those who were still considered to show any effective military opposition in the early stages of Tito's communist Yugoslavia were the Homeguardsmen who at the time withdrew from Slovenia into Austria.¹⁰

In Slovenia there was an anti-communist army of about twenty thousand men. The largest threat to the Yugoslav communists in Slovenia were the Domobranzi. The Domobranzi controlled the Ljubljana Basin, which was a powerful stronghold. Tito's men attacked the Domobranzi with full force.¹¹ The Domobranzi were no longer able to counterbalance the attack brought upon by Tito who by this time had the active support of the Red Army behind him. As a result, all anti-communist groups were forced to flee to Italy or Austria depending on their geographical location. Most of the Chetniks withdrew to Italy, along with a small percentage of the Domobranzi. The majority of the Domobranzi and a small percentage of Chetniks accompanied by thousands of civilians

⁹R.J. Crampton page 203

¹⁰ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 14 (ie they had escaped their clutches at the end of the war)

¹¹ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 36

fled to Austria in order to escape the clutches of communism.¹² The continual attacks on the anti-communist forces as opposed to German forces proved only that Tito's goal was to eliminate all of his political adversaries within the country, not the Nazi occupier.¹³

At the conclusion of World War II in Europe, on May 9, 1945, the communist regime under Josip Broz Tito was forcefully imposed upon Yugoslavia. His force was described as the dominating force and the one which would be recognized by the rest of the world.¹⁴

The Yugoslav Royal Army and Slovenian civilians who fled Slovenia were received by the British Army that had occupied southern Austria at the war's end. In all there were about thirty thousand Slovenian refugees who had hoped that by fleeing into British hands they were guaranteed "at least their personal freedom."¹⁵ As long as they were free from the communist grasp of Tito they were pleased and were prepared to start anew if it was required of them. They knew that as a result of the partisan's wartime actions, that they would be killed if they remained in Slovenia once Tito officially took over the government control.

Saddened at the fact that they were forced to stop their fight against communism, they were still able to acknowledge that they had tried their hardest to defeat communism in their country. The British Army permitted this mass exodus of twenty thousand anti-communist Slovenians to cross the frontier from Yugoslavia into Austria; they disarmed the Domobranci and directed the entire group into an open-field camp in a small village

¹² Bor. M. Karapandzic page 15

¹³ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 37

¹⁴ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 18

¹⁵ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 40

call Vetrinje near the border.¹⁶

While life was rather tolerable for the twenty thousand refugees within Vetrinje, on May 23 there suddenly came a call to assembly as the British military command ordered the Yugoslav officers to have their men ready for voyage the following day. At that time they were told that they were going to join their fellow anti-communist units which had fled to Italy at the close of the war.

The following day they were forced onto trucks which were to transport them to the train station. These trucks were joined with an armament of tanks, machine guns and fully armed soldiers. As the trucks reached the railroad station the men were unloaded and they were forced into lines which led them through a pair of British soldiers who patted down each man in search of any weapons which may have escaped initial view when the troops first came into Austria. However, the British soldiers had also taken off the soldiers any watches or jewelry of value which they so desired.¹⁷

The area was heavily fortified with guards both visible and those hiding in nearby bushes hidden away like the truths which were soon to befall on the oblivious soldiers. After the shakedown the soldiers were marched to the railroad station which was some two hundred yard away. It wasn't until the railroad station was in full view that the Domobranci had realized what was to become of them.

At the railroad station were partisan soldiers who had surrounded the area like vultures ready to prey on a dead carcass. The Domobranci were as good as dead. Escape was impossible. The soldiers were filled with both fear and rage. The wrath against the treachery but the British government whom had fooled them for so long and made aware

¹⁶ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 42

¹⁷ Babnik, Anton. Personal interview. 16 August 1995 #1

to the soldiers before they bordered their hearses in the shape of train cars.¹⁸ These men were not going to Italy as promised to them; they were being sent back to Yugoslavia where they knew they would meet their inevitable demise. From May 24 to May 29, with the war supposedly over in Europe, there was still an act of death and destruction worse than seen during any point in the war at the hands of the Nazis.¹⁹ These acts of forced repatriation occurred at two different railroad stations: Rosenbach/Podrozca and Bleiburg/Pliberk. No matter which station you were sent to, your next destination was going to be somewhere in the afterlife.²⁰

By a twist of fate one of the soldiers on the first convoy back into Yugoslavia was able to escape the clutches of death. By breaking the bars in the train car window as well as breaking one of the boards which covered it, a man by the name of Vladimir Ljotic was able to squeeze his body through the small hole and jump into the darkness as the train was going through a tunnel. After surviving the fall from the moving locomotive he traveled back to Vetrinje. He attempted to warn the others of their fate but his story was met with mostly disbelief. However, rumors did begin to circulate throughout the camp over the next few days as the daily repatriation transports were continuing as scheduled. The British publicly dismissed the rumors and threatened to use deadly force if the Domobranci refused to board the trucks.

It is also reported that several other Serbian officers had escaped and came back to Vetrinje Camp to inform the Slovene authorities. They wouldn't report to the British authorities because they were afraid that they would be forced back onto the trains. Most

¹⁸ Babnik, Anton. Personal interview. 16 August 1995 #1

¹⁹ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 50

²⁰ Metod M. Milac Resistance, Imprisonment, and Forced Labor: A Slovene Student in World War II Peter Lan Publishing, Inc. New York New York 2002 page 197

people did not believe these men and it was dismissed as “enemy propaganda” by the British.²¹ Nonetheless, by this time the British had already allowed for the repatriation of about eighteen thousand five hundred refugees. These refugees were not coming back. They were forever to remain buried in unmarked mass graves scattered among the mountains, which they once called home.²²

The prisoners of Tito, were starved not only of food and water, but of their dignity and status as human beings. They were no longer able to taste the freedom they once knew or the tokens which may have reminded them of home, such as watches, wedding rings, or a cross which they wore around their neck. They were treated worse than any wild animal, and can only be compared to those victims of the Nazi holocaust. To Tito these people were simply political adversaries that had to be exterminated.²³

The trains eventually made their way to St Vid, which is located just on the outskirts of Ljubljana. There the communists had taken over a large seminary building. The soldiers were jammed into rooms where only about a third of them were even able to sit down on the ground at one time. The partisans at this time were still robbing the soldiers of any valuables they could muster.²⁴ It was here that partisans attempted to single out any officers and those which they believe had caused great harm to the communist cause. The partisans would simply go into a room, request several people whom they were looking for and then take out the soldiers that they could tell were officers by their uniforms. Those officers who caught on with what was going on would either destroy their uniform or mangling the uniform so bad that you could no long tell

²¹ Metod M. Milac page 196

²² Bor. M. Karapandzic page 52-53

²³ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 65

²⁴ Bor. M. Karapandzic page 54-55

that it was an officer's uniform. It was already here that the killing began. At night in the darkness, the only sounds are of gunshots and the faint heartbeats of defeated men, women and children.²⁵

Once again as if the torment and uncertainty of where they were going to die was not bad enough, they were once again forced onto trains. The trip may have seemed short but that was only because they were forced to disembark from the train and make their way over a footbridge in Ljubljana because the main bridge had been destroyed. Once again they boarded the train and were sent on their way. This time it was going to be their last stop. For many it is Kocevje.^{26,27}

This time they march to a school building. It is here that their arms are bound with wire and then had their arm bound with another officer. Not only did this not allow for a prisoner to escape but it also cut off circulation to their hands and prevented any chance for escape.

It was here that so many learned first hand what it meant to be tortured. Milan Zajec, one of the half a dozen to survive this whole ordeal, described how he observed a fellow soldier, naked, being repeatedly stabbed at by a partisan. Both of his eyes were already gouged out and blood covered his whole body. The troops were forced to do mundane tasks such as standing up and sitting down, each time the wire was cutting into their flesh, and if they didn't do it fast enough they were beat or cut at with small crooked knives. This continued on for a hundred yards before the men were halted. At this point they were ordered to strip naked. Although Milan Zajec and several others would cling

²⁵Babnik, Anton. Personal interview. 16 August 1995 #3

²⁶Bor. M. Karapandzic page 67-68 (This information was contained in both these books)

²⁷Nikolai Tolstoy *The Minister and the Massacres* Century Hutchinson Ltd, Brookmount House Chandos Place, London 1986 page 178 (This book has been banned in England as a result of a court case concerning Nikolai Tolstoy and Lord Aldington (Toby Low))

onto their drawers in hopes to save some dignity. They were then forced through thorn bushes as they were beaten by a gauntlet of partisans. The gauntlet led all the way to the mouth of a gapping hole.²⁸

Here they were searched to see if they had any gold teeth. While at one time this may have been a luxury, they were truly paying for it now. Their jaws were broken and the gold tooth was hit loose. After it was determined that you no longer had anything of value, including their lives, a single shot was fired into the heads and they were rolled into the pits. The pits themselves were very large. The site was chosen for its many limestone caves; typically about five to 10 meters in diameter and which drop vertically to depths of 50 to 100 meters.²⁹ The partisans blew up the caves so that they were larger in diameter and therefore could hold more of the fallen bodies. To further ensure that the Domobranci and other anti-communists were exterminated, the partisans would throw in grenades as well as fire the submachine gun into the pit.

Sadly many people survived the initial fall into the pits, however they were either injured to the point that all they could do was pray. Others who were too weak to move eventually starved or died from blood loss. Nonetheless, despite all of the precautions made by the partisans, there were less than half a dozen who escaped at nightfall out of the pits. Covered by hanging rocks, fallen trees and the bodies of their dead comrades, they waited and escaped at times that they felt right for them. However, one man's fate was not as lucky. In an attempt to escape too early in the night, the Partisans heard him attempting to escape and proceeded to stab him to death, making sure that they were the ones to hear his last breathe. The other survivors were forced to live a life in fear,

²⁸ Nikolai Tolstoy page 180

²⁹ Brad Collis "The Dark Secret" Ameriska Domovina July 1, 1999

traveling throughout Slovenia for several years until they were able to escape safely into Austria and eventually travel to the United States and Argentina where they currently live today. Several of the men have written their story in hopes to be heard, and bring closer to their fallen brothers.³⁰

The decision for the British to forcible repatriate the Slovenians and other anti-communist back to the dirt lined coffins can first be seen in the accounts stated by Churchill on April 29, 1945, that all Yugoslav dissidents³¹ would be held in camps until an allied decision was reached. This was the official policy at the time. However, the then Minister Resident in the Mediterranean, Harold Macmillan, had flown to Klagenfurt on May 13, 1945, to confer with General Keightly, where they allegedly discussed the repatriation of all the refugees. Harold Macmillan was then able to obtain an order from the administrative officer, General Robertson that stated that “all Yugoslavs who served in the German forces must be handed over to Tito.”³² This was in fact in direct violation of the 1929 Geneva Convention concerning prisoners of war. The role of Macmillan was laid out that his decision to implement repatriation was a political one and direct relation to his experience, as well as direct connection with several of higher ranking officials.³³

Consequently, General Robertson’s order clearly made a distinction between those Yugoslavs who served in the German forces and those who did not. No screening was committed by General Keightly to separate those who did and did not fight with the German forces.

What made the matter even worse was on May 17th when Brigadier Toby Low

³⁰ Nikolai Tolstoy page 181-193

³¹ Opponents of Tito

³² Testimony page 33

³³ Nikolai Tolstoy page 84

(Lord Aldington)³⁴ issued the order that “all Yugoslav nationals at present in the corps area be handed over to the Tito forces as soon as possible.”³⁵ Lord Aldington further went on to state that they would be disarmed and not told of their destination. By taking the initial order and translating it as he so desired, he sealed the fate of thousand of men, women and children.

On May 15th Colonel France Hocevar of Yugoslavia and Lord Aldington met and discussed how they would receive the Yugoslav nationals. Nevertheless, on May 17th Marshal Alexander, the Supreme Allied Commander, sent an order that required all Yugoslav dissidents to be sent to Italy. Lord Aldington swore until he dieing day that he never received that order. While later under scrutiny Lord Aldington stated that even though they were instructed not to send any Yugoslavs by force or against their will, everything that happened concerning the Yugoslavs was a result of higher command.³⁶

While no one is claiming fault, and Lord Aldington is now deceased, there still remains unanswered questions that will one day never be answered because all of those people who were directly involved will soon be dead.

There was in fact an agreement between General Keightly and Colonel Ivanovic to hand over to Tito of the Yugoslav anti-communists, military and civilian, who at the time were under British protection and control in the Vetrinje Camp, and elsewhere in British occupied Austria, was in fact in exchange for the Yugoslav Forces' departure from Southern Carinthia. The Yugoslav Forces left Carinthia the day this agreement was

³⁴ Toby Low was later knighted after the war and his name was changed to Lord Aldington

³⁵ Uros Roessmann Testimony: proceedings of the historical symposium at Tinje/Teinach University of Graz June 30 1995 page 35

³⁶ Uros Roessmann pages 31-42

reached.³⁷

To the British, their repatriation scheme was to ultimately empty the Vetrinj camp of every last Slovenian man woman and child: first the military, then the civilians. After four days of transporting Homeguards and some civilians (approximately 9,000 people), a series of events exposed this secret operation. The pro-tem civilian leader of the camp, a respected Slovenian physician who had studied in the USA and thus knew English, was finally convinced of the true destination of these British transports by a series of escapees. This physician, Dr. Valentin Mersol, approached the Allied officer who was in charge of the refugees in the camp, a Major Barre, a Canadian officer. Together they approached the British General in charge of the operation with the truth. The British General, sensing that the Canadians were privy to their secret, was experienced enough to phone his superiors for advice. The message came back: stop all deportations immediately until General Alexander, the Field Marshall for the entire Mediterranean area, can review the case. The fact that this repatriation of Slovenians had been occurring without the knowledge of some of the highest levels of the Army was now a true embarrassment to the Allies.³⁸

Ultimately, there is disgrace in the fact that the allied forces knew exactly what was going to happen to the Slovenian refugees. It is evident in the name of the operation for the forced repatriation: Operation Keelhaul. "To keelhaul is the cruelest and most dangerous of punishments and tortures ever devised for men aboard a ship. It involves trussing a man up with ropes, throwing him overboard, unable to swim, and hauling him under the boat's keel from one side to the other, or even from stem to stern. Most of those

³⁷ Uros Roessmann pages 31-42

³⁸ Uros Roessmann pages 31-42

keelhailed under water are already dead when their punishment is over.”³⁹ Most of those forcibly returned did not survive. They lay together in their mass graves, dead as a result of treachery and deceit. There were a few that survived just as there are a few that would survive a keelhaul. Both are bloodied and broken, but both live to tell the tale. A tale which must be heard so that people may know of the treachery that took place in a time of peace.

Those who searched for the answer when they tried to find the truths behind forced repatriation, were met with little success and suffer their own keelhaul. They are scraped with lawsuits, official secrecy, and lost documents, as opposed to barnacles or bullets. Who then is able to speak for the dead? But when the living are prevented from speaking for the dead, has history itself also been keelhailed?

³⁹ Julius Epstein Operation Keelhaul: The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present The Devin-Adair Company Old Greenwich Conn. 1973 page 1