

Slovenia in World War II: The Massacres at Jelendol, Grahovo, and Teharje

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With the German invasion in April 1942, World War II reached the Slovenian part of Yugoslavia. The Slovenian territory was partitioned into three zones. The northwest corner and everything north of the Sava river went to Germany, the small eastern part, known as Prekmurje, to Hungary. The remainder was added to the part that went to Italy after World War I.

At first the Soviet Union (USSR), under Stalin, allied with Nazi Germany because their ideologies were similar: The USSR was communist, Nazi Germany was socialist. That alliance ended when Hitler invaded Russia in June of 1941.

At that point, the two opposing sides in the Italian zone were the Partisans, who were allied with the Soviet Union, and the Italians, under Mussolini, who were allied with Germany.

Both sides were opposed to the Catholic Slovenes—the Nazis because of the Catholics' nationalistic leanings and because they were Slavs and thus not part of the "master race." The Partisans opposed them because of their anti-communist convictions.

The feeling was mutual. The Catholic Slovenes were opposed to both sides, which put them between the proverbial rock and hard place. For if they resisted the Italians, they were sent to concentration camps or put before firing squads. If they accommodated them, they were attacked by the Partisans.

The Partisans made up the armed wing of the communist Liberation Front of the Slovene Nation. Beginning in the spring of 1942, the Catholics, especially those in positions of power and those who held property, were targeted for assassination by the Partisans. To protect against Partisan raids, Village Guards were organized in the Italian zone. They were armed, controlled, and paid by the Italians.

In 1943, Italy capitulated and withdrew from the war and Germany took over the Italian zone. Much of the Italians' heavy weaponry that they had left in the area was seized by the Partisans. Due to fear of the consequences of a communist takeover and the lack of imminent military support from the Allies, the poorly armed Village Guards decided to temporarily consort with the Germans in order to obtain weapons. The various Village Guard units were united to form the *Domobranci* (Home Guard) Legion on Sept. 24, 1943. A few units, mainly those led by Gen. Leon Rupnik, supported the Germans. The others hoped to link with the Allies, in the belief that the British would fight on their side. The British, however, supported Josip Broz Tito, leader of the Liberation Front.

Jelendol 1943

Jelendol was a Gottschee German workers' settlement before the war with a population of 48. It was the location of a sawmill that exported lumber to Italy, Spain, and Africa. In 1941, the population was evicted and the sawmill was burned.

In October of 1943, 460 prisoners of war—members of the Anti-Communist Militia—were taken from Kočevje to Ribnica, where they were individually interrogated and sentenced to death by

Partisans. On October 15 and 22, 1943, 120 of them were taken in groups to Jelendol with hands tied behind their backs, led to the edge of a pit and shot by the Security and Intelligence Service (VOS). 119 were buried in mass graves. One of them, who the bullets missed, narrowly escaped from the pit, fled, and lived to tell his story.

The graves were discovered and the bodies were disinterred a year later by the Domobranci. Ninety were reburied at the military cemetery in Hrovača, the others in family graves.

Grahovo 1943

In 1943, the Liberation Front decided on the following disposition of the Domobranci:

1. Each Domobranec will be destroyed.
2. The property of the Domobranci and their families will be confiscated.
3. In the more difficult cases, the families of the Domobranci will be expelled.

The order was approved by the Tomšič and Šerčer Partisan brigades. By late November, they had moved into the Lož valley, in the vicinity of Grahovo, and expelled 24 families. Preparations were made for military attacks on the Domobranci. Three dangerous strongholds were identified: Cerknica, Begunje pri Cerknici, and Grahovo. Grahovo was considered the most dangerous: The VOS (Security and Intelligence Service) had word that Domobranci leaders were assembling there and recruiting partisans who had deserted during the German offensive. The attack on the stronghold was ordered by headquarters to take place on the following day, November 23, 1943, at 10:00 PM.

Grahovo had been bombarded by the Germans on September 30, 1943, after a pilot spotted a partisan mule-drawn cart hauling a heavy machine gun on the road below Lipsenj. When it arrived in Grahovo, the bombing started and continued for an hour. 24 people were killed and there was considerable property damage.

The Domobranci stronghold in Grahovo was under the leadership of Franc Kremžar. He had joined the Chetnik division in the spring of 1942. In the autumn of that year, he became the commander of the Anti-Communist Militia in Grahovo, and in November 1943, he became the commander of the Domobranci garrison in Grahovo.



Franc Kremžar (1920-1943)



Franc Balantič (1921-1943)

The poet Franc Balantič, as a student, joined the pro-communist Liberation Front of the Slovenian People in 1942. Being a Catholic and opposed to communism, he soon left it and joined the Anti-Communist Militia. After Italy capitulated, he joined the Domobranci. He served as an officer at the supply post in Grahovo. After the war, his poetic works were banned from schools and libraries by the communist government. He is now considered one of Slovenia's foremost poets.

As result of a German offensive in late October and early November 1943, the Partisans experienced heavy losses of personnel due to desertions and dissolution of the units unfit for weapons. The Tomšič

Brigade, which before the German offensive had over 1,000 combatants and now was down to around 430 combatants, was assigned to carry out the attack on Grahovo. The Šerčer Brigade, with 478 combatants, was to provide cover. The Tomšič Brigade proceeded to surround Grahovo, while the Šerčer Brigade proceeded to block access to the village.

The Domobranci's main stronghold in Grahovo was a building which housed wood merchant Alojzij Krajč's tavern, bakery, and store. In front of it was a road scale. Across the street was the church and bell tower, in which the Domobranci had two heavy guns.

On the night of November 23, the combatants of the Tomšič Brigade arrived in Grahovo and secretly stationed themselves at favorable positions with weapons aimed at the Krajč stronghold. The Domobranci were expecting an imminent attack, but underestimated the strength of the enemy. They believed that, despite their inexperience, they had the strength to fend off the attackers themselves, with help from the stronghold in Cerknica if it became necessary.

The assault was to begin with the signal from a rocket at 10:00 PM. At about 9:30, the watchman in front of the stronghold spotted several rocket launchers and was immediately fired upon by the Partisans. He retreated to the stronghold and locked the door. General shooting followed, beginning the assault ahead of schedule. The Partisans then began to occupy and loot isolated houses throughout the village. The Domobranci in the other three strongholds fled to the nearby forest, leaving only about 30 Domobranci in the Krajč stronghold to battle 430 Partisans.

After an hour of shooting, the attack abated and the Partisans held their positions. At this time, shortly after 10:00 PM, Lt. Rado Petrovič, commander of the Cerknica stronghold, Lojze Debevec, who drove, and one or two others arrived in a passenger car from Cerknica, about three miles away. They stopped at Krajč's stronghold. The car was immediately riddled by machine gun bullets. The passengers escaped to the stronghold. This was the only help that the Domobranci in Grahovo were to get.

Lojze Debevec, of Begunje pri Cerknici, was a graduate of a technical school in Ljubljana. Forced to give up his job due to the wartime situation, he joined the Domobranci and served as an officer and strategist.

The Partisans resumed their attack on the stronghold with rifles and machine guns without effect until around 1:00 AM, when they brought in two cannons. The cannons were moved and grenades were fired from various positions. As morning approached, the walls of the stronghold began to weaken. Lt. Petrovič was struck by a grenade and killed. At around 6:00 AM, several Domobranci tried to escape, but were captured by the Partisans.

The Partisans repeatedly asked the Domobranci to surrender, assuring them that they would not be killed, but the Domobranci refused to believe them. After 7:00 AM, the Partisans entered the ground floor of the stronghold. Ten of the younger Domobranci surrendered and were taken away. Those remaining fled to the upper story and defended the stairway, successfully keeping the Partisans away.



Lojze Debevec (1923-1943)



With the cannon, the Partisans blew a large hole in the wall of the stronghold, wounding several Domobranci in the process, but still could not enter. At mid-morning, when the Domobranci again refused to surrender, the Partisans brought straw into the ground floor, poured kerosene obtained from Krajč's warehouse over it, and started a fire. Fires were also started in the church and bell tower.

Seven of the Domobranci escaped by leaping over the burning staircase and hiding under the road scale in front of the house. Others, including France Balantič, died in the fire. Commander Kremžar, already severely wounded, stood at the opening and was shot to death shortly after 11:00 AM.

The Partisans then brought the captured Domobranci, including Lojze Debevec, to the house, shot them, and threw them into the fire, most still alive. They then went through the village and seized three civilians whose names were on a list, killed them, and threw them into the fire. Two of the victims were men in their seventies. The Partisans then looted the burned stronghold of what remained, a market, and two homes.

Of the 78 Domobranci in Grahovo the evening of the attack, 34 were killed. The rest escaped, including those from the other strongholds, those under the scale, and two more from the roof of the side chapel of the church. Almost all of those who did escape were later killed in the post-war slaughters.

The bodies of the victims were laid in a common, unmarked grave in the parish cemetery. Maintenance of it was prohibited by the communist government.

Many of the Partisans who participated in the attack were repulsed by the actions that took place and subsequently deserted, putting themselves in danger.

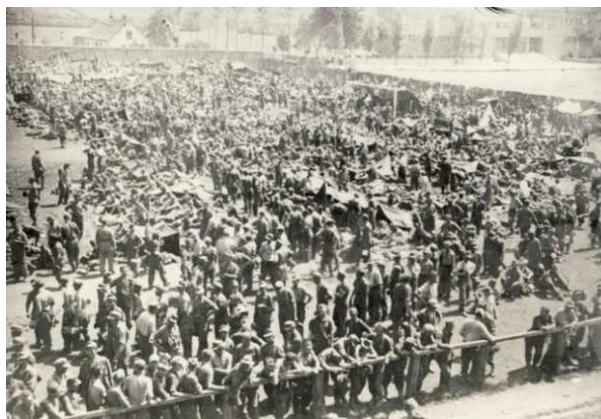
After Slovenia gained its independence, a monument was erected on the site of the burned stronghold as a memorial to the Domobranci and civilian victims who died there. It was unveiled and blessed with a Mass on April 6, 2014, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, known as "Silent Sunday," a reminder of the decades of communist suppression of the tragedy. On the monument are the names of all the victims and the inscription:

At this place, in the year of our Lord 1943, a Domobranci garrison of the Slovenian national army was killed by cannons and fire by communists – brothers by lineage, strangers by thought.

Teharje 1945

Teharje is northeast of Ljubljana, close to Celje. In 1943, the Germans built a military camp there for the Hitler Youth (Hitlerjugend). They abandoned it after the war but it was reactivated by the Yugoslav secret police in May 1945. Sixteen more buildings were added. Its purpose was to accommodate former members of the Domobranci and others that collaborated with the Axis, as well as the civilians who fled to the refugee camps in Austria.

On May 12, 1945, some 30,000 Slovenian, German, Serbian, and Russian soldiers, and 6,000 Slovenian civilians surrendered to the British. 10-12,000 of the soldiers were Slovenes. They were interned at the Vetrinje (Viktring) camp near Klagenfurt (Celovec), Austria. Of those, about 9,500 Domobranci and 600 civilians, betrayed by the British, were taken to the Teharje camp. The prisoners were beaten along the way and those that lagged behind were shot. A few managed to escape.



The Domobranci received the harshest treatment at the camp, being denied food and water at the start, then receiving only meagre rations. Their officers were taken to a bunker underneath a warehouse and tortured. Finally, they were taken in groups to nearby pits with their hands tied behind their backs, lined up at the edge and shot. The executions continued through June.

On August 3, 1945, the Yugoslav legislative body (AVNOJ) passed a general amnesty and pardon. 371 Domobranci, who were still in the camp, were released and the camp was turned into a penal camp.

In 1993, the Slovenian government approved a plan to build a memorial park at the site of the Teharje camp. It was designed by the architect Marko Mušič and was opened on October 10, 2004. The park is the largest memorial in Slovenia. A ceremony is held there annually.

Epilogue

The war took its toll on my Debevec relatives in the homeland, as it did on many other families. Three brothers in one family, first-cousins of my father, lost their lives – Janez at Padež, Jožef at Jelendol, and Anton at Teharje. The other two brothers and one of their sisters fled to Argentina, along with many other refugees.

Two brothers in the other family, also first-cousins, lost their lives – Janez at Teharje and Alojzij at Grahovo. Another brother fled to Argentina. Another emigrated to Australia, possibly at a later date. Only one remained in Begunje.

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