

command of Fuchs, were responsible for producing the hostages. Because the fight for Šabac represented a key point in his great offensive to secure Serbia, Böhme decided to begin by taking the hostages from the Sava camp.

On October 6, Böhme ordered the 342nd Division to build a concentration camp near Zasavica in order to house 30,000 Serbs taken prisoner during the clean-up operation, temporarily being held near Šabac at the former Seniak military compound. The Division had been ordered to evict everyone from the area between Sremska Mitrovica and Ravnije — a strip of twenty kilometers along the banks of the Sava.

The village of Zasavica was located near the river bank in the corner of this area. According to Böhme's plan, four hundred Serbian builders and craftsmen imprisoned at the Seniak camp were to be brought to Zasavica to construct the new concentration camp. On October 8, the prisoner-laborers were handed over to the infantry company of the 750th Regiment.⁴¹

One of the four hundred prisoners who built the Zasavica camp was Milorad-Mica Jelesić, a farmer from the village of Majur. He later testified:

In October 1941, when the German penal unit moved across the Matava, I went with the other adult farmers to receive identity papers, as the Germans had ordered. But as a result I was imprisoned in the barracks at the Šabac camp [the Seniak camp]. Before Miodjdan [the Orthodox feast of Saint Michael, which falls on October 12], they asked, who was prepared to work, and I volunteered, just to get out of the camp for a while. We were taken to Klenak in a group of about 400, and from there

⁴¹ Report on the partisan ambush near Topola, 10/2/41, Document NOKW 1043, Wiener Library; order from Böhme, "Reprisals for the Cruel Murder of German Soldiers by Communist Bandits," 10/4/41 (Handwritten Supplement to War Diary), Document NOKW 192, "The Hostage Case," p. 976 (in German, YVA N7/111). The entry notes that the order was only given verbally (cf. p. 32); Head of the Security Services (S.D.) and Police (SIPO) [Heydrich] Report on the events of 10/9/41, Document NO 3156, YVA 0-10/12 and N7/111.

⁴² Böhme's Chief of Staff to the Head of the Military Administration and to the headquarters of General Bader and of the 342nd Division, "The Concentration Camp at Zasavica," 10/6/41, Document NOKW 262, YVA N7/43. Christopher Browning found additional details concerning the duties of the 750th Regiment in the war diary of the 718th Division at the [Federal Archive Archives] at Freiburg. He passed the information on in a letter to Yehoshua Berger (in the Hague), 10/18/81, private collection of Yehoshua Berger.

we traveled by train to Sremska Mitrovica. At Sremska Mitrovica we were left in the railway cars we had traveled in for three days, without food; during the day, we were sent out into a field. On the fourth day, they began to sort us into a few work groups. When those who had gone out to work returned at nightfall, they were not allowed to join the rest of us. On Miodjdan I was taken to Mačvanska Mitrovica [south of the Sava, in the Serbian Mačva region] in a group of forty men; then we moved on to Zasavica.... They brought us to a ditch two hundred meters long, two and a half meters wide, and two and a half meters deep. Later I found out that this hole had been dug by the men who had been taken out to work during the previous days.⁴³

The long narrow pit was in fact a mass grave, intended for the Jewish and Gypsy hostages destined to die at Zasavica. This account makes it clear why Zasavica provided the perfect location for the murder of hostages: the entire area had been evacuated in order to construct a large concentration camp, and the Germans would be able to carry out the executions without witnesses or interference. The four hundred workers responsible for building the camp could also be used to dig the necessary mass grave. Even the executioners were already on the spot — the soldiers from the 750th Regiment who were in charge of the work force.

Dorothea Fink was the only member of the Kladovo-Šabac group imprisoned at the Sava camp who survived. A non-Jewish German seamstress, Dorothea had joined "Ehud's Transport" with her Jewish husband, Walter Fink. After the war, she wrote to her brother-in-law:

One day the S.S. appeared.... The men, who had returned tired and filthy from a day's work, were ordered to turn out as they were. They were marched out while the guards aimed vicious blows at them. We had to stay in the sheds; they threatened us, pointed guns at us. From then on, the women and children were alone in the camp.⁴⁴

In her post-war testimony, Borika Wettendorf stated that the men were taken away on October 11. First, they were brought to the Seniak camp, where they were joined by the Gypsies who had been selected for

⁴³ Serbian Provincial Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes, Regional Office, Šabac, Protocol no. 849/45; Testimony of Milorad Jelesić, 2-10/45; German and Hebrew versions at *Yad Vashem*; YVA 0-10/12.

⁴⁴ Dorothea Fink (Berlin) to Heinz (Harry) Fink (New York), May 22, 1945.

execution.⁴⁵ The following day, they were taken to the fields around Zasavica. A giant pit had been dug in the marshy land by the river. In the background, they saw fields full of ripe corn — the farmers had been evacuated, and there was no-one to bring in the harvest. This is the account of Milorad Jelesić, the Serbian peasant who now served as undertaker:

... I saw the Germans sticking posts in the ground, three or four meters away from the pit. There were between fifty and seventy posts, each one ten centimeters in diameter and fifty or sixty centimeters high... At that moment, a company of about one hundred and fifty German soldiers arrived....

After that they brought a group of some fifty men in civilian clothes through the cornfields, from the direction of Mitrovica. I saw that they were Jews. Each one had to go up to one of the posts (which were placed a meter or two apart) and stand with the post between his legs, facing the pit.

When everything was ready, the German soldiers went and stood about ten meters from the Jews. There were two Germans behind every Jew, and we stood about fifty meters behind the soldiers. Then the soldiers spread out a blanket, which they carried along the row of Jews. The Jews threw things into it, probably money and valuables. When this had been done, an officer gave a command and the Germans aimed their rifles at the back of the Jews' necks, two at each Jew. We were immediately ordered to run to the pit and throw the murdered men into it. [That first] we were told to search their pockets and take out anything of value such as gold or money, and also to remove their rings. Since it was often difficult to get the rings off their fingers, the Germans gave me a pair of pliers to break the rings, which I then gave them. Before we threw the victims in the pit, I saw the Germans pulling gold teeth out of their mouths. If they were having trouble, they would kick them out with their boots....

The next day, they brought us back to the same place... On the first day, only Jews had been shot. This time there were more of our Gypsies than there were Jews. During the execution, the Germans photographed all sorts of things: for example, the victims before they were killed, how they stood at the posts, the corpses as they lay by the posts. They photographed us lifting the bodies into the pits, the firing squad, etc.

⁴⁵ Wettendorf Testimony; Glišić.

⁴⁶ See above, note 43.

In his book on the camps at Šabac, Stanoje Filipović quotes other witnesses to the mass execution. According to these witnesses, the first men to be killed had no idea what lay in store for them. They approached the pit calmly. When they understood what was happening, they became restless, but were soon quieted by the barrage of bullets. The next group, seeing the bodies of friends and relatives in the pit, refused to approach the posts or hand over valuables. The older men remained calmer and quietly took leave of their friends.⁴⁷

In that desolate strip of land, more than 650 Jewish men, some 160 Gypsies, and a few Serbs from the Šabac area were killed on October 13 and October 13, 1941.⁴⁸

The execution of Jewish hostages in Belgrade followed more or less the same pattern. The officer in charge was *Oberleutnant* (First Lieutenant) Liepe of the 521st Battalion, whose men had been ambushed at Topola. He reported the execution of 449 Jews on October 9 and October 11 and described how the true purpose of the operation had been concealed from its victims. Work implements were distributed to those intended for execution, and only three soldiers guarded each transport vehicle. Liepe organized the execution with the help of the security police; a propaganda unit sent people to photograph and film the execution. The report submitted by Liepe provides a chilling contrast to the testimony of Milorad Jelesić, who witnessed the killing at Zasavica. His personal comments on the operation demonstrate the extent to which Liepe was emotionally desensitized, the extent to which he had detached himself from the reality of what was done:

During the journey, the prisoners were in good spirits. They were happy to get away from the camp, which seemed to them to offer unsatisfactory

⁴⁷ Filipović, *Šabac Camps*, pp. 142–43.

⁴⁸ The number of Gypsies killed appears in Löwenthal, p. 41; Filipović mentions the murder of Serbians. The number of Jews is based on a list produced by the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia after the war (see p. 170, note 3), which includes the names of Jewish residents of Šabac and members of the Kladovo-Šabac group killed by the Nazis. However, this list does not tell us the exact number of Jewish men murdered at Zasavica, since we know from the testimony of friends and relatives that certain names are missing. Those who do not appear on the list may have been killed on other occasions. For example, during the shelling in April 1941 or the Death Race of September 26 — or they may have fled and been killed elsewhere. In any event, the post-war list cannot be considered complete. See also above, note 1.

living conditions.... At the time of execution, the prisoners were quite composed. Two tried to escape and were immediately shot. A few expressed their convictions with cheers for Stalin or Russia.... The units returned contented to their bases [!].... On the two days of execution, not one prisoner escaped, and there were no untoward incidents. Unfortunately, the units had to interrupt the executions because of other operations.⁴⁹

In this context, it is worth quoting the more thoughtful, although equally desensitized, report of another German officer, who witnessed a different execution of Jews and Gypsies near Belgrade in late October:

The execution (*Erschiessung*) of Jews is simpler than the shooting of Gypsies. It must be admitted that Jews face death calmly, standing quietly, whereas the Gypsies weep, screaming, and move about constantly.... In the beginning, my soldiers were not impressed. However, on the second day it became apparent that some of them did not have the nerve to participate in executions for any length of time. It is my personal impression that a man does not develop psychological blocks at the time of execution. Such inhibitions only appear, after a few days, when he mulls things over quietly, in the evenings.⁵⁰

On November 18, the 342nd Division submitted a report on losses sustained and executions carried out as part of its offensive against the Serbian resistance. In retaliatory operations between October 10 and 20, 1,081 hostages had been killed. However, this report did not mention the mass killing at Zasavica, which provides further evidence that it was not really the 342nd Division that executed the Jewish men from the first camp, but rather a company of the 750th Regiment. In addition, a report on retaliatory action up to December 3 stated that complete information was as yet unavailable: data had still not been submitted by the 714th Division, stationed in Croatia — to which the 750th Regiment belonged.⁵¹ In other words: the murder at Zasavica does not appear to

⁴⁹ Liepe, Report on the Execution of Jews on the 9th and 11th of October 1941, 10/13/41, Document NOKW 497, YVA N7/11. The observer from the security police was S.S. *Oberscharführer* Edgar Enge, who later served as Commandant of the concentration camp at Zemun.

⁵⁰ Report on the Execution [Shooting to Death] of Jews and Gypsies, *Oberleutnant* Walther, to the 704th Infantry Division, 11/1/41, Document NOKW 905, "The Hostage Case," pp. 1138–40; English translation (not given here), pp. 996–97.

⁵¹ Report of the 342nd Division for 11/18/41, Document NOKW 1013, (the

any German document. Were it not for the survival of Serbian prisoners who were forced to witness the execution, it is entirely possible that the story would never have been told. We would know nothing about the final hours of those Jews and Gypsies who were murdered. We would never know where the men from the Kladovo-Sabac group lay buried in their mass grave.

The Final Solution in Serbia and the Murder of All Jewish Men

On October 10, six days after ordering the mass execution of Jews and Gypsies in retaliation for the Topola ambush, General Böhme directed that prisoners be gathered in concentration camps to provide a permanent supply of hostages for future contingencies. His order extended a new directive from Keitel, which stated that hostages might be taken from the nationalist movement, the democratic middle class, or the communists. Acting on his own initiative, Böhme added: "and all the Jews." Furthermore, he converted Keitel's recommendation that a hundred hostages be executed for every German killed (and fifty for every German wounded) into a straight order. He wrote:

In Serbia it is necessary, on the basis of the 'Balkan mentality' and the great expansion of insurgent movements both Communists and camouflaged as national, to carry out the orders of the OKW in the most severe form.⁵²

After Böhme issued this order, the killing started in earnest. By the beginning of November 1941, the Germans had murdered every Jewish

Hostage Case," pp. 997–99 (German: YVA N7/108); War diary of General Heider's headquarters, entry for 12/20/41: "Reprisal Actions from the Beginning of the Uprising in Serbia up to 12/3/41," Document NOKW 474, YVA-N7/108. Christopher Browning came to the same conclusion in his letter to Yehoshua Berger (see above, note 42). The commanding officer of the 718th Division, *Generalleutnant* (Major General) Hans Portner, was tried and executed in Yugoslavia in 1946.

⁵² Keitel Order Concerning Taking of Hostages," 9/28/41; Chief of General Staff of Field Marshal List (Salonica) to army headquarters in Serbia and Greece, 10/4/41, Document NOKW 458; Order from List to Böhme concerning Treatment of Male Population in Clearing Areas of Partisans," 10/4/41, Document NOKW 892, "The Hostage Case," pp. 973–76 (German: YVA N7/42); Order from Böhme concerning "Suppression of Communist Insurgent Movement," 10/10/41, Document NOKW 557, *ibid.*, pp. 977–78 (German: Pollakov & Wulf, pp. 350–51).

man they managed to get hold of. Böhme had the full co-operation of Fuchs and Turner. It will be remembered that, already in August, Fuchs had — on his own initiative and without any “strategic” or “military” necessity — begun to imprison the Jewish men in Belgrade. On October 19, he informed the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) that “the confinement of all males living in Belgrade to camps has been completed.” The following day, he noted with satisfaction that “Böhme’s directive of October 10 has finally provided clear guidelines for the execution of hostages.”⁵³

From the time the first hostages were killed until the final suppression of the Serbian uprising on December 3, 1941, 7,548 people were executed by units of the *Wehrmacht*. A further 3,616 were killed by units under the control of General Turner and the military administration.⁵⁵ On October 17, Turner wrote a letter to a friend serving as Higher S.S. and Police Leader in Danzig:

That the devil is loose here you probably know.... Five weeks ago I put the first 600 against the wall, since then in one mopping-up operation we did in another 2,000, in a further operation again some 1,000 and in between I had 2,000 Jews and 200 Gypsies shot in accordance with the quota 1:100 for bestially murdered German soldiers, and a further 3,000; likewise almost all Jews, will be shot in the next 8 days.⁵⁶

In a report submitted to Himmler in February 1942, Turner boasted that he had carried out the mass murders in Serbia with great enthusiasm. (Presumably he hoped to impress his masters with his dedication.) He claimed credit for “the execution of as many members of unreliable elements [*unsicheren Elementen*] as possible, within the framework of the military operation.”⁵⁷ The Foreign Office also took part in the extermination of Jewish men in Serbia. At the end of September, Felix Benzler appealed directly to Minister Ribbentrop, asking for the immediate removal of Jews from Serbia, which he

⁵³ Danckelmann to List, Daily Report, 9/17/41, Document NOKW 1057, YVA N7/42.

⁵⁴ Heydrich, Report on daily events, 10/20/41, Document NO 3404, YVA N7/111; 10/21/41, Document NO 3402, Wiener Library.

⁵⁵ Document NOKW 474, YVA N7/108.

⁵⁶ Document NO 5810, quoted in Browning, *Final Solution*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ Report from Turner to S.S. Reichsführer Himmler, 2/16/42, quoted in Ladislaus Hory and Martin Broszat, *Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941-1945* (Stuttgart, 1964), p. 118.

considered “a political task of prime importance.” The military operation in western Serbia provided a golden opportunity for such a project. Benzler added that Danckelmann and Böhme had asked him to present their request that Berlin approve the immediate deportation of Jews from Serbia. “Housing them in concentration camps is not feasible, since the camps are needed to receive some twenty thousand Serbs from the area of the uprising.”⁵⁸ When this cable arrived, Ribbentrop and his deputy, Luther, decided to meet with Heydrich. Ribbentrop wanted to find out if it was not possible, after all, to deport the Jews eastward. Luther was already convinced that the problem must be solved on Serbian soil. Before the meeting with Heydrich, he noted:

If the military commander [Danckelmann] is agreed with Benzler to the effect that these 8,000 Jews prevent pacification action in the Serbian Old Kingdom in the first place, then in my opinion the military commander must take care of the immediate elimination of these 8,000 Jews. In other areas other military commanders have dealt with considerably greater numbers of Jews without even mentioning it.⁵⁹

In conclusion, Luther wrote that Heydrich would surely favor a definite solution. He was right: at their meeting, Heydrich and Ribbentrop decided to send a joint delegation to Belgrade to press for an on-the-spot solution to the Jewish problem. In mid-October, the delegation, consisting of Franz Rademacher from the Foreign Office and two of Heydrich’s aides, Suhr and Stuschka, set out. Later events indicate that the envoys had been sent with explicit instructions.⁶⁰

They arrived in Belgrade on October 18. At this point, thousands of Jewish men had been killed in reprisal executions, but there had been no fundamental decision on how the Serbian Jewish problem was to be solved. German opinion in Belgrade remained divided. Turner still thought the Jews should be expelled and called for a decision to that effect when he and Fuchs met with the Berlin delegation. However, Rademacher explained that it was impossible to send them to Rumania, while Suhr and Stuschka rejected the possibility of deportation to

⁵⁸ Benzler to Ribbentrop, 9/28/41, Document NG 3354, Poliakov & Wulf, pp. 28, 29.

⁵⁹ Ribbentrop (writing on board a train) to his office, 10/2/41; Luther, entry in preparation for a conversation with Ribbentrop, 10/2/41, *ibid.*, pp. 29-30; English translation from Browning, *Final Solution*, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Browning, *Final Solution*, pp. 58-60, 64-65; Documents nos. 1044, 1045, 1161, State Archives, Eichmann Trial.

Poland. Turner found himself in the minority and eventually acquiesced to Fuchs' proposal for a violent, domestic solution. At the meeting, it was decided that (1) any Jewish and Gypsy men still left in camps were to be killed within a week; and (2) the remaining women, children, and old people were to be put in concentration camps.⁶¹

Once the decision had been made, Turner did not look back. On October 26, he circulated a letter to all regional and field headquarters calling for every Jew and Gypsy to be handed over to the army as hostages.⁶² Since this circular did not qualify as an express command on November 3 Turner issued a directive in the name of General Böhme, ordering (on the basis of Böhme's directive of October 10) the immediate imprisonment of all Gypsy and Jewish men. The directive of November 3 also called for an estimate of the number of Jewish or Gypsy women and children and a list of their addresses and ordered preparations for their transfer to *Sammellager* (assembly camps).⁶³

Pressure applied by those responsible for Jewish affairs in the German Foreign Office and by representatives of the RSHA was therefore a determining factor in the decision to exterminate the Jews of Serbia. However, it must be remembered that when the delegation sent by Ribbentrop and Heydrich arrived in Serbia, most of the Jewish men had already been killed, victims of the German program for quelling Serbian resistance. Acting on his own initiative, General Böhme had begun to get rid of the Jews even before their fate was determined formally. On October 4, after the Topola ambush, he decided to implement — to the fullest — Keitel's recommendation vis-à-vis reprisal executions; he also made a personal decision that the victims would be Jews. It was only on October 10 that he issued a formal general order expanding another directive from Keitel regarding hostages and added the words "and all the Jews." It was completely preposterous for Böhme to present the mass execution of Jews as a deterrent or means of suppressing the Serbian uprising. He simply exploited the directive from Keitel in order to accelerate the extermination of the Jews, and he used the German

⁶¹ F. Rademacher, Summary of results of the Belgrade visit, 10/23/41, Document NG 2878, Poliakov and Wulf, pp. 33–37; Browning, *Final Solution*, pp. 60–63; on the verdict in the second Rademacher trial (1968), see *ibid.*, Appendix, pp. 189–206.

⁶² Circular from Turner to field and regional headquarters, 10/26/41, Document NOKW 802, YVA N7/111.

⁶³ Order from Turner to field and regional headquarters, 11/3/41, Document NOKW 801, YVA N7/108.

army as his executioners, while enjoying the full co-operation of the S.S. and the Gestapo, who were anxious to apply the Final Solution. The Serbian resistance had merely provided the pretext and the opportunity.

Franz Böhme completed his tour of duty in Serbia on December 3, when the uprising was over. The Četnik units confronting the Germans had been defeated; the survivors fled to Bosnia. After a grueling battle, the partisan "liberated territory" was occupied and Tito, along with the partisan units that had survived the First German Offensive, retreated to the Sandžak (Novi Pazar) region and to Montenegro, which were under Italian control.⁶⁴ Paul Bader replaced Böhme as Plenipotentiary Commanding General. On December 22, Bader ordered a reduction in the ratio for reprisal executions: now fifty hostages were to be executed for every German killed, twenty-five for every German wounded. Bader's staff calculated that the ratio of 100:1 had not actually been implemented, if one examined the figures for the entire uprising. According to Böhme's ratio, it would have been necessary to execute 34,000 Serbian hostages. In fact, 'only' 11,164 hostages had been killed, and 3,562 Serbs had been killed in battle — a total of 14,724.⁶⁵ The bloody price demanded at the outset of the Serbian uprising had not been paid in full, but Böhme had managed to get rid almost all the Jewish men in Serbia.

Even after deciding to exterminate the Jews in Serbia, the authorities continued to use security as a pretext. In the letter circulated on October 26, Turner based his order to hand Jewish and Gypsy men over to the army on security grounds: "It must be stated fundamentally that Jews and Gypsies are, in general, an unstable element and therefore represent a threat to public order and security."⁶⁶ However, the security argument was merely a smokescreen for the Nazis' decision to wipe out the Jews. This becomes obvious when we consider that the Germans did issue restrictions on the reprisal killing of non-Jewish Serbs after it was found that Serbs were being arrested and executed in an arbitrary

⁶⁴ On fighting between the Germans and the Serbian resistance in November and December, see Hehn, *German Struggle*, pp. 58–69, and Dedijer, *Tito*; Djilas, *Warline*.

⁶⁵ "Reprisal Actions from the Beginning of the Uprising in Serbia up to 12/3/41," entry in the war diary of General Bader's headquarters, 12/20/41, Document NOKW 474, YVA N7/108. Bader to the staff of the military administration, 12/22/41, Document NOKW 342, YVA N7/108.

⁶⁶ See above, note 62.

Serbia. It would seem that pressure from these men also played a decisive role in speeding up the murder of Jewish women and children.

The Women and Children are Taken to Sajmište

For more than three months after the mass shooting at Zasavica, the Jewish women and children remained in the Sava camp. They did not know what had become of the men. The S.S. and camp guards fed them contradictory stories; one day, they said the men were repairing roads, and the next day, they told the women that their husbands had all been shot.⁷⁴

In the October deliberations on the fate of the remaining Serbian Jews, it was decided that the women and children should be brought to the Zasavica camp, then under construction. However, work at the camp was halted when the Sava River flooded its banks. Another concentration camp would be built on the former site of an industrial exposition (*Sajmište*) near Zemun, which lay in Croatian territory across the river from Belgrade.⁷⁵

In early December, Jewish women and children from Belgrade were deported to the Sajmište camp, where, as winter wore on, they were joined by women and children from outlying towns. The few women who survived have described the camp. Thousands of women and children slept on bunk-beds erected in giant windowless barracks that lacked heating and sanitary facilities. The inmates suffered from the cold even more than from hunger; the longer they were there, the higher the daily death rate grew.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See above, note 44; Wettendorf Testimony.

⁷⁵ See above, note 63; Staff of General Bader, Supplement to the report of 10/30/41, Document NOKW 199, YVA N7/108; note by Rademacher, 12/8/41, Document NG 3354, Poliakov & Wulf, p. 32; Browning, *Final Solution*, pp. 64-67; Browning, "The Semlin *Judenlager*," p. 46. These exhibition grounds (*Sajmište* in Serbo-Croat) were located in what is now the "New Belgrade" district.

⁷⁶ According to Löwenthal (p. 23; English Synopsis, pp. 4-5), the women from Belgrade were ordered to appear at the camp on 8 December 1941. According to Romano & Kadelburg, the date was December 12. Testimony concerning the Sajmište camp appears in: Löwenthal, pp. 25-35; Report of Milan Marković, "German Crimes against the Jews," written at the initiative of the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the Occupiers and their Collaborators, Document 1432, State Archives, Eichmann Trial (henceforth Marković Report); Menachem Shelah, "Sajmište

According to the diary of Father Babović, the women and children were taken from the Sava camp on January 26, 1942. At the town of Klenak across the river, they were put on trains to Ruma. From Ruma they marched sixty kilometers to Sajmište. Now the winter cold was at its worst, and many of the children who marched or were pushed in carriages froze to death. Elderly women — and even some who were not elderly — were unable to endure the march and died en route.⁷⁷

The Sajmište concentration camp was run by the S.S. Shortly after the camp was established, the upper echelons of the security police in Serbia were overhauled: in order to ensure that the RSHA remained in control, Himmler sent over S.S. *Gruppenführer* (Major General) August Meyszner, who held the highest possible rank in the S.S. and the German police force: *Höherer SS und Polizeiführer* (HSSPF). Fuchs was replaced by *Standartenführer* (Colonel) Dr. Emanuel Schäfer. Turner and the military administration became less involved in the killing, while Heydrich and Himmler took direct control of the fate of the Jews remaining in Serbia. Those in charge of the Sajmište camp served in the Section on Jewish Affairs of Department IV in Belgrade: S.S. *Oberscharführer* (Staff Sergeant) Edgar Enge and S.S. *Untersturmführer* (Second Lieutenant) Herbert Andorfer.⁷⁸

Because the Jews of Serbia were not included in the deportation programs of other occupied countries, the entire burden of maintaining the camp fell on the local S.S. and *Wehrmacht*. They therefore sought a speedy solution to the Serbian Jewish problem and found their answer in a method that had already been employed by the S.S. in Poland and the U.S.S.R.: mobile gas units. Jews transported in sealed vans could be killed by redirected exhaust fumes by the time the vans reached their destination. This sort of murder had been practiced in occupied eastern territory since the summer of 1941. In September 1941, Heydrich ordered the construction of a whole fleet of special vehicles. On December 8, mass extermination by means of sealed vans began in Helmino, Poland, and a short time later, improved vehicles built specially by RSHA were introduced.⁷⁹

An Extermination Camp in Serbia," in: *Dappim leheker tekufat hashoah*, [Studies on the Holocaust Period], Vol. IV, Tel Aviv, 1986, pp. 127-151.

⁷⁷ Filipović, *Sabac Camps*, p. 144 (see above, note 16).

⁷⁸ Browning, *Final Solution*, pp. 49-54, 59. Meyszner was tried and executed in Yugoslavia in 1947.

⁷⁹ Testimony of Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, taken while in prison in Cracow in 1946; R. Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, paperback ed.,

in a meeting attended by General Bader, Schäfer told the visitors that there was "no longer any Jewish problem in Serbia." The following day he informed those in charge of sealed van operations in the RSHA that truck number S. Pol. 71463 had carried out its mission in Belgrade. "The drivers, S.S. *Scharführer* Götz and S.S. *Unterscharführer* Meyer have completed their special task. They and the afore-mentioned vehicle may therefore be sent back."⁸⁶ A month later, General Alexander Löhr was named as the new Commanding General of the Southeast Command. Turner prepared some notes for a report to his new commander, observing with satisfaction that "Serbia is the only land in which the problem of Jews and Gypsies has been solved."⁸⁷

The Jews of Serbia were killed during the first stages of the implementation of the Final Solution in Europe. In terms of extermination techniques, the Nazis were still in a transitional phase. During this period, Jews were shot at mass executions, either by *Einsatzgruppen* or — in the case of Serbia — by soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*. In the summer of 1941, the use of gas was just being discovered with the introduction of sealed vans; soon the more efficient implications of gas would be realized at Treblinka and Sobibor in Poland. Apparently, the psychological difficulties created by constantly shooting large numbers of unarmed civilians in the back of the head were beginning to affect soldiers and members of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Gas techniques were therefore being developed to make murder more humane — for the murderers, not the victims.

The Serbian operations also represent a transitional phase with regard to the overall status of the Final Solution. In the autumn of 1941, no one in Belgrade or Berlin talked about exterminating the Jews outright; the murder of Jewish men in Serbia was depicted as a security measure. After the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, the murder of Jewish women and children in Serbia became part of the "Final Solution."

⁸⁶ Report on Kuntze's trip to Serbia, June 7–14, 1942, Document NOKW 936, Wiener Library; Schäfer to Pradel (director of the motor vehicle department at the RSHA, who was responsible for the planning and deployment of sealed vans), 6/9/41, Document PS 501, IMT, Blue Series, Vol. XXXI.

⁸⁷ Turner, note in preparation for his report to General Löhr, 8/24/41, Document NOKW 1486. Löhr was tried and executed in Yugoslavia in 1947. His predecessors, List and Kuntze, were sentenced to life imprisonment at the "Hostage Murder Trial" held by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1948 ("The Hostage Case"). List was released for health reasons in 1951. See Hilberg, pp. 442, 710.

Epilogue

In the autumn of 1944, shortly after the Red Army liberated parts of Yugoslavia, a "State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the Occupiers and their Collaborators in Yugoslavia" was established. The testimony assembled by this commission fills seven volumes. At a local hearing in Šabac, Milorad Jelesić, the peasant who had been taken prisoner and was forced to assist in the killings at Zasavica on October 12 and 13, 1941, told his story. On June 12, 1945, the mass grave at Zasavica was opened by order of the commission. Through the identification of bodies by relatives, the examination of papers found in the grave, and the collection of testimony, it was determined that the giant pit contained the bodies of Gypsies, refugees from the Šabac group, and local Jews. The story told by Jelesić supported this identification, and the exact date was determined indirectly by examining German sources.

Abraham R. Mevorach was present on behalf of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia when the mass grave was opened in June. On September 6, he published an account of this dreadful scene in the Hebrew newspaper, *Davar*. He described the pastoral village of Zasavica, surrounded on three sides by the Sava river, adding: "That is why the oppressor chose it — that no-one might escape. From the distance, we saw the masses of women and children who had come to identify their relatives." These were the families of the Gypsies and Serbs murdered at Zasavica. Citing information he had received, Mevorach wrote that the grave contained the bodies of sixty Jewish men

from the town of Šabac and more than seven hundred refugees — the men from the Kladovo-Šabac group.¹

In his article, Abraham Mevorach wrote that it was not known where the other members of the group were buried. For a few years, the circumstances surrounding the death of the Kladovo-Šabac women and children remained unknown. It is true that in July 1945 a Viennese newspaper carried an article about the Kladovo-Šabac affair, citing reliable information to the effect that the women and children had been taken to the Sajmište concentration camp and had then been gassed in sealed trucks.² Nevertheless, the story did not become widely known shortly after appearing, the Viennese and *Davar* articles disappeared into oblivion until rediscovered many years later by historians. For some time after the war ended, anyone who contacted the Belgrade office of the Federation of Jewish Communities was only able to receive information on the murder of the men at Zasavica.

Late in 1945, the Association of 'Olim from Yugoslavia asked the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia for information on the fate of the Kladovo-Šabac group. In January 1946, they received a copy of the testimony of Milorad Jelesić and the list of murdered Jews buried at Zasavica, which they then passed on to the Holocaust Archives of *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem. Many people seeking information concerning their friends and relatives were able to see these documents, but still they learned nothing about the death of the women and children.³

¹ *Davar*, 9.6.41. I am grateful to Jenny Lebl, who drew my attention to this report. Concerning the number of people killed at Zasavica, Filipović writes: "In file no. 519 of the Serbian Commission... of 9/13/45, it was written that on June 12, 1945, 868 victims were removed from the grave. Forty-seven were identified as Jews on the basis of documents. However, in the notes of the Regional Commission's investigation at Bogatić on 6/12/45, ... it says that the bodies of 832 men and 2 women were exhumed that day. Relatives identified 61 bodies and another 48 were identified by means of documents. This is a difference of 34 people, and for the time being, it is impossible to know how many Gypsies and how many Jews were executed." Filipović, *Šabac Camps*, p. 44. See also above, note 48. The list of those who perished contains the names of fifty-five members of the Šabac Jewish community (including twenty-three men), as well as the rabbi of Ruma. See YVA 0-10/12.

² Anonymous report in an unidentified Viennese newspaper from 7/27/45. The clipping was given to us by Mr. Yosef Wimmer, who came to Palestine from Šabac with the Youth *Aliyah* contingent. His parents perished in Yugoslavia.

³ David Alkalaj (President of the Federation of Jewish Communities in

At the end of 1945, the Yugoslav government submitted a report to the International Military Tribunal at Nürnberg. This report stated that tens of thousands of partisans and political prisoners incarcerated at the Janjica camp had been killed and buried in the firing range outside Janjica between July 5, 1941 and November 3, 1943. As we saw, the women and children of the Kladovo-Šabac group were among the Sajmište prisoners killed en route to Janjica. However, when the area around Belgrade was liberated in October 1944, no mass graves were found at the Janjica site. The mystery was solved on February 7, 1945, after Mončilo Damjanović testified that the dead of Janjica had all been burned: from the end of 1943 to the beginning of 1944, the Germans forced a chain gang of Yugoslav prisoners to incinerate the bodies buried there. Damjanović served on that chain gang and managed to save himself by escaping. He estimated that approximately 60,000 corpses were exhumed during the time he was forced to work at Janjica. When a prisoner responsible for transferring the bodies from the pits to an open bonfire grew too exhausted to carry on, he himself was thrown onto the fire. It was expected that anyone who survived this ghastly forced labor would be killed when the job was done, Damjanović testified. The incineration of the dead at Janjica was organized by a unit of the infamous *Kommando 1005*. (*Kommando 1005* was headed by S.S. *Standartenführer* [Colonel] Paul Blobel and was responsible for erasing traces of the Final Solution throughout Nazi-occupied territory.)⁴

The Serbian jurist Dušan D. Drča was one of the few prisoners who escaped with Damjanović. When the Eichmann trial was held in Jerusalem in 1961, Drča sent a manuscript to the President of Israel. He titled his work "The Story of Men who Faced Death," and the story was about the chain gang at Janjica. In it, all the compassion Drča felt for the Nazis' victims — dead and (for the moment) alive — comes to the fore. He shared the suffering of his fellow-prisoners, some of them Jews

(Belgrade) and Naftali (Bata) Gedalia (Secretary of the Federation) to the Association of 'Olim from Yugoslavia (Tel Aviv), 1/18/46, YVA 0-10/12.

⁴ Report of the Yugoslav Commission, 1945: Blobel was commander of an *Einsatzgruppe* in the Ukraine from June 1941 to January 1942. Blobel was tried in the "Einsatzgruppen Case" at the American Military Tribunal in Nürnberg and executed; Blobel's testimony at Nürnberg, 6/18/47, Document NO 3967, may be found in Y. Avad, Y. Gutman, and A. Margalit (eds.) *Documents on the Holocaust*, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 471-473 (Doc. 212). See also Robert Kempner, *Eichmann und Komplizen*, Zurich, 1961, p. 444.

"The Five Kings of Serbia" announced special measures for Jews and Gypsies, beginning with a proclamation issued on May 31, 1941 in the name of the Military High Command. Containing seventeen articles, it imposed the anti-Jewish Nürnberg Laws, annulled civil rights, forbade entry to public places, and limited property, economic activity, and the right to practice certain professions.⁶

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Šime Spitzer appealed to Jewish organizations abroad for immediate assistance for the Jews of Serbia. He implored Richard Lichtheim, representative of the Zionist Executive in Geneva, to obtain immigration certificates to Palestine for all possible candidates. Spitzer stressed the need to get around the so-called neutrality clause. (The British consulates were demanding that applicants prove that they were already in a neutral country when the war broke out. In the past, helpful Yugoslav clerks had complied with the Palestine Offices' request to falsify this sort of proof.)⁷ He also asked if it would be possible to continue clandestine *aliyah* operations. Lichtheim answered that he saw no chance of immigration "by alternate routes" and then forwarded Spitzer's telegram on to the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem. Early in June, Spitzer wrote again to Lichtheim, emphasizing the terrible plight of destitute Jewish refugees and an equally distressing four thousand Belgrade Jews who had been stripped of their property.⁸

The anti-Jewish measures naturally applied to the Jews in Šabac. On May 10, they were ordered to wear the yellow badge and forbidden to enter public places. The refugees in Šabac were even more vulnerable than other Jews because they were concentrated in a small area and were totally dependent on outside financial assistance. The Nazis ordered the older people and families living in private houses to move back to the *Magazin*. They made the refugees' leaders — once the leaders of an illegal immigration voyage — responsible for maintaining the group's present numbers; in other words, the leadership now had to

II, pp. 641-642 (henceforth Salz Testimony).

⁶ Summons to a discussion of Jewish affairs, 5/11/41, State Archives Eichmann Trial, Document 1339; Regulation Leaflet (*Verordnungsblatt*) of the Military High Command in Serbia, no. 8, Belgrade, 5/31/41; Supplement to Leaflet no. 16, 7/25/41, Wiener Library, Tel Aviv.

⁷ Richard (Rikki) Cohen, "Memoirs," manuscript, 1974, Archives of the Association of *Olim* from Yugoslavia, B343, p. 8. Cohen was director of the Palestine Office in Zagreb.

⁸ Telegram from Spitzer to Lichtheim, 5/22/41; Lichtheim to Spitzer, 5/24/41; Lichtheim to Lauterbach, 5/23/41; Spitzer to Lichtheim, 6/2/41, CZA 1.3.1.13

prevent escapes from Šabac. Men, and sometimes women, were conscripted for hard physical labor. Food supplies for the communal kitchen were now supervised by the Germans and provided by the Jewish community of Ruma, a town across the Sava River in Croatian territory. Since funds for maintaining the group had come from abroad via the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, they dried up almost immediately. This is how Mara Jovanović, the Serbian teenager who had been in contact with the group since its arrival in Šabac, described the situation of the refugees in Šabac:

The Jews would wander around the town wearing their yellow stars of David, unable to enter any building. They had no source of sustenance and were always hungry. They had been utterly forsaken. From day to day, their sense of insecurity grew, while the authorities devised more and more ways of hurting them.

From her courtyard, Mara Jovanović saw a German officer and two soldiers arrive at the old *Mühle*. All the Jews were ordered to parade in front of the building. The officer made some sort of announcement, and then the soldiers gave an elderly Jew a bundle of cloth patches, which he distributed. When the Germans left, Mara ran across to her friends in the group, and they showed her the yellow badges bearing the word *schade*.⁹ The group was very silent; most returned to the *Mühle* without uttering a word.⁹

The Beginnings of Serbian Armed Resistance: First Imprisonment and Reprisals against Jews

The Serbian uprising against Nazi occupation led to new developments in the story of Serbia's Jews. From the moment the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia, the Communist Party in Serbia began making plans, and when Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and Moscow issued the call to resistance, local communists responded immediately. In the beginning, the communist rebels staged random attacks on railway tracks, electric, telephone, and telegraph lines, and German vehicles. In August, they began systematic forays against local

⁹ Jovanović, Hebrew version, (Katan) p. 10. Local testimony concerning the refugees and the Jewish community of Šabac is quoted or summarized in a book about the Šabac camps: Stanoje Filipović, *Logori u Šapcu*, [Camps in Šabac] first ed., 1967 (henceforth Filipović, *Šabac Camps*), pp. 135-44. We are indebted to Jennie Lebl, who translated portions of this book for us.

centers of authority and the Serbian gendarmerie, which was collaborating with the occupation forces in outlying towns and villages. Working slowly but surely, the partisans succeeded in keeping the Nazis out of many communities.¹⁰

The Germans responded to the first attacks with executions (either by hanging or firing squad). After a bomb attack in Belgrade on 5 July, ten communists and three Jews were hanged. The Jews had been included by express order of the Commanding General of the German Army in Serbia, General von Schröder. In July, more and more Jews were among those executed. Following a series of attacks and attempts at sabotage in the capital, 122 people — almost all of them Jews — were shot on 29 July. They had been chosen at random by the S.S.¹¹ On 29 July, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a German vehicle; according to the report submitted by Fuchs, the culprit, who escaped, was a Jew. The same day, a Serbian girl was arrested for throwing a Molotov cocktail and, according to the report, said that her attack was the result of Jewish incitement. The following day, the Germans foiled an attempt at sabotage at the Belgrade broadcasting station. With the help of an informant, they caught a young man named Rafael Talvi with bomb in his possession, but the desperate Talvi committed suicide by jumping out the window. Rahel Baruh, in whose house the bomb had been prepared, and Haim Almozilino, who had set fire to a German motorcycle, were executed. All three young people were members of the same *Hashomer*

¹⁰ Vladimir Dedijer, *Tito*, New York, 1953 (henceforth Dedijer, *Tito*), pp. 150–57; Milovan Djilas, *Wartime*, trans. M.B. Petrovich, London, 1971 (henceforth Djilas, *Wartime*); P.H. Hehn, *The German Struggle against Yugoslav Guerrillas in World War II*, New York, 1979 (henceforth Hehn, *German Struggle*), pp. 5, 13. Hehn's book is primarily the translation of a survey written during the war by General Wisshaupt at the instruction of the Wehrmacht High Command.

¹¹ Document NOKW 251, YVA N7/109; Document NOKW 1057, YVA N7/42; A summary of the prosecution's case in the "Hostage Murder Trial" at Nürnberg appears in International Military Tribunal (IMT), Green Series, Vol. XI; "The Hostage Case," Washington, 1950 (henceforth "The Hostage Case"), p. 1263; Hehn, *German Struggle*, p. 22. Von Schröder was appointed Commanding General of the *Wehrmacht* in Serbia at the beginning of June 1941 and was killed in an airplane crash in the second half of July. General Danckelmann replaced him on 24 July. See Kiesel Interrogation: *His* Testimony.

Hata'a 'ir group and had joined the communist youth organization in order to fight the Nazis.¹²

During this period, apparently in response to the partisan uprising, the S.S. began to take even harsher action against Jews, and many were expelled from the Banat region north-east of Belgrade, which had a large *Volksdeutsche* minority. More than six thousand Jews had lived in this area before the war; as soon as the Germans invaded, they were subject to discriminatory laws and threatened with imprisonment. In the middle of August, all remaining Jews in the Banat were deported to Belgrade. The women and children were ordered to find accommodation in Jewish houses, while the men were sent to Topovske Šupe, a concentration camp for Jews located in a former military base. Other Jews were imprisoned in a second Yugoslav military base in the suburb of Banja Luka, in early July, was converted into a concentration camp for those resisting the occupation. By 1944, tens of thousands of people, including Šime Spitzer, had been killed at Banja Luka.¹³

¹² Lowenthal, pp. 9–10 (English Synopsis, p. 2); Jasa Romano, *Jews of Yugoslavia 1941–1945: Victims of Genocide and Freedom Fighters*, Belgrade, 1946 (henceforth Romano), p. 210. The book was written in Serbo-Croatian and contains an English summary on pp. 575–78. Haim Guri, "Benei 'Amah shel Olga Alkalaj" [Olga Alkalaj and her Jewish Brethren] *Davar*, 4/27/81. On *Hashomer Hatzair* members who were killed fighting alongside the partisans, see Armando Moreno, "Jevrejska Omladina Beograda u Nob" [Jewish Youth from Belgrade in the Struggle for National Liberation], *Jevrejski Almanach* (the yearbook of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia), 1954, pp. 103–106. A member of the Communist Party Central Committee, A. Ranković, was also arrested during the foiled attempt to sabotage the broadcasting station, but the partisans freed him in a daring raid in the center of Belgrade. See Dedijer, *Tito*, pp. 157–59; Document NO 2952, "The Hostage Case," p. 238; Document NO 2953, YVA N12/83.

¹³ Lowenthal, pp. 13–15 (English synopsis, p. 3); Dragoljub D. Čolić, *Haysholim baBanat hatzefoni vehatichon* [The Jews in the Northern and Eastern Banat], *Yalkut tashah-tashlah*, pp. 73–74. On concentration camps in Serbia, see Report of the Yugoslav State Commission to the International Military Tribunal at Nürnberg, 12/26/45, Document URSS O36, which was published in the series of documents from the principal war crimes trials at Nürnberg IMT, Blue Series, Vol. XXXIX, Nürnberg, 1949, pp. 253–89 (henceforth Yugoslav Commission Report); Jasa Romano and Ladislav Kadelburg, *The Third Reich, Initiator, Organisator and Executor of Anti-Jewish Measures and Genocide in Yugoslavia*, in *The Third Reich and Yugoslavia 1933–1945*, Belgrade, 1977, pp. 670–90 (henceforth Romano & Kadelburg); Venceslav

of "liberated territory" in Western Serbia, which extended from west of Šabac as far as Užice (now Titovo) to the south. The commander of the communist partisans, Josip Tito, moved to the city and established the "Republic of Užice" which, however, lasted only a few months. On September 11, Nedić asked Harald Turner, head of the military administration, to appoint a German general to organize the suppression of the uprising around Šabac.²¹

In Belgrade on September 12, the liaison officer sent to Belgrade by Field Marshal List submitted a written assessment of the situation in Serbia. He based his survey on information received from General Danckelmann, Bader, and the chiefs of staff for the region. Of the three centers of resistance, he first listed the Sava-Drina crescent — in other words, the area around Šabac. Turner estimated that there were two thousand resistance fighters west of Šabac; others believed there might be up to ten thousand. The officer who wrote the report acknowledged that the entire area west of the Mitrovica-Šabac-Valjevo-Užice line was no longer under German control. He concluded: "It is necessary to concentrate our forces for a powerful strike."²²

On September 13, List once again demanded that a combat infantry division be sent to Serbia, along with armored units. He suggested uniting the staff of General Bader (commander of the field forces) with that of General Danckelmann (Commanding General of the German Army in Serbia). A senior commander should be put in charge of the combined staffs — he recommended General Franz Böhme, then in Greece, "since he has an excellent understanding of conditions in the Balkans."²³

On September 16, Hitler ordered List to "suppress the rebel movement in Serbia" and appointed Böhme as "Plenipotentiary Commanding General in Serbia" (*Bevollmächtigter kommandierender General in Serbia*), answerable to Southeast Command headquarters in Salonica.²⁴ Danckelmann's staff in Belgrade immediately began to work on a plan to deploy a combat unit in the Sava-Drina crescent. According to their plan, the offensive would be launched simultaneously from a number of points, including Šabac.²⁵ General Böhme served in

²¹ List Defense Documents.

²² See above, note 20; Hehn, *German Struggle*, pp. 41-44.

²³ Document NOKW 1424, "The Hostage Case," p. 967; Hehn, *German Struggle*, pp. 44-47.

²⁴ Document NOKW 1492, "The Hostage Case," pp. 969-970.

²⁵ "Order for Cleaning Up (*Säuberung*) the Sava Crescent West of Šabac and

Serbia for a total of two and a half months, during which the Serbian uprising was suppressed and the fate of the Jews in the area was determined. The Jewish men at the Sava camp were among Böhme's first victims.

Disputes Concerning the Jews of Serbia on the Eve of the German Offensive

The army and security police were not the only actors in the German drama now unfolding in Serbia. Felix Benzler, Foreign Office Plenipotentiary in Serbia, also reported to Berlin on the Nazi struggle against the partisans. He argued that suppressing the communist uprising must be Germany's first priority if it wished to prevent the communists from combining forces with the nationalist Četnik movement. Benzler himself was in charge of the suppression of subversive political activity, and Jews and Freemasons naturally came under the heading of subversives. Already in August, one month before General Böhme arrived on September 19, Benzler had proposed the immediate, total elimination of the Jewish problem in Serbia. On August 14 he cabled Berlin:

I have called for immediate, severe measures against captured communists and against the Jews, who are clearly communist collaborators. In addition, I ask for a ruling on whether it is possible to deport the Jews down the Danube or away to the *Generalgouvernement* [central Poland].²⁶

On September 8, Benzler sent an even stronger request for the repulsion of the Jews, stressing security considerations:

It can be proved that the Jews participated in numerous acts of sabotage and rebellion. It is therefore urgently demanded that, from now on, faster arrangements be made to secure [*sicherzustellen*] and remove all the Jewish males, at least. The number involved must be about 8,000. At the moment, a concentration camp is being built, but in light of probable developments, it seems advisable to get these Jews out of the country as quickly as possible — that is, load them on cargo boats and send them

including the Cer Mountains," 9/18/41, Document NOKW 1222, YVA N7/42. Danckelmann was tried and executed in Yugoslavia in 1946.

²⁶ Benzler to the German Foreign Office, 7/23/41, 8/14/41, Document NG 11, YVA N11/311.

down the Danube to the Rumanian territory (islands in the Danube Delta).²⁷

Two days later, Benzler repeated his request for a "speedy and Draconian settlement of the Serbian Jewish question," asking for an explicit order that would enable him to demand assertive action from the Military High Command in Serbia. He added that a parallel order from Himmler to Fuchs would expedite matters. However, Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop stated that Benzler's plan could not be implemented without the agreement of Rumania; another solution must be found. Martin Luther, Deputy Foreign Minister (*Unterstaatssekretär*) and head of *Abteilung Deutschland* ("Division Germany") to which the Jewish *Referat* (Desk) belonged, told Benzler: "Getting rid of the Jews [*Abschieben*] [by sending them] to foreign territory is unacceptable. A solution to the Jewish question will not be found in this way. It may be advisable to secure [*sicherzustellen*] the Jews in labor camps and use them for urgent public works."²⁸ Benzler would not give up; in response he sent a telegram to Berlin on September 12, making explicit mention of the Jews confined at the Sava camp. This time, he argued that, for security reasons, Jews must be removed from centers of the uprising:

Accommodation in labor camps is impossible under present domestic conditions, since safety cannot be guaranteed. Jewish camps hinder and even endanger the operations of our forces. Thus, the immediate evacuation of 1,200 Jews in Sabac is essential. Sabac is a combat zone, and rebel groups with several thousand men have been located in the area. Furthermore, Jews add substantially to the unrest in Serbia. In the Banat region, the harmful rumor-mill came to an abrupt end after the Jews were removed. Getting rid of the Jews, beginning with the men, is an important precondition for the restoration of order. I therefore repeat

²⁷ Benzler and Veessenmayer to the German Foreign Office, 9/8/41, Document NG 1723, Leon Poliakov and Josef Wulf (eds.), *Das Dritte Reich und seine Diener Dokumente*, Berlin-Grunewald, 1956 (henceforth Poliakov & Wulf).
²⁸ Edmund Veessenmayer, who served in senior Foreign Office posts in France and Southeast Europe, was sent to Belgrade to investigate. See the ruling in the Second Rademacher Trial (1968), YVA TR — 10/628.

²⁹ Benzler and Veessenmayer to the German Foreign Office, 9/10/41, Document NG 2722, Poliakov & Wulf, p. 25; von Ribbentrop's office in *Abteilung Deutschland* (under the direction of Luther), 9/11/41, Luther to Benzler, 9/11/41, Document NG 3354, *ibid.*, p. 26.

my request most emphatically. If it is turned down again, there remains only the possibility of deportation, whether to the *Generalgouvernement* or to Russia, but this would cause considerable transportation problems. Otherwise, the Jewish operation [*Judenaktion*] must be postponed for the time being, which would contravene the order I received from the Foreign Minister.²⁹

The plans for expelling Jews proposed by Benzler in the summer and autumn of 1941 conformed to accepted German policy. From October 1939 on, the Nazis had taken steps to uproot Jews from their homes, and this policy was applied with special force in Vienna after the winter of 1941.³⁰

In response to these insistent cables from Benzler, on September 12, Deputy Foreign Minister Luther ordered Franz Rademacher, who was responsible for Jewish affairs in his department, to telephone Adolf Eichmann at the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt* [RSHA]) and consult with him: was it possible to expel the Jews of Serbia eastward? Eichmann's answer was recorded by Rademacher in the margin of the cable received from Benzler that day: "... settlement in Russia and *Generalgouvernement* impossible. Not even the Jews from Germany can be accommodated there. Eichmann proposes shooting." In his written declaration at Nürnberg in 1948, Rademacher provided further details about this conversation: "Eichmann said roughly, that the

²⁹ Benzler to the German Foreign Office, 9/12/41, *ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁰ After the war, Benzler (who was never put on trial) claimed that Turner had urged him to demand the expulsion of Jews from Serbia. He said that Turner asked his assistance in this matter — which involved relations with a foreign country (Rumania) — in order to prevent the Jews from being executed as hostages. Benzler portrayed himself and Turner as men whose sole interest in the affair was the rescue of Jews. In his study of the Final Solution and the foreign ministry, Christopher Browning more or less accepts Benzler's claim. See P. Benzler, Written Declaration from 1949 and Testimony from 1968, Nürnberg-Fürth District Court, cited in Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office: A Study of Referat D 111 of Abteilung Deutschland 1940-41*, New York, 1978 (henceforth Browning, *Final Solution*), p. 57 and note 27, p. 235. However, this claim is not in the least convincing when one considers the evidence from August until mid-September 1941. During this period, Benzler showed tremendous enthusiasm for the idea of getting the Jews out of Serbia — even though serious measures to suppress the uprising, including the designation of all Jewish men as hostages, only began after General Höppe arrived on September 19.

military was responsible for order in Serbia and had to shoot innocent Jews. To my inquiry he simply repeated, 'Shoot' and hung up.³¹ It should be noted, however, that Eichmann's answer could be no more than a recommendation, since he was not empowered to order the army to murder Jews in Serbia or anywhere else.

The Start of the "First German Offensive" and the "Death Race" at Šabac

On October 16 (the day on which General Böhme was appointed Plenipotentiary Commanding General in Serbia), Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the *Wehrmacht* High Command (*Oberkommando Wehrmacht* — OKW) at Hitler's headquarters, issued an order concerning "Communist Insurgent Movement in the Occupied Territories."

Keitel wrote that a mass resistance movement had existed since the opening of the front against Soviet Russia, involving not only communist resistance, but also nationalists and other circles. Since steps taken so far had not managed to crush the movement, the Führer was now ordering the adoption of more severe measures. Keitel continued

One must keep in mind that a human life frequently counts for naught in the affected countries and a deterring effect can only be achieved by unusual severity. In such a case the death penalty for 50 to 100

³¹ Attorney-General of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann, Jerusalem, 1961, Vol. I, p. 53; Jerusalem, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 44–45; facsimile of the original document *ibid.*, and also in YVA 0–10/12; Rademacher Declaration, Nürnberg, 1948, Document NG 3354, State Archives, Eichmann Trial, Document 1244. In his opening and closing statements, Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial, claimed that the murder of Serbian Jewry was the direct result of this telephone conversation. However, this was not the case. Eichmann was authorized to reject the suggestion of deportation to Poland, but he did not control the final decision regarding the fate of Serbia's Jews. Browning points out that when Eichmann said, "shoot," he knew very well that on July 11, Göring had authorized Heydrich to work out a detailed plan for the Final Solution throughout Europe. Browning concludes that in Eichmann's view, the situation in Serbia demanded more immediate action than the Reich Security Main Office was capable of producing at the moment. Since the *SS* and *Einsatzgruppen* were not ordered to wipe out the Jews in Serbia (as they were on the eastern front), Eichmann decided that the *Wehrmacht* had better do the job; Browning, *Final Solution*, p. 58. The second quotation is quoted from Browning, *loc. cit.*

Communists must in general be deemed appropriate as retaliation for the life of a German soldier. The manner of execution must increase the deterrent effect.³²

Lat conveyed the order from Keitel to headquarters in Greece and Yugoslavia.

The man in charge of quelling the Serbian uprising, Franz Böhme, was an experienced career officer. He had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I, serving in the Balkans. Before the *Anschluss*, he was Chief of Staff of the Austrian army. Now that Böhme had been appointed, the post of Commanding General in Serbia was abolished, and Danckelmann was transferred out at the beginning of October. The field forces under the command of Bader and the military administration headed by Turner were now at Böhme's disposal. He also had two combat divisions under his direct command, one of them the 342nd Infantry Division, which had been transferred from France along with an armored unit.³³

On September 22, Böhme signed an order for the "cleaning up (*Säuberung*) of the Sava crescent." Two reinforced regiments of the 342nd Infantry Division were to begin combing the area: one would work from north to south (starting at Sremska Mitrovica in the Croatian stem region) and the other would work its way west, starting from Šabac on the eastern edge of the Mačva plain. Forces posted in Croatia would secure the area to the west, at the Drina river. Böhme added a number of orders aimed at quelling the uprising. For example, if German troops were fired on from a settlement (or even in the vicinity of the settlement), or if ammunition was found in its proximity, the settlement was to be torched. All men aged fifteen to sixty were then to be arrested and confined to a camp set up by the Division. The women were to be conscripted for forced labor harvesting crops or repairing roads.³⁴ The 342nd Infantry Division began operations immediately; the

³² Keitel Order, 9/16/41, Document NOKW 258, "The Hostage Case," pp. 911–73 (German version: YVA N7/42).

³³ Written Declaration by Böhme to the American Military Tribunal at Nürnberg, Document NOKW 1041, Wiener Library; Hehn, *German Struggle*, pp. 47–50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47; Bader, "Order for Cleaning Up the Sava Crescent West of Šabac and Encircling the Cer Mountains," 9/18/41, Document NOKW 1222; Böhme, "Order for Cleaning Up the Sava Crescent," 9/22/41, Document NOKW 183, YVA N7/42.

Serbs called it "the penal unit." In the official history of "the national uprising for the liberation of Yugoslavia," the operation carried out between September and December 1941, is known as "the First German Offensive."

At this point, all the territory west of Šabac was controlled by partisans and Četniks. On September 21, their units surrounded Šabac and managed to take over parts of the town. Mara Jovanović later wrote: "We did not eat or drink or sleep for two days. Then the battles were over.... The sound of shooting for freedom ended on September 23."³⁵ On the evening of the September 23, Böhme stated that "machine-gun and rifle fire from inside houses in Šabac has caused German losses" and ordered the 342nd Division to "clear out" the town. The division was to storm Šabac and take all men aged fourteen to seventy to special concentration camps. Any resident who resisted in had a weapon in his house was to be shot.³⁶

The German operation that followed came to be known in Yugoslav sources as the "Death Race." According to eye-witness testimony, the residents of Šabac were ordered to gather at a certain place in the town and were then taken to a village across the Sava. After a while, the women and children were allowed to return to Šabac, but the five thousand men, along with the Jewish men from the Sava camp, were taken to the town of Klenak. There they were left for a day and two nights without food. On September 26, the men — young and old alike — were forced to run the Death Race: they ran twenty-three kilometers to the town of Jarak in Croatia.³⁷ German soldiers and the Croatian Ustasi spurred the runners on with taunts and threats. Those who lagged behind were killed on the spot. Borika Wettendorf was the only member of the local community interned at the Sava camp who survived the war. In October 1945, she testified that three local Jews and five refugees

³⁵ Jovanović, Hebrew Version, [Katan] p. 17; Hehn, *German Struggle*, p. 3.

³⁶ Böhme Order, "The Evacuation of Šabac [*Räumung von Šabac*]," 9/23/41. Document NOKW 194, YVA N7/42. On September 28, Böhme reported to [unintelligible] that 4,410 men were taken prisoner during the evacuation of Šabac, Document NOKW 1022, Wiener Library.

³⁷ On September 22, Böhme ordered the construction of a concentration camp at Jarak, in order to house Serbian prisoners from the Mačva plain. See Hehn's order, above, note 36, as well as a memorandum concerning the Jarak camp and the Šabac townspeople and refugees, 9/27/41, Document NOKW 193, Wiener Library. The plan to build this camp was abandoned when the area became flooded.

were among those shot during the forced run.³⁸ A Serb from Šabac who also ran the Death Race testified to the courage and endurance displayed by the Jews. He related that a Jew gave him and his son water to drink, which he believed saved their lives. Four days later, those who had run the race began to come 'home'. The Jews were transferred back to the Sava camp on September 30, and the Serbs were allowed to return to Šabac in small groups.³⁹

The 342nd Division then left control and abuse of the Šabac townspeople in the hands of units posted in the area, including the company of the 750th Regiment that had been sent from Croatia. The soldiers of the 342nd spent a day searching houses in the town for rebels and then moved on to "clean up" the Mačva plain.⁴⁰

Jewish and Gypsy Hostages are Murdered in Zasavica and Belgrade Following the Topola Incident

Around this time, events that would have fateful repercussions for the Jews in Šabac were being played out far from the Sava region. On October 2, partisans killed twenty-two German soldiers in an ambush near the town of Topola, eighty kilometers south of Belgrade. General Böhme promptly made two decisions: to follow Keitel's directive of September 16 to the utmost — that is, to kill a hundred hostages for every single German soldier — and to use Jewish and Gypsy inmates of concentration camps in Belgrade and Šabac as hostages. He decided that the executions at Šabac would be carried out by soldiers from the 342nd Division (although, as we shall see, it seems that they were in fact carried out by the company from the 750th Regiment). In Belgrade, the executioners would be soldiers from the same Signal Battalion that had been ambushed near Topola. The security police, under the

³⁸ Jovanović, Hebrew Version, [Katan] pp. 17–19; Testimony of Borika Wettendorf to the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the Occupiers and their Collaborators, Šabac, 10/13/45, quoted in Filipović, *Šabac Camps*, p. 138 (henceforth Wettendorf Testimony). The witness managed to get out of the Sava camp in November 1941 on the pretext of needing an eye operation in Belgrade. Three members of her family appear in the list of Šabac Jews who were killed by the Germans (see p. 170, note 3). See Löwenthal, pp. 40–41.

³⁹ Mikić, "Trka na Smrću" in: *Otpor u Zičama*, Belgrade, 1969, pp. 90–103. I am indebted to the late Menachem Shelah, who summarized sections of this Serbo-Croat book for me.

⁴⁰ See above, note 36, and Jovanović, Hebrew Version, [Katan] p. 19.