

Photography, Collaboration and the Holocaust: Looking at the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945) through the Frame of the 'Hooded Man'

Lovro Kralj

From the 1904 photograph of a father staring at the severed hand and foot of his daughter in the Congo, to the 2004 Abu Ghraib photo of the 'Hooded Man', visual representations of mass violence and genocide in the past century have been dominated by atrocity images depicting dehumanization, humiliation, torture and executions. Reflecting on the significance of the Abu Ghraib photographs, Susan Sontag has noted that 'photographs have laid down the track of how important conflicts are judged and remembered'.¹ In other words, images have the power to significantly shape our interpretation and memory of historical events.

Despite the large circulation of atrocity photographs depicting genocide and the Holocaust in World War II Croatia,² it was not the image of victims that became the predominant visual representation of Ustasha terror but that of the perpetrators of this terror. As a response to Cortis and Sonderegger's re-take of the Abu Ghraib picture, this paper will discuss a picture taken by Heinrich Hoffman, Hitler's personal photographer, on 6 June 1941. The picture in question depicts the first meeting between Ante Pavelić, the leader of the Croatian fascist Ustasha movement, and Hitler.³ The photograph, taken at Berghof, shows Hitler in a physically superior position, standing two steps above Pavelić: the Führer bending down to shake his hand. The exchange is observed by a German sentinel in the back and SS officers to his side, isolating Pavelić as the sole figure from the Ustasha delegation. The angle from which the photograph was taken renders Pavelić an almost

1 Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times*, 23 May 2004, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>> [accessed 1 August 2019].

2 Jovan Byford, 'Picturing Jasenovac: Atrocity Photography Between Evidence and Propaganda', in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes: Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, ed. by Hildegard Frubis and others (Vienna: Böhlau, 2019), pp. 227-248.

3 This image can be found in the Ustasha newspapers: 'Poglavnik kod Fuhrera', *Hrvatski narod* [Croatian People], 538, 25 September 1942. Due to better quality, the image used here is from the United State Holocaust Museum Collection (photograph number: 85432). Available on: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa25465>.



FIGURE 1. Pavelić meets with Hitler for the first time (Berghof, June 1941).

faceless participant. This image is one of the most widely circulated visual representations of the Second World War and the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH).

At first sight, little seems to connect the ‘Hooded Man’ to the photograph of the Hitler-Pavelić meeting at Berghof which I propose to discuss here. Unlike the prisoner at Abu Ghraib, Pavelić is not a victim. He is a perpetrator. And yet, several parallels can be drawn between these two images by comparing them. Both achieved iconic status within their own context. The exposure and circulation of these images continues to shape the public and scholarly perception of the events which they depict. Although in different forms, the interpretation of these images is often determined by the power relations which they supposedly embody. Moreover, the asymmetry represented in and enacted by the photos not only keeps shaping our perception of what happened but, I contend, may also explain why these two pictures are icons of atrocity.

Even though Ante Pavelić and Hitler met at least four times during the course of the war, and there are more than twenty different images of them together,⁴ it is the image from the Berghof staircase which is predominantly used in historical textbooks, monographs, documentaries and various exhibitions related to the Ustasha movement. Furthermore, this photograph is the single most reproduced digital image of

4 Carl Savich has traced and republished more than twenty images taken from various Hitler-Pavelić meetings. See Carl Savich, ‘Adolf Hitler and Ante Pavelic: The Wartime Meetings, 1941–1944’, *Serbianna* <<http://serbianna.com/analysis/archives/2882>> [accessed 1 August 2019].

Pavelić on the internet.⁵ Why is it that this image stands out to such a degree? Does it possess a particular explanatory value of Ustasha terror or the Holocaust? Or does it rather foster a kind of 'historical distortion'? If so, what can be (re)constructed on the basis of such a visual source? In their interpretation of the 'Hooded Man', Cortis and Sonderegger re-frame the photograph's frame. In the case of the photo discussed here, what would a similar process of double 'framing' imply? And what would it say about perpetrators more generally?

This paper suggests that the emphasis on this particular photo is rooted in a desire to represent a specific kind of historiographical narrative – that of collaboration. The leader of the Yugoslav Partisans, Josip Broz Tito, epitomized this interpretation in December 1942 when he asked '[w]hat does Pavelić and his Ustasha gang represent in Croatia? Nothing else than simple agents of the occupiers in the enslaved Croatia'.⁶ The Yugoslav collaboration narrative is part of the 'Brotherhood and Unity' policy, which delineated the Ustashe as deviant individuals, setting them aside from the rest of the Croatian nation. This narrative was taken up by Yugoslav historiography. For example, in his influential book, historian Mladen Colić wrote that 'once brought to power by the Italians and Germans, Pavelić and the Ustashe started to immediately implement the policies of their masters, implementing their orders and wishes from day one'.⁷ In this sense, the Berghof image seems to work as an accompanying allegory to this narrative: as an eloquent symbol of the unbalanced and servile relationship between the NDH and Nazi Germany. One which seemingly confirms the thesis prevalent in Yugoslav historiography that treats Pavelić as a servant of Italian Fascism and Nazi Germany – a mere executioner of their will.

The Ustasha regime was indeed established under the auspices of the Axis forces which had previously defeated the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941. The Ustashe were principally dependent on military support from Germany and Italy, both of whom had large army garrisons stationed in the NDH and allowed for the economic exploitation

5 According to the available data on the search engine *TinEye*, which traces the circulation of photography on the internet, this particular image was uploaded 207 times. No other existing digital image of Pavelić comes close to this circulation. See *TinEye* <<https://tineye.com/search/b3cd275445f511b0c6e3fc6993d89e148faa32d4?page=1>> [accessed 8 September 2019].

6 Josip Broz Tito, 'Nacionalno pitanje u Jugoslaviji u svjetlosti Narodno-Oslobodilačke Borbe', *Jugoslavenski Federalizam*, ed. by Petranović Branko and Zečević Momčilo (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1987), p. 745.

7 Mladen Colić, *Takozvana Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941* (Beograd: Delta-press, 1973), p. 352.

of the country.⁸ Nonetheless, the Ustasha genocide conducted against Serbs and Jews, as well as against Roma later on, was initiated by the Ustashe themselves. This took place very early – already by the end of May 1941 – before Pavelić met with Hitler. Moreover, there is no conclusive evidence stating that the Ustashe initiated such genocidal measures against Serbs and Jews because of pressures from Germany and Italy. In fact, the rampant Ustasha antisemitism, which was fully integrated into the movement's ideology and propaganda by 1940,⁹ as well as other sources,¹⁰ reveal that the Ustashe were the driving force behind the planning and implementation of the Holocaust in the NDH.

It was only in mid-1942 that the Ustashe started to deport a part of Croatia's Jews to the German death camps. However, this was not done under duress from the German side. The Ustashe had, by that time, already killed or imprisoned the majority of Croatian, Bosnian and Herzegovinian Jews in its own domestic concentration camps located inside the NDH. The most infamous Ustasha extermination site was Jasenovac, the largest operating death camp in Europe independent from the German SS. Here, between 1941 and 1945, the Ustashe systematically murdered more than 83,145 people – Serbs, Roma, Jews and anti-fascist Croats.

What is especially striking when it comes to Jasenovac, is the prominent role given to the Pavelić-Hitler image throughout the wide arrange of publications and exhibitions related to the camp's history. Today, the photograph stands out in the Jasenovac Memorial Site exhibition. Below it, a caption states: 'Hitler gave Pavelić his full support for the policy of genocide against the Serbian population'. Therefore, according to the Memorial Site's interpretation, the Hitler-Pavelić photograph does not only depict the perpetrators but the *perpetration itself*, since the meeting is presented as one of the key moments in the decision-making process leading to the genocide against the Serbs in the NDH. However, a deeper analysis shows that the mass murder of the Serbs in the NDH started already in late April 1941, long before Hitler and Pavelić first met. Moreover, initially, Germany did not envision the removal of Serbs from the NDH. Rather, it intended to deport ethnic Slovenes from north Slovenia, which was annexed to the Third Reich after the defeat of Yugosla-

8 *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945, Series D (1937–1945), Vol. XII: The War Years* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 831–832.

9 Ante Pavelić first elaborated his version of antisemitic ideology in 1936. A reprint of the text can be found in *Dr. Ante Pavelić riešio je hrvatsko pitanje*, ed. by Ivo Bogdan (Zagreb: Naklada Europe, 1942).

10 The German military attaché in the NDH, Edmund Glaise Von Horstenau, wrote in his diary already in April 1941 that the Ustashe would launch the persecution of the Jews in the NDH on their own 'as soon as possible'. See Glaise von Horstenau, *Zapisi iz NDH* (Zagreb: Disput, 2013), p. 92.

via, to Serbia proper.¹¹ It was the Ustasha regime who managed to assert itself and put forward an alteration of the German plans for the ethnic reorganization of South Eastern Europe. At the meeting in Berghof in June 1941, Hitler only approved of the Ustasha plans for ethnic homogenization.¹² However, there was no talk of mass murder. Therefore, careful contextualization of the Hitler-Pavelić meeting reveals that the Ustashe were not merely the executioners of a foreign power, but actually succeeded in implementing their own agenda of ethnic cleansing which ultimately altered Germany's plans in South Eastern Europe.

This undermines the one-sided collaboration narrative, partially adopted by the Jasenovac Memorial, which maintains that the Ustashe were 'entirely dependent on the policies of the Third Reich' and declares that Pavelić was 'under the domination and complete influence' of Nazi Germany.¹³ Perhaps unintentionally, such interpretations implicitly perpetuate the idea of an impotent Ustasha regime by downplaying its agency. This, in turn, relativizes the active role of the Ustasha in the Holocaust. Strikingly, the collaboration narrative overlaps significantly with the Ustasha post-war narratives that tried to whitewash its responsibilities for the Holocaust in the NDH and lay the blame for all crimes on Germany. For example, Vladimir Židovec, Ustasha official and NDH ambassador to Bulgaria, argued that the Ustasha narrative on the Holocaust was a taboo issue and after the war,

ministers from the circle of Ante Pavelić avoided talking about the measures against the Jews. Their official story is that everything [related to the persecution of the Jews] happened under the pressure or suggestions from the Germans.¹⁴

However, according to early German diplomatic reports, Germany consistently followed a policy of non-interventionism into the minority policy of the NDH. Hitler thought that 'the shaping of Croatia's future system of government should be left entirely to the Croats them-

11 *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Vol. XII, pp. 725–726.

12 *Ibid.*, Vol. XII, 725–726, 831, 977–981.

13 'Jasenovac Concentration Camp', *Jasenovac Memorial Site* <<http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6793>> [accessed 1 August 2019].

14 Zagreb, Hrvatski Državni Arhiv (Croatian State Archives, HDA), Služba Državne Sigurnosti (State Security Service, SDS), Republički Sekretarijat za Unutrašnje Poslove (Republican Secretariat for Internal Affairs, RSUP), Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske (Socialist Republic of Croatia, SRH), HR-HDA-1561, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec), 138–139. See also Danijel Crljen, *Svjedočanstvo II* (Toronto: NDH Publishing, 1988), pp. 44–45.

selves. Germany did not think it wise to force anything upon them'.¹⁵ The persecution of the Jews was not mentioned at all during the Hitler–Pavelić meeting at Berghof in June 1941. By that time, however, the mass murder of the Jews at hands of the NDH was well under way.

Conclusion

Much like in other European countries affected by Nazi occupation, the term 'collaboration' in Croatia has acquired a distinctly pejorative connotation, 'becom[ing] synonymous with treason and the adoption of a Fascist or Nazi ideological position'.¹⁶ The analysis of the Ustasha relationship with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy can offer important insights into the history of the NDH. Still, projecting the one-sided, collaborationist narrative onto every Ustasha action and policy can create dangerous historical distortions. After the war, many Ustasha members claimed that they were manipulated and forced to commit the mass atrocities – that *they* were, in fact, victims. Not surprisingly, similar arguments can be found in defence of the Abu Ghraib perpetrators (that is, the military police soldiers who were court-martialled and sentenced). Their apologists argued that the perpetrators Frederick, Harman and the others had been 'encouraged by their superiors to behave in a certain way and then hung out to dry when things went bad'.¹⁷ That may well be, yet such narratives treat the perpetrators as people without any choices, agency or will – and consequently without any responsibility.

The Ustasha press used the Hitler-Pavelić photographs publicly in order to legitimize the leader of the Ustasha movement, due to the perceived prestige of German military and Germany's political influence in Europe. After the fall of the Ustasha regime in 1945, the photograph was repurposed with the exact opposite intention. Much like the 'Hooded Man', the Berghof meeting image is attributed with a high level of symbolism, through which it aims to provoke emotional responses. The 'Hooded Man' might invoke familiar Christian iconography of Christ's crucifixion, and its main appeal is compassion with the

¹⁵ *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Vol. XII, p. 597.

¹⁶ Stathis Kalyvas, 'Collaboration in comparative perspective', *European Review of History*, 15 (2018), 109.

¹⁷ George R. Mastroianni, 'Looking Back: Understanding Abu Ghraib', *Parameters*, 43.2 (2013), 59.

victims and anger at the perpetrators.¹⁸ In the case of the Berghof photograph, the appearance of Hitler is used as the familiar and universally accepted representation of 'evil', a secularized Devil, with the aim to trigger an immediate response of disgust and revulsion. Invoking the association with Hitler forces us to interpret the collaborator Pavelić through the lens of his 'master'. Therefore, historians overemphasizing the interpretative significance of the image have used it to delegitimize Pavelić and the Ustashe by tying them to the external Other.

Even though comprehensible, such emotional responses often hide more than they reveal. Scholars working in the field of Perpetrator Studies have noted that the 'Abu Ghraib [scandal] was a missed opportunity' to have a serious debate about torture, individual and command responsibility, as well as policymaking.¹⁹ Similarly, in the case of the Ustasha movement, such emotional responses distance the reader from understanding the genocidal policies of the Ustasha in their own right, their domestic roots and consequences. Used in such a way, the term 'collaboration' becomes nothing more than a moral label and stops being a useful analytical tool.

When the Abu Ghraib images were revealed to the public, journalist Seymour Hersh, wrote that '[t]he photographs tell it all.'²⁰ However, the variety of responses to the publication of the images – ranging from sheer relativism of mistreatment²¹ to attempts at pinning the responsibility onto the 'American culture' – bears witness to the fact that photographs do not in fact speak for themselves:

The image of [the Hooded Man] achieves its power from the fact that it does not show the human form laid bare and reduced to raw matter but creates instead an original image of inhumanity that admits no immediately self-evident reading. Its fascination resides, in large part, in its mystery and inscrutability – in all that is concealed by all that it reveals.²²

18 Katrin Dauenthauser, 'Do the Photos Tell it All? Representing Torture in the Images from Abu Ghraib', *COPAS*, 10 (2009).

19 Mastroianni, 64–65.

20 Seymour M. Hersh, 'Torture at Abu Ghraib', *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2004, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib>> [accessed 8 September 2019].

21 'GOP Senator Labels Abused Prisoners "Terrorists"', *CNN.com*, 14 May 2004, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/05/11/inhofe.abuse/>> [accessed 7 September 2019].

22 Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, 'Exposure: The woman behind the camera at Abu Ghraib', *The New Yorker*, 17 March 2008, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/24/exposure-5>> [accessed 01 August 2019].

In some way, this is what Cortis and Sonderegger's work reminds us: we need to go behind the image and understand that the picture, always framed, demands analysis and not only an emotional response.

Much like the case of the Abu Ghraib photos, the Hitler-Pavelić image does not speak for itself either. Its decontextualized usage, especially in relation to the persecution of minorities, misplaces the responsibility for the mass murder and minimizes the agency of the Ustasha. The continued recycling of such images in popular history and collective memory reveals that the interpretation offered within Yugoslav historiography on the nature of the collaboration remains very much ingrained today. As a result, such narratives produce a misleading understanding not only of the relationship between the NDH and Nazi Germany, but also of Croatia's own relationship with the Holocaust and with its past.

Works Cited

- Adolf Hitler Greets Ante Pavelic, Leader of the Croatian Puppet State, Upon his Arrival at the Berghof for a State Visit*, photograph, United State Holocaust Museum Collection <<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa25465>> [accessed 1 August 2019]
- Bogdan, Ivo, ed., *Dr. Ante Pavelić riešio je hrvatsko pitanje* (Zagreb: Naklada Europe, 1942)
- Byford, Jovan, 'Picturing Jasenovac: Atrocity Photography Between Evidence and Propaganda', in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes: Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, ed. by Hildegard Frubis and others (Vienna: Böhlau, 2019), pp. 227–248
- Colić, Mladen, *Takozvana Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941* (Belgrade: Delta-press, 1973)
- Crlijen, Danijel, *Svjedočanstvo II* (Toronto: NDH Publishing, 1988)
- Dauenhauer, Katrin, 'Do the Photos Tell it All? Representing Torture in the Images from Abu Ghraib', *COPAS*, 10 (2009)
- Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, Series D (1937–1945), Vol. XII, *The War Years* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962)
- 'GOP Senator Labels Abused Prisoners "Terrorists"', *CNN.com*, 14 May 2004, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/05/11/inhofe.abuse/>> [accessed 7 September 2019]
- Gourevitch, Philip, and Errol Morris, 'Exposure: The woman behind the camera at Abu Ghraib', *The New Yorker*, 17 March 2008, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/24/exposure-5>> [accessed 1 August 2019]
- Hersh, Seymour M., 'Torture at Abu Ghraib', *New Yorker*, 30 April 2004, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib>> [accessed 8 September 2019]
- Horstenau, Glaise, *Zapisi iz NDH* (Zagreb: Disput, 2013)
- Hrvatski Državni Arhiv (Croatian State Archives, HDA), Služba Državne Sigurnosti (State Security Service, SDS), Republički Sekretarijat za Unutrašnje Poslove (Republican

- Secretariat for Internal Affairs, RSUP), Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske (Socialist Republic of Croatia, SRH), HR-HDA-1561, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec)
- 'Jasenovac Concentration Camp', *Jasenovac Memorial Site* <<http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6793>> [accessed 1 August 2019]
- Josip Broz, Tito, 'Nacionalno pitanje u Jugoslaviji u svjetlosti Narodno-Oslobodilačke Borbe', *Jugoslavenski Federalizam*, ed. by Petranović Branko and Zečević Momčilo (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1987)
- Kalyvas, Stathis, 'Collaboration in comparative perspective', *European Review of History*, 15 (2018), 109–111
- Linfield, Susie, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)
- Mastroianni, George R., 'Looking Back: Understanding Abu Ghraib', *Parameters*, 43.2 (2013), 53–65
- 'Poglavnik kod Fuhrera', *Hrvatski narod* [Croatian people], 538, 25 September 1942
- Savich, Carl, 'Adolf Hitler and Ante Pavelic: The Wartime Meetings, 1941–1944', *Serbianna* <<http://serbianna.com/analysis/archives/2882>> [accessed 1 August 2019]
- Sontag, Susan, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times*, 23 May 2004, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>> [accessed 1 August 2019]

Lovro Kralj is a PhD student at the Central European University. He specializes in the fields of fascism, antisemitism and Holocaust studies, with a geographical focus on Central and South-Eastern Europe.