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THE ETHNIC-GERMANS IN THE VOJVODINA DURING AND AFTER WWII

The Vojvodina is the Northern province of the Republic of Serbia. In its today's borders which were defined only after WWII, it comprises Eastern part of Syrmium (which belonged to the historical Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia until 1918) in the West, the bulk of the Bacska in its Northern part and Western third of the historical Banat, nowadays being the eastern-most part of the province. It was after WWII that the Vojvodina became an administrative unit for the second time – the first being the short lived (1849-1861) Austrian crownland, with larger and somewhat different territory. One has to keep this in mind since the fate of the Ethnic-Germans in the province's territory during WWII was determined by developments in its parts rather than in the territory as a whole. The territory of the post-WWII Vojvodina played a more significant role after the war as new administrative units were built,¹ and particularly since respective Yugoslav republics became charged with their respective Germans.

Until 1918 the Germans in the Vojvodina were nationally dormant and prone to assimilate to the Hungarians (in the Bacska and the Banat) and the Croats (in Syrmium). The first national awakeners appeared only at the turn of the century. They accomplished their mission only during the inter-war period as the Volksdeutsche were second-class citizens in Yugoslavia. Not being satisfied with their position within the state and the national minority, groups of young people, usually educated in Germany and Austria, started clamoring against the then minority leaders. During 1938/39, with the aid of the German Reich, they came to the helm of the German minority and organized it according to the Nazi lines. Due to their increased self-assertiveness and the power of Germany, the Yugoslav authorities and Serbian patriots started regarding the Volksdeutsche as a threat to the state.

As Yugoslavia was attacked by Germany and its allies in April 1941, the Volksdeutsche greeted German units with enthusiasm, aided them in many places by taking power or disarming the retreating Yugoslav soldiers. Some served as German guides and even atrocities occurred in some places. The actual extent of these goings-on and the role of the Ethnic-Germans was never fully researched, the Yugoslav and German side clinging stubbornly to their respective versions of the events.

After the defeat of Yugoslavia, the Vojvodina was dismembered like the rest of the country. Syrmium was given to the Ustasha Independent State of Croatia (ISC), a puppet state run by Croat Fascists; the Bacska was given back to Hungary to which it belonged until 1918, and the West-Banat, being coveted by both German allies Hungary and Romania, remained temporarily as an autonomous part of the occupied Serbia. The situation of the Volksdeutsche

¹ To be sure, Serbia itself ceased to exist as a separate administrative unit after 1918, becoming part of the unified Yugoslavia. It reemerged during WWII as an occupied territory, being reestablished within its present borders after WWII by the Communist rulers of Yugoslavia.

in these three parts was different. The Ethnic-Germans in the ISC were granted large autonomy in education, use of language, economy and military organization. They held local power in many places, and even the chief of one of the counties was a German. The Croat Fascists, the Ustasha, had to make concessions to their powerful German protectors who had put them into power, but their relations with the Volksdeutsche were far from cordial. Indeed, constant frictions were the order of the day.

In the Bacska, the Germans became part of the Volksbund, the organization of the Germans in Hungary. They, having enjoyed a more liberal treatment in Yugoslavia than their brethren in Hungary had, soon became the most radical part of the newly united Volksgruppe. They were not granted the same rights as in the ISC, but they still had a privileged position as compared to other national minorities – again, thanks to the Reich. They supplied (at first willingly, and as the war draw on, increasingly less willingly) volunteers for the Waffen-SS, foodstuffs and raw materials for Germany, without enjoying such benefits as the Germans in Croatia and the Banat.

The Banat remained officially part of the occupied Serbia, but it was made autonomous under the Volksdeutsche rule. Ethnic-Germans were brought to all leading posts, although most of the Serbian officials remained in their places on lower levels. However, the Volksdeutsche leaders were subordinated to the German occupying authorities in Belgrade, and in the last resort to the Reich's leadership in Berlin. They had to supply foodstuffs and raw materials, but also soldiers for the 7th Waffen-SS Division "Prinz Eugen" which was set up allegedly to defend the Banat, but was actually used for fighting the partisans in Serbia proper and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The war-crimes parts of the Division committed in the process would be held against the whole German minority after the war.

The same was true of many acts parts of the Ethnic-Germans committed against their Serbian, Jewish and other non-German neighbors. Some of the Volksdeutsche not only collaborated with the invaders and committed war-crimes fighting the partisans, serving as concentration-camp guards, auxiliary policemen, officials etc, but also acquired the property of the persecuted Jews and Serbs. For all that the whole German minority would be held accountable by the new powers-that-be after the war. One could justifiably say that the Volksdeutsche have broken their oath of allegiance to their country and their king. However, one could say the same of most of the country's inhabitants.

Where were then the reasons for the fate which befell them at the end of the war? They can be partly found in the above described behaviour of the Volksdeutsche during the war, the wide-spread Germanophobia WWII triggered off throughout Europe, in their relations with the Yugoslav people's, above all the Slovenes and the Serbs and in the wish of the Yugoslav Communists to fortify their power in the country. We shall say something about the last two. The Slovenes had their one-century old dispute with the small but economically and socially very strong German minority in their country. Some of their bourgeois intellectuals managed to get into contact with the Communist partisans and convince them of the need to purge the country of the Volksdeutsche. Some Serbian intellectuals feared the Germans already before the war because of their economic strength which, in their view, was endangering the Serbs in the Vojvodina. The disloyal behaviour of the German minority was for them a welcome reason to put an end to the German minority in the Vojvodina. However, most of these intellectuals were on the wrong side of the barricade – among the Serbian monarchist and nationalist Chetniks, who collaborated with the Germans and Italians, and who were eventually on the side of the losers. It seems only few of Serbian bourgeois nationalist intellectuals joined their hands with the Communists. How influential they were is still not quite known, since the archival sources don't give us any clues.

The fact is that the Communists who headed the partisan movement, made their decision to expel the Volksdeutsche from the whole country, sometime in late 1943 or in early

1944. The details are still unknown. The decision was put to practice in fall 1944 when the Germans in the Vojvodina were stripped of their property and gradually put into concentration camps. After the first wave of mass murders, mishandling and rape, all the members of the German minority (with very few exceptions) who hadn't fled or weren't evacuated by October 1944, were put to concentration camps by mid-1945.

Already in the second half of that year the Yugoslav government asked for them to be transferred to Germany. This demand was repeated several times during the next year. However, Yugoslavia wasn't mentioned in the Potsdam protocol with Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, who were allowed to expel their Germans, and the Western allies didn't feel like obliging the staunchest Soviet satellite-state with which they had several disputes to settle. For that reasons the Volksdeutsche had to stay in the camps and to die en mass of hunger, disease, hard labor and manhandling. Their farms were given over to the partisan veterans, changing thus the ethnic make-up of the province and securing a long-term support for the Communist regime.

Not being able to "resettle" the Volksdeutsche, the Yugoslav authorities made escape easier during 1947. However, already by mid-year, new winds started blowing: the government started recruiting the Volksdeutsche as free labor force for work in mines, on farms or in factories. The process was finalized with the disbanding of the camps in spring 1948. The surviving Volksdeutsche were sent to work for three years in places they couldn't chose or leave. They were free and paid for their work like other workers, and even some German-language schools were founded in some places. After four years of terror the regime showed the signs it wanted to integrate the Volksdeutsche, just like all other national minorities. However, since their property wasn't given back or reimbursed, since many already had relatives who had escaped to Germany, Austria and other countries and since they couldn't cope with memories of the atrocities they had been through while in camps, almost all Ethnic-Germans emigrated by the early 1960s. The authorities tried to make it more difficult to emigrate by imposing high fees and complicating the procedure, but eventually, with the help of the International and German Red Crosses and relatives from abroad, all desirous of emigrating eventually left the country which had treated them so cruelly.

Unlike the fate of the Volksdeutsche in some other countries, the fate of the Yugoslav Germans (of which those in the Vojvodina made the largest part) couldn't be researched in detail due to the lack of relevant documents. We know particularly little about the decision-making process, as well as about the chain of command and control. We are also in the dark as to the actual reasons for such treatment of the Volksdeutsche, i.e., we can only guess with smaller or larger degree of accuracy.