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**HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND  
PRESENT-DAY SOCIO-POLITICS:  
THE MULTIETHNIC EFFORT  
BEHIND THE RESCUE OF THE  
JEWS OF KAMPOR**

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# Historical Research and Present-Day Socio-Politics: The Multiethnic Effort Behind the Rescue of the Jews of Kampor

During its existence in 1942-1943, Kampor concentration camp, located on the island of Rab in the Croatian Littoral, held more than 15,000 prisoners whom Fascist Italian authorities considered “undesirable” in political, ideological, racial, or ethnonational terms. My RECAS fellowship project revolves around the history of Kampor, more specifically the massive rescue operation of some 2,500 of the camp’s Jewish prisoners, which the Yugoslav communist resistance movement put into motion after Fascist Italy’s capitulation in the fall of 1943, anticipating the German conquest of their former ally’s holdings in the East Adriatic.

The historiography on the rescue of Jews interned in Kampor concentration camp comprises a handful of studies<sup>1</sup>, most of them in BCMS and Slovenian, and only two

in the English language<sup>2</sup>. Most of these works represent valuable, well-researched accounts of this important history; due to its small size, however, the analytical reach of existing historiography has been limited, leaving a number of important aspects insufficiently explored and remaining largely inaccessible both to regional and international audiences.

In order to explore intergroup relations during this large-scale rescue operation, my study places a sustained focus on the way Jewish survivors and those who assisted them experienced the rescue, especially in the period between the evacuation from the island of Rab in the fall of 1943 and the end of the war in spring 1945. After the Jewish prisoners of Kapor had been transported to Partisan-held territory, most Jewish men of military age, as well as a number of women, joined the communist-led forces (Alfred in Kovač 1995). The communist leadership, however, moved the majority of rescued Jews to the regions of Kordun, Banija, and Lika, where the local population – primarily Serbs and Croats, but also Bosniaks – hosted and provided for the former prisoners until the end of the war.

Besides the rescue operation itself, which had been organized by Partisan leadership, the housing of the Jews of Kapor was a complex operation in itself, dependent on intergroup cooperation and a focus on coexistence, involving the efforts of ordinary people from the entire spectrum of Croatia's and the wider region's diverse ethno-confessional groups. United under the banner of "antifascist struggle" and intent to expel Italian and German occupation forces, Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, Slovenians,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kovačić 2000; 1998, Potočnik 1975, Romano 1973, Pakiž 1953, Drenovec 1953.

<sup>2</sup> See Kerenji 2006, and Jezernik 2001.

antifascist Italians, and others worked together to save their Jewish compatriots from annihilation at the hands of Nazi Germany.

Situated within the broader European context of rescue operations during the Holocaust, the multiethnic dimension of the story of the rescue of the Jews of Kapor holds significant potential for countering simplistic, ethnocentric, and exclusivist historical narratives that represent the mainstream public understanding of the history of the Second World War in the region. In other words, this history represents a historical counternarrative that reflects and promotes a culture of a shared future for the peoples of Croatia and the broader region.

Most common historical narratives in the Western Balkans are nationalistic in nature and are thus in essence myopic. Political actors and agenda-driven professionals, both in academia and outside of it, place focus on concerns that matter to the in-group, with a strong tendency to shun any sensitivity for alternative historical perspectives, such as those of national and other minorities.

Much like individuals, collective entities are by default subjective, making sense of the world around them from a position of their own lived experience, their own collective contexts, concerns, aims, and perspectives (See Ortner 2005). This tendency results in an incomplete, highly self-centered view of the world, one that is unlikely to self-correct without intentional, well-thought-out action on the part of experts and other professionals.

Collective subjectivity also produces a myopic view of history, especially if reinforced by nationalistic actors and political parties, whose agendas collective subjectivity is pursued as a matter of ideological principle. Reluctance to consider alternative ways of framing lived reality is an inevitable side effect, further preventing the necessary complexification and diversification of the way in which

collective past and present are understood and interpreted.

Such a situation, especially when holding the reins of most, if not all, collectivities in this historically tumultuous region, locks the various national societies in a cycle of mutual distrust, animosity, and historical grudge, disaffecting not only political developments but also overall economic growth and intergroup cultural relationships.

Ethnonational groups that coalesced in Southeast Europe over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have a view of the world that almost exclusively puts focus on elements of lived reality that provide them with collective self-affirmation, often involving an affective dimension of collective superiority. Efforts to change such a state of affairs—one that induces intergroup hostility and mutual deprecation—have been far and between. Reluctance to consider alternative ways of framing lived reality at this point appears to be an integral part of regional national cultures, which makes for a dangerous outlook in regard to the coming decades.

In this context, histories that challenge established collective historical narratives are habitually unnoticed or ignored. Academic research often follows the laws of the free market economy, where available funding usually backs what is in demand, rather than what is needed for social progress and building a better, shared future. Instead of decreasing the likelihood of intra- or international strife, therefore, academic research remains impotent in countering these highly problematic trends.

The history of the Jewish prisoners of the Italian concentration camp Kapor is largely unknown; in the academic arena, and even more so among the general public, the multiethnic effort on the part of the antifascist insurgency that rescued them and kept them in safety for the rest of the Second World War is even less familiar. As mentioned above, scholarly works recounting the history of the rescue from the camp do exist; however, the history of

housing and protecting these people for eighteen months until the end of the war has never been written.

In terms of multiethnic efforts to rescue and keep the “Jewish refugees” safe, the history that came *after* the rescue is much more significant, since it involved the labor and support of thousands of ordinary people who came into contact with former internees of Kapor over the year and a half that they resided with the rural population of the regions of Banija, Kordun, and Lika. The picture that emerges from the preliminary stages of my research shows that the local multiethnic population of the regions where the Partisan leadership dispatched the Jews of Kapor—primarily Serbs, also targets of Ustaša genocide, but also Croats and Bosniaks disenchanted with the NDH—accepted the “Jewish refugees” as fellow victims of regime violence and allies in anti-Ustaša and anti-German struggle. When certain parts of liberated territories were threatened by fascist forces, for example, Jews evacuated through forests and mountain passes to safer places together with locals; episodes of strife that unsurprisingly arose between people trying to survive a fourth and a fifth year of genocidal violence and profound upheavals in community and personal life appear to have mainly revolved around the distribution of scarce resources—rather than intergroup tension—with the majority of Jews of Kapor integrating into Partisan structures and local economy.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely histories such as this one that contain a goldmine of material able to help shift the self-affirming and self-serving historical narratives that are currently gripping the region.

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<sup>3</sup> The bulk of my research is based on documents collected in the Croatian State Archive in Zagreb, Croatia, and the Archive of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, Serbia.



Government agencies and public stakeholder entities that have at their disposal the infrastructure, networks, and funding necessary for efforts at the popularization of alternative views of collective history ought to support the kinds of historiography that emphasize those chapters of the past that have fallen by the wayside as a result of in-group bias and self-affirming myopia. Sustained support of such scholarly endeavors will inevitably produce shifting perspectives in the local marketplaces of ideas.

However, it is not enough to only reinforce the production of more complex and more complete historical accounts. Dissemination of new studies, ones not driven by political or economic agendas, is the crucial part of the equation. In this particular case, once the history of the rescue of the Jews of Kampor has been written, efforts at making it available to broad audiences ought to be reinforced by institutional public policy support.

Academic institutions, publishers, media, and other actors in the public arena have not only the capability but also a *standing social responsibility* to promote historical perspectives that take into account other groups' historical experiences, intergroup coexistence, and cross-ethnic collaboration. In other words, it will not suffice to increase funding for such historiographical projects and provide institutional support for their dissemination among the general public. Considering the time-consuming nature of social and cultural evolution, to make a felt difference and shift the self-affirming worldviews common in this region, it is to be expected that such an effort will produce desired results only gradually, requiring a *long-term commitment* on the part of relevant government entities and other socio-political stakeholder organizations.

As a concluding note, allow me to remark that, besides promoting more complex, more inclusive, and, in essence, more accurate historical accounts and studies,

governments ought to implement serious controls—including possibilities of punitive action for clearly selective and dishonest scholarship—of historical research published in the region. Agenda-driven historical revisionism represents a serious threat to long-term regional stability, especially in the era of global socio-political, economic, and cultural challenges, including climate change, mass migrations, emergent technologies, and an ever-shifting landscape of geopolitical power.

Historical research may appear as a matter of lower priority compared to the more immediate grand arena of politics, the economy, and ongoing social issues. Consider, however, that the aim of revisionism is not historical accuracy; revisionists are not out to correct errors about what happened in the past but to construct a basis for a specific socio-political agenda in the present. Historical research is therefore crucial for present-day matters; it informs the way in which we engage with our neighbors, our communities, our anxieties, and aspirations, as well as our very sense of self. Despite the seemingly secondary role of history in everyday society and politics, the way we view our past and our differences is crucial for the project of building bridges instead of walls.

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