

# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN THE CREATION OF THE 21<sup>st</sup> DIVISION OF THE SS - SKANDERBEG AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE WAR CRIME IN VELIKA

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the role of fanaticized religious leaders in the creation of the 21st Division of the SS “Skanderbeg”, developed on the basis of the ideas of the League of Prizren which laid the foundations of the so-called “Greater Albania”. The authors analyze the activities of the German Counter-Intelligence Service “Abwehr” in the creation of such an “elite” division, whose operatives and agents skillfully mislead religious leaders and religiously fanaticized aghas and beys in order to preserve occupying power in the Balkans without the involvement of German regular troops. Within this unit there were numerous ballist and volunteer forces from the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, Northern Albania, Western Macedonia, but also from Plav and Gusinje (Montenegro) and from the Raška area, while only the commanding staff (officers and non-commissioned officers) were Germans. Since the creation of this unit, religious and nationalist fanatics have been attempting to ethnically cleanse the multinational region from all Non-Albanians, committing mass crimes against the unprotected population. The list of crimes committed by this unit is very long, but definitely the most brutal was the one committed on 28 July 1944. On that day, in an event that is known in historiography as “The Velika Massacre”, for just two hours and fifteen minutes in the villages beneath the mountain Čakor called Velika and Gornja Ržanica the fanatics blinded by their religion murdered and then burned down most of their 458 victims, 120 of which were children.

**Keywords:** religious extremism, Greater Albania, war crimes, SS division “Skanderbeg”, ballists, volunteers, intelligence services.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over hundred years have passed since the creation of the Albanian League, well-known Kongra, later known as the League of Prizren which laid the foundations of so-called "Greater Albania". The League was a sort of military-political association formed by a group of Prizren people on 10 June, 1878, when the war among Russia, Serbia and Montenegro against the Ottoman Empire ended (1877–1878). Protecting the interests of the Ottoman Empire, the aim of the League was to prevent the Serbian and Montenegrin annexation of territories predominantly inhabited by the Albanian and Bosniak population (mostly Muslims and Catholics). The Prizren League planned to achieve this goal in the armed struggle for the Ottoman Empire and perform the unification of all the territories inhabited by the Albanians, regardless if they were majority population or not. At the Congress of Berlin, The League tried to act on behalf of the Albanian people, fighting for protection of border territories aspired by the neighboring countries.

In order to realize the proclaimed goals, the league of Prizren sent a Memorandum to the Congress of Berlin requesting the Great Powers to acknowledge the national identity of the Albanians and Albanian autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. Along with Memorandum action, the League of Prizren sent a delegation led by Abdullah-Hysni Dume bej Frashëri and Mehmet Ali Vrioni to Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London and Rome. The delegation's goal was to defend the stands of the Prizren League Memorandum (Military encyclopedia, item 4, 1972:656). However, the Congress of Berlin ignored the League's Memorandum and the Chancellor of the German Empire Otto von Bismarck even took a stand that the Albanian nation did not exist. The Albanian delegation was not allowed to participate at the Congress of Berlin. Territories inhabited by the Albanian population were treated as a part of the Ottoman Empire and the Albanians as its citizens.

Albanian aspirations towards the autonomy were expressed through the first League of Prizren which simultaneously raised the effect of religious fanaticism with the Albanian Muslims. Among others, it included looting, rape and arson of Serbian settlements and assassinations of prominent Serbs. For instance, on 23 June, 1880 Kongra sentenced to death and executed 14 prominent Serbs from Prizren. Upon foundation of the first League of Prizren, the conditions became unbearable. This was the result of an Anti-Serbian propaganda orchestrated by the Great Powers through their operating intelligence centers in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. This led to exodus of 400 000 Serbs from their old country from the Serbian-Turkish War in 1876 till the beginning of the Balkan Wars in 1912. Arbanasi crimes against Serbs had a history which was going to be continued in the Second World War.

Before the onset of the Second World War, the Albanians from the Balkans became the key collaborator of the fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Through different organizations and associations of political, religious and military character, they supported the idea of "the Greater Albania" along with extreme Anti-Serb

feelings. The ideas of “the Greater Albania” were the foundations for all the quisling units in the Second World War formed at this territory. Among them, central place belonged to the notorious 21<sup>st</sup> Division of the SS – “Skanderbeg”. In the division’s formation, central place was assumed by the Mufti of Jerusalem Mohhamed Amin al-Husseini, who served in German forces and used hodjas to influence the Muslim population to enlist the mentioned unit. Since mid May to beginning of June in 1944, this unit committed huge crimes against Jews in Prishtina, but will certainly be remembered for the mass crime against the civilians in two villages under the mountain of Cakor, Velica and Gornja Rzanica.<sup>3</sup> On that day, 28 July, 1944 in just two hours, the members of this unit slaughtered 458 women, children and old men (Paunović, 2015:144). Number of casualties in this crime was not final, although lots of effort has been put in the identification of victims.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT- PARTIAL EXPLANATION OF CRIMES GENESIS AT THE TERRITORY OF “THE GREATER ALBANIA”

Before the Second World War, foreign intelligence services in Kosovo and Metohija were very active. They undertook various subversive actions, preparing field for the arrival of the armies that invaded these territories in April 1941. Intelligence services of Germany, Italy, England and Bulgaria had a wide network of associates in Kosovo and Metohija, consisted of Albanian collaborators. Security situation at this territory was additionally burdened by the fact that both Germany and Italy had extremely opposite interests. The division of Kosovo and Metohija supported by the Nazi Germany interfered with Mussolini’s plans engaged in creation of “the Greater Albania” including Kosovo-Mitrovica District, which was not suitable for the Germans due to the “Trepca” mine.

Before the beginning of the Second World War, the Germans were trying to buy off “Trepca” mine bonds owned by the English capitalists. Due to its reserves in lead, the Trepca mine was highly significant to German war machinery. However, British Intelligence Service, through its agents in Skoplje and Kosovo and Metohija confronted German interests, in order to protect their capital in “Trepca” mine, all for purpose of realizing its military and political goals in the Balkans (Dželetović, 2012:70).

Without any doubt, the strategic goal of Germany in Kosovo and Metohija was a geo-strategic space between Kosovska Mitrovica and “Trepca” mine. At that point, Italy did not comply with it, not to mention the Albanians who had believed

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3 Villages of Velika and Gornja Ržanica (Plav Municipality) are highland settlements in the upper North-East of Montenegro. The majority of Velika region is situated around the Velika river, a right tributary of the Lim. In its east part, the village goes to Cakor Pass and reaches the spring of Pecka Bistrica river. The first written record of the Velika village is found in St. Stephen Crysobull issued by Serbian king Stefan Milutin, dated 1314-1316, depicting Banjska monastery confines in the mountain region of Velika (Otašević, 2002.)

that the dream of “Greater Albania”, including the region of Kosovska Mitrovica, would be easily realized if supported by the fascist Italy. But, the importance of Kosovska Mitrovica region for the Hitler’s war machinery could be best described by the fact that the German Counter-Intelligence Service “Abwehr” had spread a wide intelligence network in Kosovo and Metohija even before the Second World War started. Service Head Office was right in Kosovska Mitrovica and the main agent was Xhafer Deva.<sup>4</sup> He had established a Humanitarian Organization “Merhamet” (“Mercy”) involved in politics rather than humanitarian work. Its main activity was to stir up the ethnic hatred of the Albanians towards the Serbs, for the interests of Nazi Germany whose strategic goal was to recruit the Albanians for quisling military formations that were about to emerge during the war throughout the region. Germany tried to create as many as possible of these formations, in order to spare its own resources in the Balkans. Before the war broke out, they were aware of the fact that the majority of its resources would have to be engaged in the Russian front, leaving the Albanian population as a reliable source to fill voids in quisling military formations personnel.

Italy launched the invasion of Albania on April 7, 1939. The fascist governments of Italy and Albania immediately began with their plan for dismantling of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, spreading harsh anti-Serb propaganda among the Albanians in Kosovo and Methohija, but also in Macedonia and Plav and Gusinje in Montenegro. Their goal was to create union with “the Greater Albania”, “The Independent State of Croatia” and “the Greater Montenegro”. In the summer of 1939, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent the instructions to the administrative bodies to initiate the action in Kosovo and Metohija, the action which should have proceeded in three phases: general propaganda based on cultural and religious ground, public organization in that field and secret military organization for collaboration with the Italian army in case the Yugoslav crisis began (Sekulović&Forca; 2019:243). The substantial emigration from Kosovo and Metohija became an excellent base for the Italian Military Information Service SIM (Servizio Informazioni Militari) and the Civil Secret Service OVRA (Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism) that helped creating intelligence checkpoints firstly in Albania and then in Yugoslavia.

When Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, paid a visit to Albania on 19 August, 1939 he was presented with geographic charts of Albania with 32 Yugoslav districts in it. It was pointed out that the Albanian aspiration went to the unification of all the Albanians, supported by the Italy, paroles “Kosovo, Kosovo, Chameria”<sup>5</sup> were shouted out while Count Ciano replied that “their wishes will be realized soon”. Since the chart of “the Greater Albania” by Mehmet Vokshi published in Rome in 1931 till many present charts of Albanian

<sup>4</sup> Xhafer Deva was selected and trained by ABWEHR since 1936. He was a typical representative of the Islamic fundamentalism and Greater-Albanian nationalism with separatistic tendencies of Kosovo and Metohija (Dželetović, 2012:30).

<sup>5</sup> Chameria is a term used by the Albanians to denote coastal parts of Epirus region in southern Albania and north-eastern Greece inhabited by the Chams (Albanians).

pretensions in the Balkans, it was quite obvious that “the Great Albania” project incorporated parts of Albania’s neighboring countries – Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and North Macedonia. In case of North Macedonia, this region covered more than half of its present territory (Sekulović&Forca; 2019:243).

After the fall of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on 17 April, its territory was dissolved and the region of Kosovo and Metohija was divided among three invaders: the Italians who supported creation of “Greater Albania”, the Germans who were holding Kosovska Mitrovica and Trepca and the Bulgarians who got smaller part of Kosovo. When he got what he wanted in Kosovo, Mussolini issued a decree on 29 June, 1941 and established “Greater Albania” as a quisling formation constituting of not only Kosovo and Metohija, Plav and Gusinje but also parts of Western Macedonia – Debar, Tetovo, Gostivar and Kitchevo. This Mussolini’s unilateral act implied the transition of all rights from these territories to the Government of “the Greater Albania” in Tirana. Till the capitulation of Italy on 8 September, 1943, the Pro-Italian government of “the Greater Albania” remained an absolute puppet state to the fascist Italy. The invader had delegated authority to aghas and beys, trusted fascists and hodjas. In former Gendarmerie stations, illiterate Albanians formed Militia units, being unconditionally loyal to new masters.

Based on historical documents from the Second World War and many anthropo-geographic and ethnological researches, we can undoubtedly determine genocide against the Serbian population in the territory of “Greater Albania”. After the April War and the capitulation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, just by the end of 1941, the Shqiptar quislings with the support of the invaders, killed 10 000 ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins and destroyed or burnt down their houses (Gaćeša, 1993:146). By the end of war, the persecution of ethnic Serbs continued with unabated violence. It is estimated that around 30 000 Serbian houses were burnt down and evicted properties were possessed by the Shqiptar colonists from Albania. According to Italian sources, their number ranged from 150 000 and 200 000 persons (Pejin, 1993:44). The displacement was executed systematically with the aim of creating the ethnically cleansed “Greater Albania”. The ones who suffered the most were the colonists who settled in from underdeveloped regions after the First World War and were allocated with a piece of land as part of the Agrarian Reform. The assassinations of prominent people were part of the vision to create more fear and panic among the ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins and to persuade them that their further staying in Kosovo and Metohija would be impossible. The representatives of the quisling authorities and Albanian members of volunteers’ units used to come to Serbian villages and order villagers not to cultivate the land, as they did not own it. All the Albanian military formations, from the “Vulnetari” – “volunteers” to Ballists and others had the same mission - to expel ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins from the territory of Kosovo and Metohija and, by doing so, complete the ethnic cleansing.

Looking for a way out, many have decided to seek refuge in Serbia and Montenegro. During 1941, 11 168 families were expelled from Kosovo and Metohija

and according to Memoirs of Carlo Umilta, an Italian diplomat travelling through Kosovo and Metohija that year, ethnic Serbs experienced great calvary: “The Albanians are out to exterminate the Slavs... People stand in the streets waiting for our military trucks and vehicles to pass by, begging our soldiers to take them to Old Serbia and Montenegro, awaiting the salvation there”. Umilta has visited Prishtina, Djakovica and Pec. In one region he found villages where ‘not a single house has a roof; everything has been burned. There were headless bodies of men and women strewn on the ground’ (Borozan, 1998:37).

However, parts of Montenegro (Plav and Gusinje) were also annexed by “Greater Albania”, bringing the same destiny to the Serbs from these regions as to those in Kosovo and Metohija. At that time, the Muslims from the cities Plav and Gusinje started feeling the old hatred against the Serbs, which led to a decision reached at one of their gatherings: “No mercy for the Serbs! Capture them all and shoot them at the Orthodox cemetery!” Thus, in one “savage rush” the Muslim and Albanian patrols captured around 50 prominent Serbs from Plav and surroundings and shot them at the Orthodox cemetery on the east side of Plav (Popović, 1959). In this and all other crimes committed in the regions of Gornje Polimlje, Velika, Plav and Gusinje, the special part belonged to religious leaders and religiously fanaticized aghas and beys who misused religious blindness of the Muslims from the city of Plav to disseminate propaganda and hatred of everything that was Non-Muslim.<sup>6</sup> When the first military units entered the settlements which they had just occupied, a large number of Islamic scholars decided to become collaborators to the invaders and took active part in crimes against the Serbs and the Montenegrins. A drastic example of religious fanaticism could be heard in the speech of Tahir Hodja of Tropoje, made in July, 1941 in Plav in front of the local Vulnetars (Albanian Volunteers’ Militia), saying, among others: “The soul of every our believer will go to Jannah, if you show no mercy in revenge to the Vasojevic tribe (Dželetovic, 2012a:160). You will make no sin if you burn their homes, cottages and yards, if you steel their cattle and rip out their crops. Seize their girls and women and take them to be yours, while men, even in cradles, kill to each and everyone, leaving no trace of our old blood enemies, the Vasojevics”. This religiously fanaticized scholar originated from Northern Albania. He came into region of Plav and Gusinje according to instructions of the Italian Service, with aim to organize the quisling military formations for cleansing the region from Plav to Andrijevisa from the Orthodox Christians.

## CREATION OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> DIVISION OF THE SS “SKANDERBEG”

After the capitulation of Italy on 8 September, 1943 the Germans occupied Albania, but also Kosovo and Metohija. There were no major changes in administrative divisions, same personnel remained in civic administration, whilst only

<sup>6</sup> Such hatred is present even today (Mijalković, 2018: 222–223).

changes were made in top governance<sup>7</sup>. The aim of Germany was to unify nationalists of the Greater Albania in the fight against the National Liberation Movement at the territory of “the Greater Albania”. German instructors trained Albanian quisling Military and Gendarmerie formations, supporting creation of Ballists, SS and other fascist formations. They were aware of total loyalty of the Kosovo and Metohija nationalists, unlike the ones coming from Albania. The Second League of Prizren executed most of the intelligence and military actions on their behalf, so they did not have to engage their own forces in that part of Yougoslavia.

It is well-known that the Second league of Prizren gathered most prominent Nazi collaborators. In preparations that preceded its foundation and during its foundation, one of the active participants were Capt. Josef Matl, Chief of the First Unit of Belgrade ABWEHR and SS Capt. Gunther Hausding (Dželetović, 2012:86). The Second League of Prizren planned to recruit an army of 150 000 soldiers with the main task of defending borders of “the Greater Albania”, especially towards Montenegro and Serbia. As future would tell, these intelligence evaluations proved to be wrong.

Preparations for the foundation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Division of the SS “Skanderbeg” began in early 1944. Goebbels personally was responsible for naming this notorious division (Dželetović, 2012:96), a man who claimed to be a good connoisseur of the history of the Balkans ethnicities. Its garrison was located in the town of Prizren. The unit was formally a part of the Albanian Ministry of Interior, while it was placed under the complete Command of German commissioned officers. Even the sub-officers positions were rarely allocated to Albanians, except to extremists who “were justified” in killing of Orthodox Christians in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija and the valley of the Lim river in Montenegro.

The division was composed of:

1. Ethnic Albanians already recruited in the “Handschar” division. Also, there were many Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Raska District. According to Dzeletovic’s estimations, this division was composed of 60% of the Bosniaks and 40% of the Albanians.
2. Approximately 10 000 Albanians recruited after the capitulation of the fascist Italy at the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, Albania and North Macedonia;
3. Albanians from Kosovo and Metohija who were held captive in Germany as prisoners of war and were used as forced labor at German estates;<sup>8</sup>
4. Ethnic Muslims from the towns of Plav, Gusinje, Petnjica and Novi Pazar;

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7 At that time, the conditions for forming the Second League of Prizren had been met and it was formed on 16 September 1943, with a mission to preserve Greater Albania including Kosovo and Metohija, parts of North Macedonia and Montenegro (Plav, Gusinje, Tuzi and Ulcilj) after the capitulation of Italy. Members of the Second League of Prizren did not forget to raise the issue of Kosovska Mitrovica Districta, a constituent part of Serbia under Nedic

8 On that occasion, 4000 prisoners of war (POW) were released in hope that they would enlist the future SS division. However, their enlistment was low as, just by being held in concentration camps in Germany, they were able to witness the agony of the Nazi Germany

5. Criminals from Kosovo and Metohija who were pardoned for most severe crimes, should they have accepted the recruitment to this division (Dželetović, 2012: 96).

The idea for formation of this unit was proposed by Xhafer Deva who became the Minister of Interior of the so-called “Greater Albania” after the capitulation of Italy, as one of “German trusted man”. It consisted of the Albanians of Muslim and Catholic religion.

Xhafer Deva was responsible for recruiting volunteers for this division, as during its formation he had no official function, but was responsible for the ABWEHR intelligence work (Dželetović, 2012:98). For that purpose, many conferences were held disseminating recruitment propaganda for the division. Besides aghas, beys and fascist intellectuals, speeches were held by a newly appointed Divisional Commander SS Untergruppenfuhrer August Schmidhuber.<sup>9</sup> Volunteers were promised material benefits, comfortable life in the unit, along with the privileges in the “New European Order” provided by the Nazi Germany. Along with German Military Intelligence Service, the Germans have brought to Kosovo and Metohija approximately 140 former Muslim soldier who were fighting in the Red Army. Their mission was to agitate and recruit the local ethnic Muslims into SS Divisions.

The individuals who had an active part in dissemination of propaganda were the religious scholars who were under the direct influence of the Mufti of Jerusalem Mohhamed Amin al-Husseini. These scholars were trained in the Centre for Imams’ Training located in Germany (Berlin) formed by the mentioned Mufti of Jerusalem (Dželetović, 2012a:163). His activities were completely under the supervision of Reichsfuhrer-SS Himmler. Al-Husseini paid a visit to the imams who were attending the special course for work in SS units. There were around 15 of them and, according to visions of Himmler and Mufti Al-Husseini, their mission was to support the spirit of Islam and to “evolve in good SS members and soldiers by awakening and strengthening the faith” (Dželetović, 2012:102). It was recorded that they had been sending letters to many Muslims living in the region of Novi Pazar, Plav and Gusinje, suggesting them to seize the opportunity and enable Hitler to lead them on into the Holy War. The historians who fully researched biography of the Mufti of Jerusalem Mohhamed Amin al-Husseini stated that he allegedly said that it was time for the Muslims to redeem their sins by massive enlisting to the 21<sup>st</sup> Division of the SS “Skanderbeg” (Dželetović, 2012:102). He also participated in the formation of notorious SS - “Handschar” Division in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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<sup>9</sup> August Schmidhuber was born in Augsburg, Germany on 8 May 1901. He was an SS Brigadefuhrer of the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen since 20 January 1944 till 8 May 1945 and 21<sup>st</sup> Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Skanderbeg since May 1944. After the war, Yugoslav authorities sentenced him to death. He held trial of many crimes at the region of former Yugoslavia, but not for the one in Velika and Gornja Rzanica. He was executed by a firing squad in Belgrade on 19 February 1947.



After the war, the Yugoslav authorities declared him a criminal, but from the authentic copy of the decision it remained unclear whether there had been a formal trial to the Mufti. One thing is for sure: the Mufti remained unpunished for the monstrous atrocities he had organized and committed at the territory of Yugoslavia (Paunović, 2015:70).

The Imams spoke openly of the religious, Jihadi character of the Anti-Partisans' War. The Albanian Muslim population was highly religious. So, invoking the Islam was the most favorable way of attracting wide public to enlist the quisling units of the Second League of Prizren. The Second League of Prizren actually advocated for the creation of the Islamic State in the Balkans. It is clear that, in its nature, this was a Pan-Islamic organization rather than a nationalistic or any other.

However, it should be emphasized that both the Muslim and Catholic ethnic Albanians equally participated in awful atrocities towards the Serbian population, under the leadership of hodjas and Roman Catholic priests. Crimes were committed on ethnic and religious ground, even the Serb Orthodox Cemeteries were desecrated and Serbian churches and monasteries devastated and turned into camps for torturing the ethnic Serbs (so-called cultural genocide – culturocide (Mijalković, Popović-Mančević: 2018: 150)). This consequently led to continuous displacement of the Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija and between 1941 and 1944 almost 100 000 Serbs were expelled from this region and banned from returning in the post-war period by the Communist regime (Pejin: 1994:19). At the same time, 75 000 ethnic Albanians who settled to Kosovo and Metohija during the World War II acquired the Serbian citizenship (Bataković, 2009).

In spite of the mentioned propaganda activities disseminated by the German Counter-Intelligence Service "Abwehr", the 21<sup>st</sup> Division of the SS "Skanderbeg" never reached its divisional strength, being always under 50% of planned formation rate (25 000 soldiers). Even during its formation, the Division became responsible for securing the region of Kosovo and Metohija, Kukes in Albania, Plav and Gusinje in Montenegro and Western Macedonia. At the same time, this military formation secured the railway from Kosovska Mitrovica to Skoplje, actually the part that was going through the Albanian territory and the railway from Kosovo Polje to Pec.

## VELIKA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the beginning of the Second World War, the territory of Montenegro, including the village Velika and other villages under the mountain of Cakor went under Italian occupation government. Although Velika village had never been under the administration of towns of Plav and Gusinje, along with other villages under mountain Cakor, Velika became a part of Greater Albania, along with other Montenegrin villages - Gornja Rzanica, Novsic, Pepic, Masnica and Murina. Municipal administration was located in Gornja Rzanica. President of the

Municipality was Avdo Avdic, a Muslim from Plav, who administered his policy against the ethnic Orthodox Christians in a quite brutal manner (Otašević&Otašević, 2019:192).

Kosovo Albanians welcomed the arrival of German and Albanian troops in Yugoslavia with great rejoice. As we have already pointed out, the mass exodus of the Orthodox Christians had already begun and they were expelled from the region of Kosovo. Once the exhausted refugees had crossed Cakor, a mountain covered with snow and ice started descending into the villages beneath the mountain. The inhabitants of Velika village knew this was a certain sign of upcoming suffering and suspense. Many sufferers found shelter in homes of the inhabitants of Velika, and the displaced people of Velika origin who fled from Metohija found shelter with their relatives and neighbors in Velika. As Milos Dzudovic, member of Partisan forces later recalled, the villages of Velika, Novsici, Gornja Rzanica and Murina were overwhelmed by the columns of refugees, seeking refuge at their relatives (Lekić, 1961.). During the Second World War, the village of Velika was burnt down to the ground three times (in 1941, 1943 and 1944). However, all the atrocities and cruelties imposed to villagers of Velika and Gornja Rzanica in the period 1941-1945 were overshadowed by the atrocity that happened on July 28, 1944. On that day, one of the most infamous massacres of innocent and helpless children was committed, being the utmost monstrosity not only in the World War II, but also the modern history.

Namely, after huge preparations, in order to prevent the penetration of the National Liberation Army from the region of North-East Montenegro to Serbia, the South-East Command of the German Wehrmacht launched the military Operation „Draufgenger“ on 18 July, 1944, in our history known as the Andrijevića Operation. The troops deployed in the operation were the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division “Prinz Eugen” and the 21<sup>st</sup> Division of the SS “Skanderbeg”. Many Ballists and Vulnetars volunteers from the region of Kosovo and Metohija, Plav, Gusinje, Sandzak and Northern Albania were deployed as parts of these military divisional formations (Otašević, 2017: 63).

In the second half of July 1944, battles were fought across the whole region of Andrijevića district. In the fierce fights around Andrijevića, Velji Krs and Balja, the Partisans decisively defeated the formations of “Prinz Eugen” and “Skanderbeg” divisions (The Proceeding “Fires from Komovi”1978:108), who, in complete disarray, fled across the Lim valley to break through the Cakor Pass and Rugova Gorge towards Pec. The civilians who were found in villages in Polimlje region and Gornja Rzanica and Velika were severely tormented. Speaking about the Velika Massacre in his book “The Ballists”, Milovan Celebdzic says: “This poor village of Montenegrin highlanders has experienced the slaughter of unthinkable proportions. There were arson fires in houses, cottages and sheds, with people in it. Burnt human flesh could be smelt miles away. Girls were killed while defending their honor. They raged to frenzied SS soldiers and Ballists and were killed by bullets or fire to which they have been thrown alive” (Dželebdžić, 1989).

The villagers of Gornja Rzanica and Velika remember clearly the perfidious role of the religious leaders while preparing the crime, especially of Sait Hodja Sahmanovic, notorious villain who used to visit hamlets in these two villages, pretending to be a good-will ambassador and persuading villagers to stay at their homes because the Germans would not harm them. It is remembered that this criminal, who was sentenced to death after the war and executed, used to tell the Velikians: "The Germans will not harm anybody they find in his house, you should offer them with bread and salt, as the soldiers are hungry, but if they find someone in shelter or out of house, will be shot immediately." However, as time has shown, the soldiers who had committed these atrocities in two villages were the Shquiptars, Ballists and Vulnetars, sworn enemies to the Orthodox Christians, already serving in the mentioned SS Divisions. People knew well what atrocities were done by Sait Hodja Sahmanovic and how much he was to be trusted. However, some miserable people had failed to choose the right way, left the shelters and returned to houses where they paid the highest price for being naive. It must be especially emphasized that the testimonials of the survivors of Velika and Gornja Rzanica Massacre entirely match in two things. Firstly, that the criminals spoke excellent Serbian and secondly, that "someone" came to all the villages on a day of the Massacre or a day ahead, persuading people to stay put at their homes (Novović, 2011; Dželetović, 2012; Paunović, 2015).

According to some, yet unconfirmed data, Sait Hodja Sahmanovic and his assistants brought three old men from Velika to the "Prinz Eugen" Division Command to hear there what he had to say and to use them afterwards to persuade families from Velika who had found shelter in the surrounding woods to return to their homes. In order to deceive them even further, the "Prinz Eugen" Division Command instructed the detained old men to order the Velikians to prepare plenty of food and provide assistance to the repair of bridges and culverts in country roads leading to Cakor mountain (Lekić, 1961: 511). It was obvious that the enemies used all means at their disposal to return civilians from shelters to homes or to be more exact, gather them in several checkpoints in order to execute mass murders and realize its previously planned crime.

Sait Hodja Sahmanovic was the immediate participant of the Gornja Rzanica and Velika Massacre and a member of SS Division "Prinz Eugen" (Lekić, 1963: 510), serving as an Intelligence officer. Before the outbreak of the WWII, he came back from Albania, where he emigrated in 1921 (Lekić, 1963) and was an active collaborator to the occupiers for the whole period of the World War II. It is well-known that he was strongly connected to the Kosovo Committee, especially with its members who originated from Plav and Gusinje.

Hodja Osman Rastoder (Paunović, 2015:81) from Petnjica, of Montenegro origin, also participated in the Velika Massacre. Osman Rastoder was born in 1882 in Radmanci (Petnjica), Montenegro. He completed six grades of the Turkish Madrasa in Djakove, three grades in Novi Pazar and another three in Constantinople. He taught religious education in Primary schools in Petnjica and Savin

Bor. From 1926 to 1929 he served as a Registrar in Petnjica. In the WW II he organized the Quisling Military Formation "Muslim Militia" as a close collaborator to the Italian military formations serving at the territories of Novi Pazar, Rozaje, Berane and other border towns between Serbia and Montenegro. This military formation was composed mainly of ethnic Muslims and was notorious for its numerous atrocities against the Orthodox Christians residing in Polimlje.

Still, regardless the undisputable historical facts, the Bosniaks cultural community in Luxembourg still aggressively attacks the historical truth of the Osman Rastoder's crimes during the World War II and keeps on promoting the criminals among them, by establishing the "Mulla Osman Hrastoder"<sup>10</sup> Award since 2013. Allegedly, this award is given to the distinguished individuals who, in their work and commitment, have contributed to the affirmation of the Bosniaks' national, religious and cultural values.

## CRIME IN GORNJA RZANICA AND VELIKA VILLAGES

The Massacre in Velika, also known in historiography as the Velika Slaughter was preceded by calvary of innocent civilians in the villages of Luge, Ulotina, Masnica, Gracanica and Gornja Rzanica. The members of notorious "Prinz Eugen" and "Skanderbeg" divisions started to annihilate everyone right after exiting the "Suceska" Gorge. In a village of Gornje Luge, in the house of Miladin Culafic they burned down two women and five children. In the house of Novica Soskic in Ulotina they killed three children and a woman by forcing them into the house and burning it afterwards (Otašević, Otašević, 2019:197).

In the village of Gracanica, the criminals tried to rape 16-year old Saveta Mijovic. She tried to defend herself by holding tightly to an oak tree. The criminals started pulling her hair, and when they saw that she was utterly persistent, they began smashing her with a rifle butt until she fainted and then killed her. Her calvary was depicted in a novel "Black Wind" written by Veljko Mijovic, a novelist from Berane (Mijović,1993). Also, in Krivace hamlet, situated at the end of Masnica village, in the house of Milija Krdzic, Milija's wife Saveta and her three children were killed: sons Sava (4) and Nikola (6) and a daughter Radosava (age unknown).

In Gornja Rzanica village, in hamlets of Firista and Polje, the criminals have committed a monstrous crime against innocent civilians. Comparing the references researching Gornja Rzanica crime, we found that the casualties' records do not entirely match. The most complete list of victims was provided by Branko Paunovic who registered 69 killed inhabitants of which 17 were and 52 women. Even 31 children were killed (Paunović, 2015: 168).

<sup>10</sup> Ref internet: <https://sandzakpress.net/luksemburg-dodjela-priznanja-mula-osman-hrastoder>, browsed on 10 June, 2019

After Gornja Rzanica, the enemy continued their path of blood to Velika. The criminals managed to trick the villagers of Velika and keep them at their houses. Meantime, while the villagers were leaving shelters in the surrounding woods and returned homes, “Prinz Eugen” and “Skanderbeg” troops surrounded the villages. Around 10 o'clock in the morning, the sound of machine guns' incessant fires and bombs' explosions was heard, while the houses at the village outskirts burst into flames and screams and shouts were echoing the village.

There were few survivors who weren't burnt alive, who managed to escape the destiny of their loved ones, becoming live witnesses to this horrible crime in Velika. In the house of Tomica Gojkovic, out of 23 members, 19 were killed and only four survived by mere chance. In the house of Milivoje Stesevic, the arsonists grabbed Mileva and Novka Stesevic and threw them alive to a burning house. They tried to rape Danica and Mileva Tomovic, but they faced strong resistance. They cut them with knives and threw them into the fire. Dusan Simovic's children were killed: Zorka (14), Kristinja (8) and Milorad (2). They slashed open pregnant Milica Simonovic, ripped her guts out and the baby fell out and cried. Stana Zivaljevic along with her three daughters and a son were thrown alive into a burning house. They killed Jela Zivaljevic, a 90-years old woman... and so on. Firstly, they killed the children while the others witnessed. In front of the terrified mothers, children were slaughtered in utmost ordeals. The Ballists skinned them alive, ripped off their arms and legs and then threw them into flames of the burning houses. Few families were able to find shelter in the surrounding woods from where they were able to witness burnt houses, screams and shouts of the children, innocent mothers and weak old men. They looked at the crying sky through heavy clouds of smoke and gloomy red flames, hoping that fire and death would not swallow up everything. Futile to resist, they could only helplessly stand and eyewitness the Shquiptar mob's killing, slaughtering, massacring and burning alive the children of Velika. Scream after scream, whine after whine. After two hours of insane fascist tyranny, Velika sank into grief (Otašević, Otašević, 2019: 198).

The list of victims is long, ranging from the newly born to the ones whose life was at the end. The soldiers of “the Great Albania” left their bloody traces everywhere. They were committing systematic murders in order to create ethnically cleansed state (Dželetović, 2000: 181). Paunovic reports that on 28 July 1944 in Velika Massacre 358 women, children and old men were killed (according to 1948 Census, Velika's population was 1352). All the clans in Velika suffered casualties. Fourteen children were under the age of one. Ten pregnant mothers were killed. Out of slain mothers' wombs, in one skilful stroke of a sharp knife, they cut out the unborn babies, trying to keep them alive, in a morbid satisfaction, in front of completely frantic mothers. After such atrocities, they killed both the mother and the child (Paunović, 2015: 143–144).

The same author concluded that till now it has been undisputedly estimated a total of 458 casualties in this Massacre, in only two villages - Velika and Gornja

Rzanica, while the casualties including other villages in Gornje Polimlje region exceeded this number to the great extent.

## CONCLUSION

From the Turkish invaders and then followed by the Italian fascists and German Nazis, the idea of “the Greater Albania” was highly manipulated by each of them, who disseminated national and religious hatred in Kosovo and Metohija, parts of Montenegro and North Macedonia, in order to realize their interests in the Balkans. Collaborating with all of them, secluded by the shadows of the conquerors, the Albanians have tried to create their own state. The first time they succeeded in their intent was a century ago by forming the so-called Principality of Albania (1913) and now they are trying to make the so-called Republic of Kosovo (by a Self-Proclamation in 2008). Besides, they are continuously trying to create ethnically cleansed geo-political space by putting enormous pressure to Non-Albanians, forcing them to displace, exterminating them in terroristic attacks, military uprisings and civil war.

Except the so-called state-building intentions, the other source of the Albanian extremism is the ethical and religious chauvinism. In spreading and promoting this extremely dangerous form of extremism, the significant role was played by the religious scholars, both Muslims and Catholics. With regards of this, in a case-study of one of the cruelest war crimes during the World War II, this claim has been proved.

Namely, war crimes committed in these villages enlist Velika and Gornja Rzanica among the places of utmost Calvary in the history of Serbia and Montenegro, from which they never recovered. On 28 July 1944, in only two-hour time, 458 women, children and old men, including 120 children were killed. All were the ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins and Orthodox Christians. They were killed in the most cruel manners by the members of the 21<sup>st</sup> Division of the SS “Skanderbeg” formed upon ideology of the League of Prizren that also set up the foundations for the so-called “Greater Albania”. The Unit mainly consisted of Muslim Albanians (including Catholic Albanians) – the Ballists and the Vulnetars, blinded by the religious fanaticism. The Unit was commanded by the German Nazi Military officers, mentored by the operatives of the German Counter-Intelligence Service ABWHER. The special role in inducing this and many other crimes in the region of Gornje Polimlje, Velika, Plav and Gusinje belongs to the religious leaders and religiously fanaticized hodjas, aghas and beys who took advantage of the blind fanaticism of the Muslims from Plav (including the Catholic Albanians) to spread their propaganda and hatred against everything that is Non-Muslim and Non-Albanian.

This case-study has shown the dangerous nature of any crime committed on ethnic and religious identity conflicts; ethnic cleansing and destruction of cultural and historical monuments (settlements, cultural monuments, religious objects,

cemeteries, etc.) is rightfully called “spiritual genocide”, i.e. “killing of eternity”. Besides, by the “policy of forgetfulness” induced in the post-war regime, trying to reinforce the policy of so-called “brotherhood and unity” the crime in Velika was suppressed and the victims were forgotten. To forget a crime is equally dangerous as the crime itself, and by doing so the crime may be repeated, resulting in new victims. It happened to the Serbian and Montenegrin people in Kosovo and Metohija in 1999 and is still happening today.

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