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Sajmiste as a European Site of Holocaust Remembrance

Abstract: *The article analyzes the peculiarities of the destruction of Serbian Jews during Second World War in the local and European context. Of all the sites in Serbia relevant to the destruction of the Serbian Jews, Sajmiste is the most important. After the consideration of the attitude of Germans and Nedic's regime toward Jews and "Gypsies" in the context of the Final Solution, the author highlights that the Sajmiste internment camp was transformed into a local death camp—the only such site outside the territories of Poland and the Soviet Union. Serbia was the one country outside Poland and the Soviet Union where all Jewish victims were killed on the spot without deportation. It was the first country after Estonia to be declared "judenfrei." Moreover, in Serbia the German army was not only complicit in the Holocaust but was in fact the main instigator and executioner in the killing of the Jewish men. For this reason, in particular, Sajmiste is a unique site for Holocaust remembrance not only in the Serbian but also in the European context.*

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Key words: *Serbia, Final Solution, Jews, Gypsies, Nedic, Wermacht, gas van.*

As a specialist of the Holocaust rather than Serbian history, I would like to make two points that I think are relevant to the question of "the history to remember" about Sajmiste.¹ First, the historical course of the destruction of Serbian Jews—the Holocaust within Serbia—was both unusual and very important to understanding the Holocaust as a European event. When I wrote a slim book entitled *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*² nearly 30 years ago, I focused on Serbia as a key case study for understanding the expansion of the systematic mass murder of European Jewry from what is now sometimes referred to as the "Holocaust by bullets," carried out to the east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, to all the other European countries within the German sphere of power, in which the killing was then done primarily by poison gas. The Holocaust in Serbia, I would argue, foreshadowed and illuminated this transformation. Second, of all the sites in Serbia relevant to the destruction of the Serbian Jews, Sajmiste is

1 The article is a version of the paper prepared for the international conference *If not now, when...? The Future of the site of the Old Fairgrounds (Sajmiste) in Belgrade*, held in Belgrade, 10–12 May 2012. Its organizers were The Federation of Jewish Communities in Serbia, Foundation for an Open Society in Serbia, Stiftung Erinnerung-Verantwortung-Zukunft from Berlin and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Serbia.

2 Browning 1985. The topic of the Holocaust in Serbia was subsequently treated in even greater detail in Manoschek 1993.

the most important. It should be a site of remembrance significant not only in the Serbian historical context but also to the Holocaust as an event of European history. Whatever else might be memorialized at Sajmiste, what makes it a site of European significance is the simple and brutal fact that the Nazi regime dispatched a gas van to murder the Jewish women and children interned in Sajmiste in the spring of 1942—the first time at which Jews beyond Poland and the eastern front where targeted for systematic and total extermination through poison gas.

100 Let me review briefly the significance of the Holocaust in Serbia to the question of the emergence of the Final Solution as a pivotal event in European history. When the German army defeated and dismantled Yugoslavia and set up a military administration in Serbia in the spring of 1941, the standard Nazi discriminatory measures against the Jewish population were decreed almost immediately with one unusual twist—the “Gypsies” (*Zigeuner* in the German documents) were included. The German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22 then worsened their situation dramatically. Not only did the *Einsatzgruppen* and other German units begin murdering Jews (at first primarily adult males) and those identified as communists on Soviet territory, but also in Serbia. In response to the communist-led uprising in Serbia, the undermanned German occupation responded with a vicious deterrent policy in the form of “reprisal” killing—a policy which by the end of August claimed the lives of some 1,000 people identified in the German documents simply as “communists and Jews.” In addition to the killing of hostages so-identified, however, the reprisal killing quickly expanded to the indiscriminate, mass execution of Serbs rounded up at the sites of partisan ambushes, because they were deemed “co-responsible” (*mitverantwortlich*) for not having warned the Germans of the impending attacks. As German documents make clear, German reprisal policy in no way deterred the uprising; on the contrary, it had the dual affect of driving increasing numbers of Serbs into the hands of the partisans while simultaneously destroying the morale of the Serbian police who had been forced to help implement the reprisal executions.³

By September the partisans had overrun numerous German outposts and captured over 300 German prisoners. Threatened with loss of control over most of the Serbian countryside, the Germans sought three remedies: the roundup and internment of all Jews and “Gypsies” in camps in Belgrade and Sabac, the installation of the collaborating Nedic regime to rally local anti-communist forces against the insurgency, and military reinforcement with frontline troops to carry out anti-insurgent sweeps and savage repression. In the words of the chief of the military administration, Harald Turner: “The entire population had to be punished, not only the men.”⁴ To which the commanding general Franz Böhme added: “An

3 For events in the summer and fall of 1941, see Browning 1983a.

4 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (hereafter BA-MA), 17 729.4, Anlage 17, Turner to Böhme, 21.9.41 (Nürnberg Document NOKW-1492).

intimidating example must be created for the whole of Serbia, which must hit the whole population most severely.”⁵

Simultaneously, General Keitel of the German High Command (OKW) issued a directive that 50–100 “communists” be executed in reprisal for each German soldier killed by insurgents. In the Soviet Union SS leaders on the central front in Belarus invited over 60 Wehrmacht officers to a conference in Mogilev to impress upon them the doctrine that “Where the partisan is, is the Jew, and where the Jew is, is the partisan” to encourage army participation in the killing of Soviet Jews.⁶ No such antisemitic indoctrination was needed for the German military in Serbia. When partisans killed 21 German soldiers in Topola on October 2, two officers on Böhme’s staff drafted an order that “2100 prisoners in the concentration camps Sabac and Belgrade (predominately Jews and Communists)” be provided for the reprisal shooting.⁷ In short, on its own the German military in Serbia chose the maximum rather than minimum reprisal quota (100 instead of 50) and expanded the pool of reprisal victims from “Communists” as specified by Keitel also to include Jews. A subsequent Böhme order then stipulated that “all Jews” were to be included in the hostage pool, and a subsequent report by Turner on the implementation of the Topola reprisal killing makes clear that the victims were comprised solely of 2,000 Jews and 200 “Gypsies”—precisely the groups who had already been interned in August and thus could in no way have been involved in the insurgency.⁸ The whole charade of an alleged deterrent reprisal becomes even more grotesque when one considers that many of the Jews interned at Sabac were central European refugees, mostly Austrian, and the Wehrmacht executioners were mostly Austrian soldiers, who were thus shooting their former countrymen in retaliation for casualties inflicted on the German army by Serbian insurgents.

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As several German army units that swept through Kraljevo and Kragujevac in mid-October suffered further casualties and no nearby pool of Jewish and “Gypsy” hostages was immediately available, they executed 1,755 and 2,300 local Serbs respectively, including the entire workforce of an airplane factory working for the Germans in Kraljevo and most of the students of the high school in Kragujevac. Appalled by the carnage, Nedic urged that such random shootings be stopped. Needing his help to rebuild the Serbian police and aware that such massacres were strengthening rather than weakening the insurgency, the Germans agreed that henceforth some effort would be made to screen potential reprisal victims

5 BA-MA, 17 729.4, Anlage 31, Böhme order to the troops, 25.9.41 (NOKW-1048).

6 Beorn 2011.

7 BA-MA, 17 729.8, Anlage 24, Faulmüller draft of order to Turner and 342nd division, 4.10.41 (NOKW-192).

8 BA-MA, 17 729.9, Anlage 48, Böhme order, 10.10.41 (NOKW-891 and 557). NO-5810: Turner to Hildebrandt, 17.10.41.

and distinguish between the categories of guilty, suspicious, and “innocent” Serbs. This made it all the more imperative that “it is a matter of principle...to put all Jewish men and all male Gypsies at the disposal of the troops as hostages.”⁹ While Turner was well aware that “it is false, if one is to be precise about it, that for murdered Germans—on whose account the ratio 1:100 should really be borne by Serbs—100 Jews are shot instead; but,” as he went on to explain, “the Jews we had in camps ... and besides they have to disappear.”¹⁰ Accordingly, German firing squads—composed of both military and police units—completed the destruction of the male Jews and “Gypsies” before the end of the year, with the exception of a small group of Jewish workers spared for conversion of the Sajmiste fairgrounds into the new site of internment for the Jewish and “Gypsy” women and children whose husbands and fathers had just been killed.

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I have referred to this first stage of the destruction of Serbian Jews in the latter half of 1941 as a “prelude” to the Final Solution, in that Jews were killed solely because they were Jews, but the policy of total extermination—including women and children (as was already underway on Soviet territory since the summer of 1941)—was not yet being implemented in Serbia. From the perspective of German history, this episode demonstrates beyond any doubt the falsity of the “legend of the clean *Wehrmacht*,” for it was the military, not the SS, that was primarily responsible for instigating and implementing the destruction of the male Jews and “Gypsies.” But it is indicative of a wider European phenomenon as well. Jews and “Gypsies” were especially at peril in Nazi-dominated Europe not only because of Nazi ideology and power but also because in so few countries were they viewed as full members of the national community. In Serbia Nedic pleaded for more careful screening in the selection of Serbian hostages but made no similar request concerning Jews and “Gypsies.” And the Germans, who conceded the notion of “innocent” Serbs but deemed all Jews to be enemies, realized that they if they filled their reprisal quotas by killing male Jews and “Gypsies” rather than randomly victimizing Serbs, there would be no political cost in terms of either undermining the Nedic collaboration regime or driving significant numbers of young Serbian men into the hands of the partisans.

Let me now turn to the fate of the Jewish women and children in Serbia. Before the German occupation authorities in Serbia had discovered the convenience of having large numbers of interned Jews as a pool of reprisal hostages whose execution had no local political cost, they had vigorously but unsuccessfully pressed Berlin for their deportation to Romanian or Soviet territory. When the killing of the male Jews was already underway, representatives from Berlin assured the Germans in

9 Nürnberg Document NOKW-802: Turner to Feldkommandanturen and Kreiskommandanturen, 26.10.41.

10 Nürnberg Document NO-5810: Turner to Hildebrandt, 17.10.41.

Belgrade that “as soon as the technical possibility exists within the framework of the total solution of the Jewish question,” the remaining Jewish women and children “will be deported ... to the reception camps in the east.”¹¹ This was, of course, the eventual fate of the Jews in the other countries of southern, central, and western Europe, who were deported to death camps in Poland. Uniquely, the remaining Jews in Serbia—both refugee and native—were not deported to face death in Nazi gas chambers in Poland. Instead the Sajmiste internment camp was transformed into a local death camp—the only such site outside the territories of Poland and the Soviet Union—and the Jews were killed in a gas van dispatched from Berlin as it drove through downtown Belgrade on its way to the burial site on the other side of the city.

Why did this happen in Serbia but not in other countries in Nazi-occupied Europe is the obvious question, but it is a question for which historians lack sufficient evidence to provide a definitive answer. Due to insufficient evidence, the best I can do is speculate on the basis of the behavior patterns of the Nazis in other somewhat similar circumstances at this time.

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We do know that the design, testing, and conversion of the gas vans in the motor pool of the Security Police in Berlin resulted from complaints by the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union concerning the psychological burden on the shooters in killing women and children. We know that when the German authorities in Lodz complained about the overcrowding that would result from Himmler’s plans to send numerous transports of Jews there from the Third Reich in the fall of 1941, the result was the construction of the death camp at Chelmno, equipped with gas vans, to reduce the ghetto population. It began its killing operations on December 8, 1941, the exact day on which the Jewish women and children in Belgrade were assembled for internment in Sajmiste. We know the Germans in Belgrade never ceased to press for the deportation of the Jews interned there. We know that after Hans Frank had failed to get approval to deport Jews from the General Government to the east, he reported to his followers in Krakau: “In Berlin we were told: why all this trouble; we cannot use them in the *Ostland* or the *Reichskommisariat* either; liquidate them yourselves!”¹² What followed was the completion of the first death camp in the General Government, Belzec, where gassing Jews from Galicia and Lublin began on March 15, just three days before Götz and Meyer began killing the patients of the Jewish hospitals in Belgrade as a preliminary to the liquidation of the Sajmiste Jews.¹³

11 *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik, 1918–1945*, Series D, vol. 13/2, pp. 570–72 (Rademacher report to Foreign Office, 25.10.41)

12 Präg, *Jacobmeyer* 1975: 457–58.

13 For the overall course of events leading up to the Final Solution, see Browning, with a contribution by J. Matthäus 2004.

Given these facts, I would speculate that the decision to send a gas van to Belgrade resulted from a conjuncture of factors that came into play in the winter of 1941–42. Heydrich was receiving complaints from a number of impatient Nazi occupation authorities about their Jews, whether in Lodz over the arrival of additional transports of Jews from the Reich or in the General Government and Belgrade about the failure of Berlin to help them to get rid of their Jews as soon as possible, because big death camps with the capacity to kill Jews in such numbers had not yet been constructed. In English there is a saying that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” In this case the loudest and most incessant complainers were the first ones to be provided with the means to kill their own Jews rather than bother Heydrich further. And in the case of Sajmiste, this came in the form of the newly-developed gas vans, being converted and staffed with drivers in Heydrich’s own Security Police motor pool in Berlin, that had been explicitly designed to kill precisely those categories of Jews—women and children—interned there. And finally, due to the partisan uprising, Serbia—like the east—was a theater of war where the local killing—unthinkable in places like Paris or Amsterdam—could take place relatively unobtrusively amidst the German reprisal shootings, battles with partisans, and flood of Serbian refugees bringing horrific stories of Ustasha atrocities in neighboring Croatia.¹⁴

In summary, the Holocaust in Serbia has a number of distinct features. It was the one country outside Poland and the Soviet Union where all Jewish victims were killed on the spot without deportation. It was the first country after Estonia—with its meager Jewish population of less than 1,000—to be declared “judenfrei.” It was the country where the German army was not only complicit in the Holocaust but was in fact the main instigator and executioner in the killing of the Jewish men. And it was the only country outside Polish and Soviet territory where an internment camp—Sajmiste—was transformed into a death camp to annihilate the remaining Jewish population with poison gas. For this reason, in particular, Sajmiste is a unique site for Holocaust remembrance not only in the Serbian but also in the European context. It should be restored, preserved, and memorialized accordingly.

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Sajmište kao evropsko mesto sećanja na Holokaust

Apstrakt

Članak analizira osobenosti uništenja srpskih Jevreja tokom Drugog svetskog rata u lokalnom i evropskom kontekstu. Od svih mesta u Srbiji koja su relevantna za uništenje Jevreja, Sajmište je najvažnije. Nakon razmatranja stava Nemaca i Nedićevog režima prema Jevrejima i „Ciganima“, autor ističe da je od logora za internaciju, Sajmište transformisano u lokalni logor smrti, jedini takav izvan teritorija Poljske i Sovjetskog Saveza: osim Poljske i Sovjetskog Saveza, Srbija je jedina zemlja gde su jevrejske žrtve ubijane na licu mesta, bez deportacije. Posle Estonije, prva je zemlja koja je proglašena za *judenfrei*. Štaviše, u Srbiji nemačka vojska bila je ne samo saučesnik u Holokaustu već i glavni podstrekač i izvršilac ubijanja Jevreja. Posebno zbog ovih razloga, Sajmište predstavlja jedinstveno mesto sećanja na Holokaust, ne samo u srpskom već i u evropskom kontekstu.

Ključne reči Srbija, Konačno rešenje, Jevreji, Romi, Nedić, Vermaht, dušegupka.