

Historical Accounts

The Relations Between the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Germans Prior to 1941 as the Reason for the Expulsion of the Ethnic-Germans After 1944

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The fate of the Germans in Yugoslavia at the end of WWII was determined by several factors. Apart from the wartime events the earlier history of centuries-long inter-ethnic relations left a deep mark.

Although it was many faceted, the Yugoslav communists chose to base their policy toward the Volksdeutsche only on the negative part of the common South-Slav – German relations. In that way they were continuing the pre-war bourgeois nationalism, but furthering actually their own political, social and ideological goals. What they chose to ignore was the huge contribution of the Germans to the development of culture and the economy of the South Slavic lands.

They also tended to ignore, or at least to play down the German origin of many Yugoslav luminaries in the fields of arts, literature and politics, without whom the history of the Yugoslav peoples would have looked much different. Instead of that they chose to refer only to the negative experiences and conflicts. Furthermore, they chose to imbed them in the history of conflicts the South Slavs had with the Habsburg Monarchy (although it was never a German nation state) and with Germany. Always keeping in mind also the positive side of the centuries-long common history, this author will concentrate in this paper only on its conflicting side, trying to explain how the conflicts came about and how they were interpreted, first by South Slav nationalists and then by the Yugoslav communists after WWII.

The first Germans to settle in the territory that would in 1918 become Yugoslavia, were those in Slovenia. (To be sure, the term Slovenia appeared only in mid 19th century.) During the 6th and 7th centuries B.C. the Slovenes inhabited their present homeland, as well as the neighboring territories. There they came into contact several Germanic tribes.

In 9th century they asked the Bavarians to help them fight the Asiatic marauding tribe of the Avars. The Bavarians did help them stave off the Avars, but subjugated them in the process. Very soon their power was supplanted by the Frankish one, which eventually devolved to the Habsburgs. In that way Slovenia remained under German domination until 1918.

In the Middle Ages the land was distributed among German feudal lords. The remnants of the Slovenian nobility – first the aristocracy and by 15th century the gentry too, merged politically, socially, culturally, and eventually ethnically with the German-speaking nobility, leaving the Slovenes as people of peasants.

German lords started bringing German peasants to their estates and German burghers to towns – most of whom were founded by these German colonists. This process would also have fateful consequences. One of the most important was the gradual assimilation of the Slovenes in the more outlying territories where they weren't so thick on the ground. By the late 19th century the Slovenes were reduced more or less, to the territories where they settled more densely and which they still inhabit.

To this day Slovenian nationalists moan the loss of one half of the original Slovene-inhabited territories, accusing the Germans of forcible Germanization. This accusation holds true only for the second half of 19th century, and even there, only partly. In fact the assimilation of the Slovenes was a 1000 years' process. It started early in the Middle Ages and went very gradually on until 20th century. It was in a way a natural process favored by the fact that the ruling nobility was German (or at least German-speaking), that the burghers were German (or German-speaking) and that social climbing went hand in hand with cultural and linguistic, and eventually ethnic assimilation.

What Slovenian nationalists often failed to see – or if they did, they tended to perceive it as normal and laudable – was the similar process running in favor of the Slovenes in those territories where they were the majority population – particularly in the country. In the present-day Slovenian territory, German peasants were assimilated to the Slovenes and only German burghers could ethnically survive in towns – particularly in the southern Styrian towns of Celje (Cilli), Maribor (Marburg) and Ptuj (Petau) where they managed to preserve their majority until 1918. To be sure, the Slovene nationalists claimed that the “Germans” in towns were actually of Slovenian origin –which was partly true.

The problem was that the Slovenian nationalists claimed the assimilation was always coercive. They refused to acknowledge the impact of other factors, such as social mobility – which not only made German artisans, officials, intellectuals or industrialists out of Slovenian immigrant peasants, but also German workers of Social-Democrat leanings.

The only predominantly German peasant enclave which survived in the territory predominantly inhabited by the Slovenes was Kocevje (Gottschee) in Crain. It was settled in 14th century by the counts of Oldenburg, and even though it lost some ground over centuries, it remained predominantly German until WWII. The Slovene nationalist claimed the Slovenes were the original inhabitants of the area, or that at least Slovenian settlers came along with the Germans from Carinthia, as well as that the territory was actually an ethnically mixed one.

Technically speaking it was true, but the Germans made up the vast majority of the inhabitants, making the assimilation of the immigrant Slovenes comparatively quick. Kocevje was a thorn in the flesh of Slovenian nationalists because it managed to survive as self-conscious German enclave. Otherwise it had no large importance being a poor wooded area from where people massively emigrated to USA since late 19th century.

Despite their small numbers, the Germans in Slovenia carried a much greater weight in terms of power and influence. Until 1918 the administration was German-speaking, as was most of the bourgeoisie. Social differences overlapped with ethnic ones. As the great Slovenian romantic

poet France Presern said: “In this country (i.e. Slovenia) those who give orders speak German and those who carry them out speak Slovenian.” As we have seen, this doesn’t mean the order-givers were necessarily Germans, but they were perceived as such by the masses and Slovenian nationalists.

Indeed the fact that there were many German-friendly Slovenes, not only among the self-made men, but also among peasants too, was particularly irritating for the Slovene nationalists, and it added special gravity to the “German problem” in their eyes. That’s one of the reasons which contributed to the severity of ethnic strife in the Slovenian lands since mid-19th century.

All this led to severe persecution of the Germans by Slovenian nationalists once they became top-dogs in 1918:

German associations were disbanded or turned into Slovenian ones and German schools, as hotbeds of Germanization, shut down, even though most of them were not opened with that intention. The German educational system was so reduced, that not enough German classes remained for German children – let alone those Slovenes who wished to educate their children in German in order to enable them social promotion. The authorities in Slovenia pursued oppressive national policy throughout the inter-war period which helped to push the Slovenian Germans in the hands, first of Austrian irredentists, and then of the Nazis.

This would have serious consequences for both the Slovenes and the Germans. The first were earmarked for expulsion into Croatia, Serbia, Poland or Germany after the occupation of Slovenia in 1941. Because of that, and decades long ethnic strife, Slovene intellectuals were one of the most influential champions of the expulsion of the Germans not only from Slovenia, but from the whole country.

Unlike the Germans in Slovenia, the Danube Swabians came only in 18th and 19th centuries to Southern Hungary (known as the Vojvodina in Serbian). They were brought there by the Viennese court and the nobility to till the land on the state and private estates acquired after the liberation from the Turks who had run the region for 150 years.

The Germans (usually called Swabians) were not the only settlers who were brought there. Already during the war the Serbs who were used as soldiers came in 1689/90. After the liberation from the Ottoman rule, the fertile Hungarian plane was only weakly populated. The Serbs (latecomers and locals) and Romanians were not only too thin on the ground, but were economically not productive enough: most of them were semi-nomadic cattle-raisers.

On the other hand the State and the nobility needed agriculturalists who would cultivate the deserted land and make profit. German peasants from South West Germany were seen as the best candidates for the job: they were numerous enough to export population, hard-working, (unlike the Serbs and Romanians) obedient, fed up with oppression of their princes and French incursions and land hungry, which made them willing to emigrate. For these reasons they were much desired as settlers not only by the Habsburgs, but also by Prussia, Russia, Spain and other countries. However, they were by no means the only colonists: the Hungarians, Slovaks, Czechs, Italians, and even Spaniards, were also recruited.

The settlers were granted a number of privileges such as tax exemption, advance payments, tools seed etc. that were meant to enable them to make the take-off. To be sure, they were also given land and often houses.

These privileges made them obnoxious to the Serbs because they often infringed with their way of living: the Serbs were cattle-breeders and they needed lot of space for grassing their herds. For that reason they were unhappy with parceling of land. In a number of cases they had to move out and to make room for the German settlers. They were also dissatisfied that they often had to clear and to plough the land before German settlers arrived. Sometimes they had to build houses for the colonists, or to give them shelter in theirs until the colonists' houses were built. Furthermore, due to tax exemptions for the settlers, the local Serbs had to pay all communal taxes alone during the first couple of years. All this was very onerous for the Serbs at that time, and was used time and again by Serbian nationalists in order to depict the Germans as intruders.

Although all these things did happen, in its totality, the historical reality was somewhat different. It is true that the Germans were granted privileges, but so were the Serbs in some cases. It is true that the Serbs had to move in order to make space for the Swabians, but in some cases in the Military Border it was the opposite: the Germans as poorer soldiers had to yield to the more pugnacious Serbs. In many cases the Serbs were indemnified for the land that was taken away from them, or they were given other parcels. Sometimes they had to leave their houses, but they were cheap, easy to build dwellings of semi-nomads anyway.

Serbian nationalists tended to oversee these facts and to see injustice, national intolerance or conspiracy of the Habsburgs behind these developments.

The grudge of Serbian nationalists was increased by the fact that the Germans, being not only endowed by the government, but also technically more advanced and at the same time more diligent and more thrifty, after the difficult initial phase (which lasted several decades) started to prosper better than their non-German neighbors.

This influenced also their behavior during the Hungarian revolution of 1848: the Hungarian elite was willing to grant civic equality but not national rights to numerous ethnic minorities. The Germans were interested in economic progress, and having no developed national consciousness, sided with the Magyars. The Serbs, on the other hand, being nationally more conscious, were afraid of the incipient Magyarisation.

This caused conflicts and marred the inter-ethnic relations. They were marred further still when German was introduced as the official language of the administration after revolution. The Serbs didn't realize that most of the officials of the hated absolutism were actually Slovenes, Czechs and Poles. Complaints of "Germanization" in that period are heard to this day.

The remaining decades until 1918 brought with them a considerable economic upswing. However, more often than not, the Germans were the winners and the Serbs the losers in the process. Although the Serbs (and other ethnic groups in the regions) have adopted German way of living and tilling the land, they weren't so thrifty as the Germans. Being prone to spend more than they earned, they often had to sell their land to the provident Swabians who were saving

money precisely for that purpose. In that way the Serbs and members of other ethnic groups (except for the Slovaks) tended to lose land in favor of the Germans.

The myth of the opulent Swabian came to being, but it was just a myth. Indeed, most Swabians were small or middle-sized peasants who looked opulent only because their Serbian, Croat, Magyar or Romanian neighbors had even less land.

There was another factor which estranged the Swabians from the Serbs in the Vojvodina. Being materialists, the Germans didn't care much about culture, politics or their own nationality. Just like part of the Slovenes, many of them were willing to sacrifice their nationality for social ascent and career.

For that reason, many German communes gave their schools over to the Hungarian state to finance them, although that meant introduction of Hungarian as the language of instruction. This enabled ambitious Swabian parents to send their sons to Hungarian high-schools and Universities, from where they returned as Hungarian officials, teachers, politicians, intellectuals, priests and professionals who worked on Magyarisation not only of their fellow-Swabians, but of members of other minorities too. In that way they made themselves obnoxious as pillars of the Hungarian regime with the Serbs.

Such state of affairs conditioned the Serbian policy toward the Swabians in the Vojvodina during the inter-war period. Since the Serbs and other Slavs were the minority in the province, in order to secure Yugoslavia's possession of it, the Serbian authorities tried to win the Swabians over by closing down Hungarian and opening German schools and by allowing the Kulturbund, the blanket German cultural organization to be founded in 1920.

However, once the Trianon peace treaty which allotted the Vojvodina to Yugoslavia was signed, the minority policy became more rigid. Furthermore, in order to "rectify" the ethnic-make up of the province, and "historical injustices" committed during the colonization of the area during 18th and 19th centuries, as well as in order to alleviate the social problem of the indigent peasants, the Yugoslav government instituted agrarian reform.

It was introduced in the whole country and in the Vojvodina it was aimed more against big Hungarian landowners than against the Germans. Nevertheless it hit: some German communes who lost their land, and what was even worse, the German landless received no land within the framework of the reform. At the same time, members of the minorities couldn't get jobs in state administration, educational policy was rather restrictive and possibilities of German political influence very limited.

Although the overall situation of the German minority was not intolerable, it left much space for improvements. The older minority leaders were not able to achieve them, accumulating at the same time many functions in very few hands. During 1930s this caused dissatisfaction on part of the young intellectuals, partly educated in Germany and Austria.

They came in contact with Nazi ideas there and they started their crusade against the old leaders. With the help from the Reich they managed to come to the helm of the Kulturbund after a

protracted conflict in 1938/39. During the remaining pre-war year they would reshape not only that organization but the whole German minority according to Nazi standards. This meant less adoption of the ideology, but to a much higher degree organizational forms. They were willing to follow the instructions from Berlin and serve the goals of the German foreign policy. The masses of the Ethnic-Germans, especially the young, became nationally enthusiastic since: after 20 years of being the under-dog of European politics, their mother country became a great power again.

They hoped the Third Reich would achieve what the Weimar Republic couldn't: the improvement of their minority situation. This eventually came about, but the Reich's leaders always subordinated the interests of the Volksdeutsche to those of the Reich. At the same time, greater assertiveness of the Swabians – their marches, parades, uniforms, banners – irritated the nationalist part of the Serbs and intimidated broader masses of the Serbian population.

When Yugoslavia was attacked in April 1941, the Volksdeutsche sided with Germany in their hearts, and sometimes also in their actions. The historical development has put them on the opposite side from their Serbian neighbors.

During WWII and right after it, it would have fateful consequences. After Yugoslavia (and the Vojvodina) was carved up, the Serbs became underdogs and the Volksdeutsche were given smaller or larger degree of autonomy. However, it came with a price: they had to serve the Reich as soldiers and foodstuffs and raw materials producers.

Within the framework of German actions against the partisans in Yugoslavia, some of them were also involved in war-crimes. They would serve as the main rationale for the Communist authorities to reach the decision to expel the Germans after WWII. However, in order to justify their action, they referred not only to the wartime, but also to the times when the Volksdeutsche had been settled in the Vojvodina.

Retroactively they had been accused of having always been the instrument of German imperialism and oppressors of the South Slavs. The difficulties the Serbs had had with the Habsburg Monarchy were partly shoved in their shoes. Their huge contribution to the economic and cultural development of the region was completely neglected, to be rediscovered only recently.

The situation of the Germans in Croatia differed somewhat from those in Slovenia and the Vojvodina. The Germans started settling in Croatia in small numbers already in late 17th and early 18th century. The greater influx started only from mid-19th century, mostly from Hungary. The available land in Hungary was running out and the revolution of 1848 made peasants more movable. The development of capitalism and dissolution of the Military Border increased the need for labor force on the estates of the nobility, and plunged many Croat and Serbian peasants into debts. Jobs and land at lower prices than in Hungary became available which spurred many Swabian peasants to settle in Croatia which had certain autonomy within Hungary since 1867.

Most of them settled down in the fertile Slavonian plain. Unlike in the Vojvodina, the Germans rarely founded new villages there, but rather settled in the existing Croat and Serbian ones. Although they either bought land or were given lots to till by landlords, the colonization caused

some frictions there too. The poor Slavic peasants were dissatisfied they had to sell their land so cheaply or envied the buyers.

The autonomous Croat government was striving to stave off Hungarian supremacy so that it resented the influx of foreigners – the Hungarians, but also the Germans, who were often (and with some reasons too) perceived as the extended hand of the Magyars.

Even more resentful was the increasingly more nationalist Croat intelligentsia: it couldn't come to terms with the prevalence of German cultural influence and the fact that German was the main language of communication in major Croatian towns. For these reasons the Croatian government and the intelligentsia – aided by the Clergy – strove to assimilate the newcomers.

Over decades, they were fairly successful. The Croats were Roman-Catholics like 80% of the Swabians which (unlike in the case of the Orthodox Serbs) facilitated inter-marrying and adoption of the local language through church attendance. The Swabians were usually a minority in Croat or Serbian villages which forced them to use Croat or Serbian much more often than their mother tongue.

Last but not least, the Germans had almost no German schools there (which the Croat government refused to open for them). For all these reasons they soon became nationally dormant and their national awakening started only in 1930s. It would not only reawake the animosity of nationalist Croat intellectuals, but partly also fear among the Croat and Serb population (because of the resurgence of Germany's influence in Europe). At the same time, it would split the Volksdeutsche into two opposed camps: the national one and the pro-Croat or Croatized one.

This situation would prevail throughout WWII in which Croatia was granted independence by the Axis powers. Its government had to make concessions to the Volksdeutsche who in turn had to be in the service of the Reich – just like Croatia itself. The Ustasha (Croat fascists) and the Volksdeutsche go-getters were scrambling for power and Jewish and Serbian property.

The Croatian government and intelligentsia remained anti-German, despite the official friendship with the Reich. As fate would have it, the two largest single war-crimes committed by the Banat Volksdeutsche SS-Division "Prinz Eugen" while fighting the partisans, were committed against two Croat villages. Although 90% of the Croatian Germans were evacuated before the partisan power was established, the fate of the rest was no different from that of other Volksdeutsche, and the supreme master of their fate was a Croat: the partisan leader Tito.

The same historical arguments for their incarceration and expulsion were adduced in Croatia as in Slovenia and the Vojvodina, whereas German origin of many Croat luminaries as well as the huge contribution of the Germans to Croatia's development were conveniently forgotten. As in the Vojvodina they have been rediscovered and acknowledged only after the fall of communism.