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From Expansion to Retreat: The Causes of Italy's Military Withdrawal from Croatia in 1942

ABSTRACT: Although Italy helped establish the Independent State of Croatia, until early 1942 it pursued political and military expansion at Croatia's expense. In June 1942, however, this policy shifted abruptly, as Italy withdrew a large parts of its troops from Croatia. This paper analyses the causes of this move, which had long-term consequences not only for Italians and Croats, but also for the Partisans, Chetniks, and the conduct of the war in Croatia. It further examines Italian–Croatian–German negotiations, revealing both the nature of their alliance and the tensions between Italian military and civil authorities.

KEYWORDS: Independent State of Croatia, Fascist Italy, Treaty of Zagreb, Italy, withdrawal, Ante Pavelić, Vladimir Košak

Introduction

Italian authorities supported the Ustaša movement and helped it rise to power, enabling it to take control of the newly established Independent State of Croatia (NDH).¹ The two countries regulated their relations through the Treaties

¹ Милан Гулић, *Југословенска држава 1918–2006. Од његовог успона до Мајског референдума* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2023), 166–173; Massimo Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia 1922–1939* (Bari: Edizioni B.A Graphis, 2006),

of Rome, signed on 18 May 1941 by their leaders Benito Mussolini and Ante Pavelić. Among other matters, the Treaties of Rome addressed numerous administrative issues between the two states. Italy annexed almost all of Dalmatia, a territory referred to as the First, or Annexed, Zone. In this way, Italy acquired almost the entire former Yugoslav coastline and all the islands, with the exception of Pag, Brač, Hvar, and several coastal towns and ports. However, the newly formed Croatian state took control over the so-called Second and Third Zones. The area of Gorski Kotar, Lika, the Dalmatian hinterland, and most of Herzegovina belonged to the Second Zone. The remaining territory, extending up to the Italian-German demarcation line within the NDH, was designated as the Third Zone. The rest of NDH, beyond the Italian-Croatian demarcation line, was under German influence, making the situation even more complex.²

Despite the provisions of the Treaties of Rome and attempts to regulate Italian-Croatian relations, their political ties remained strained. One episode that significantly damaged relations between the two countries was the Italian occupation of the Second and Third Zones of Croatia in August and October 1941.³ Italian dissatisfaction with the Treaties of Rome, Italian-German rivalry, combined with efforts to prevent further Ustaša atrocities against the Serbs, were among the main causes of these occupations.⁴ The Croatian

259–263; Марко Б. Милетић, *Априлски рат у Дравској и Хрватској бановини* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју), 24–26.

² Luciano Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, in *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia (1941–1943)*, eds. Francesco Caccamo, Luciano Monzali (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2009), 64–70; Davide Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Europa (1940–1943)* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), 124; Sabrina Ramet, *Die drei Jugoslawien. Eine Geschichte der Staatsbildungen und ihrer Probleme* (München: De Gruyter, 2011), 183–184.

³ For clarity, the Italian-Croatian Treaty of Rome, signed in May 1941, stipulated that Italy would annex the greater part of Dalmatia. The remaining Croatian territory under Italian influence was divided into two zones. The area encompassing the Dalmatian hinterland, most of Herzegovina, Lika and parts of the Adriatic coast, including the larger islands such as Brač, Hvar, and Pag, formed the Second Zone. The remaining territory, extending up to the demarcation line between the Italian and German armies within the NDH, was designated as the Third Zone. Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 64–70.

⁴ Danilo Kovač, „Troubled Italian-Croatian-German Partnership: Italian Occupation of the Third zone and Ustasha Violence Against the Serbs in 1941”, *Istorija 20. veka*, no. 2 (2025): 309–322; Danilo Kovač, „Ustasha Violence against the Serbs and Jews in the summer of 1941: Insights from Vichy diplomatic documents”, *Istorija 20. veka*, no. 2 (2024): 299–312.

authorities perceived the Italian occupations and the protection of the prosecuted Serbs as a greedy attack on their independence. These episodes further deepened mutual suspicion and hostility in Italian-Croatian relations.⁵

The situation grew increasingly tense, as in the following months the Croats pressed for the restoration of their powers in the occupied zones, while the Italians simultaneously pursued plans for further political and economic expansion in Croatia. Under the Treaty of Opatija (Abbazia) and the Rijeka (Fiume) agreement of 16 November 1941, the Croatian authorities undertook the obligation to supply Italian Dalmatia and the Italian Second Army, placing a severe burden on the Croatian economy. In return, the Croats were permitted to bring back part of the expelled Ustaša forces into the Second Zone. However, this attempt to regulate Italian-Croatian relations failed and quickly became a new source of conflict. The newly appointed commander of the Italian Second Army, Mario Roatta, initially authorised the return of some Ustaša forces but later demanded their withdrawal. Similarly, at a subsequent meeting in Venice on 14–15 December 1941, the Croats requested the restoration of their civil authorities in the Second Zone. Yet, after negotiations, this demand also failed to materialise.⁶

Contrary to Croatian demands during the above-mentioned meetings—in which they consistently sought the restoration of their powers in the Second and Third Zones—the Italians were making plans for further expansion

⁵ Bojan Dimitrijević, *Ustaška vojska Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2016), 86–90; Džejms Bergvin, *Imperija na Jadranu. Musolinijevo osvajanje Jugoslavije 1941–1943* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2007), 73–74; Slobodan Milošević, *Nemačko-italijanski odnosi na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1943* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1991), 68; Tomislav Jonjić, *Hrvatska vanjska politika 1939–1942*. (Zagreb: Libar, 2000), 570–572; Nada Kisić-Kolanović, *NDH i Italija, političke veze i diplomatski odnosi* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2001), 194; Alberto Becherelli, *Italia e stato indipendente croato 1941–1943* (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2012), 149; Dragan Nenezić, *Jugoslovenske oblasti pod Italijom 1941–1943* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut Vojske Jugoslavije, 1999), 99–100; Sanela Schmid, *Deutsche und italienische Besatzung im Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien: 1941 bis 1943/45* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 85; Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 70–75; Данило Ковач, „Хрватско-италијанске несугласице љета 1941”, *Војноисторијски гласник*, бр 2. (2019): 126–142.

⁶ Kisić-Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 213; *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* (Hereafter Zbornik NOR-a), tom 13/1 (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1969), dok. 39, 638–640; Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 87.

in the NDH in late December 1941.⁷ In this context, Italian policy in the NDH was marked by increasing expansionism up until the summer of 1942. The provisions of the Treaty of Zagreb, previously agreed but signed on 19 June 1942, represented an unexpected change in this regard, as the Italian authorities accepted Croatian demands and officially transferred certain political and military powers in the previously occupied Second and Third Zones to the Croatian authorities, withdrawing some of their forces to the First Zone.⁸ For precision, the Treaty of Zagreb marked the Italian retreat to the coastal zone, standing in sharp contrast to their previous policy of expansion in Croatia.

Even though the Treaty of Zagreb and its provisions have been thoroughly examined by scholars⁹, the reasons behind Italy's acceptance of the Croatian demands and these provisions form a more specific topic, one that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. While some scholars view it as an Italian sign of weakness or their waning interest in Croatia, others, such as Nenezić, interpret it as a calculated Italian success. However, academics also interpret it as the outcome of legitimate Croatian diplomatic demands.¹⁰

Apart from conflicting interpretations, the examination of the reasons of Italian acceptance of the Croatian demands merit closer examination

⁷ Zbornik NOR-a, tom 13/1, dok. 203

⁸ Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 102–108; Alberto Becherelli, *Italia e Stato Indipendente Croato* (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2012), 226–235.

⁹ Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 102–108; Oddone Talpo, *Dalmazia – Una cronaca per la storia 1942*, vol. 2 (Roma: Ufficio Storico SME, 1995), 424–437; Mario Dassovich, *Fronte jugoslavo 1941–42. Aspetti e momenti della presenza militare italiana sull'opposta sponda adriatica durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Udine: Del Bianco editore, 1999), 193–201; Kisić-Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 222–228; Becherelli, *Italia e Stato Indipendente Croato*, 226–235; Milošević, *Nemačko-italijanski odnosi na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1943*, 153–158; Nenezić, *Jugoslovenske oblasti pod Italijom 1941–1943*, 112–115; Schmid, *Deutsche und italienische Besatzung im Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien: 1941 bis 1943/45*, 155; Nikica Barić, *Ustroj kopnene vojske domobranstva. Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2003), 317–321; Amir Obhodaš, *Glava za zub: Talijansko-četnička suradnja u NDH* (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2023), 77–79; Hrvoje Matković, *Između Mačeka i Pavelića. Politički portret Davida Sinčića* (Zagreb: Naklada Pavičić, 2010), 115–124.

¹⁰ Becherelli, *Italia e Stato indipendente croato*, 226; Kisić-Kolanović, *NDH i Italija*, 222; Jonjić, *Hrvatska vanjska politika*, 842–843; Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941–1945* (Zagreb: Sveučilišna naklada Liber, Školska knjiga, 1977), 118; Nenezić, *Jugoslovenske oblasti pod Italijom 1941–1943*, 113, 116–118.

as most historians address this issue only briefly, usually in the context of broader topics rather than as the focus of a dedicated study.¹¹ Additionally, the topic merits a more detailed analysis due to its long-term consequences. Namely, a the sudden shift in Italian policy impacted the mutual relation between the Axis Powers, and had long-term consequences for the course of warfare in Croatia and the wider territory of former Yugoslavia.

Accordingly, this paper aims to analyse the causes of the Italian military retreat, which was preceded by two interconnected episodes. These episodes culminated in the Italian acceptance of Croatian demands, which, among other things, involved reducing the number of Italian troops in Croatia and restoring Croatian control over the Second and Third Zones. The first episode involved Croatian diplomatic efforts to secure the goodwill of Italian dignitaries regarding these requests, while the second was the official Croatian request for concessions, presented by Vladimir Košak, the Croatian Minister of Economic Affairs.

Before analysing Italy's military withdrawal through the lens of these two specific diplomatic episodes arising from Italian–Croatian relations, it is essential to emphasise that the retreat also reflected the broader strategic context of the period. It is widely accepted that by mid-1942, major operational priorities necessarily superseded regional concerns, relegating Croatia to a peripheral position within Axis strategic planning. Germany's expanding military commitments—on the Eastern Front, in North Africa, and along the plans for the defence of the Mediterranean coast—required active Italian participation across multiple theatres, leaving fewer resources in Croatia.

The First Croatian Diplomatic Episode: Early Concessions

Pavelić himself was active in Croatian diplomacy, repeatedly expressing his devotion to Italy and Mussolini to the Italian ambassador in Zagreb, Raffaele Casertano. Pavelić's efforts proved successful and convincing, as Casertano on 16 April of 1942 reported that the Croatian leader sought to improve Italian–Croatian relations. In his correspondence, to Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, Casertano suggested that Italy should take advantage of these circumstances, recommending that Italian military authorities

¹¹ Nenezić, *Jugoslovenske oblasti pod Italijom 1941–1943*, 112–118; Obhodaš, *Glava za zub*, 77; Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 102–106.

intensify their cooperation with the Ustaša and work towards resolving the ongoing disputes.¹²

The next Pavelić's diplomatic activity was a meeting in Zagreb on 25 April 1942. According to the minutes sent by Marquis Raimondo Giustiniani, the Italian Chargé d'Affaires in the NDH, to Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, the main negotiators were Ciano, Ugo Cavallero, chief of the Italian Supreme Command, and Ante Pavelić. Pavelić assured Cavallero that Italian–Croatian relations were excellent, aside from minor issues, describing them as a “brotherhood” and crediting Italy for helping establish the Croatian state. Giustiniani found Pavelić convincing and gave a favourable assessment of him. He also observed that Germany was not mentioned during the talks, underscoring the ongoing Italian–German rivalry over influence in Croatia.¹³

In addition to Giustiniani, Pavelić's efforts to improve Italian–Croatian relations also left a positive impression on general Mario Roatta. Roatta stated that certain Croatian ministers, particularly those from military circles, were obstructing Pavelić's efforts to strengthen Croatia's reliance on Italy.¹⁴ It is reasonable to assume that Roatta was referring to the commander of Home Guard Croatian military forces, Marshal Slavko Kvaternik, a pro-German figure within the Croatian government. However, it is notable that Roatta expressed a positive view of Ante Pavelić, and of his position towards Italy. More importantly, the same document reveals that during his meeting with General Ugo Cavallero, Pavelić raised two issues: the restoration of Croatian civil authority and the introduction of Ustaša forces into the Second Zone, which the Italians had previously banned.¹⁵

The significance of the meeting was notable, as these two issues later became key demands officially presented during Minister Košak's visit to Rome. In effect, Pavelić used his meeting with Ugo Cavallero—at which Roatta was present—to pave the way for requests that Košak would formally present the following month.

The Croatian Foreign Minister, Mladen Lorković informed the German representative to Croatia, Siegfried Kasche, about the Pavelić–Cavallero

¹² *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (Hereafter: DDI), series 9, vol. 8, (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 1988), doc. 457, p. 501; Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 103.

¹³ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 501, p. 553.

¹⁴ Bogdan Krizman, *NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986), 302–304.

¹⁵ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 489, p. 539.

meeting. Kasche was told that the meeting had been successful, as Cavallero had promised to convey Pavelić's concerns to Mussolini. Lorković's remarks to Kasche align with Italian sources, confirming—as noted above—that Roatta was less conciliatory, largely due to Italian–Croatian misunderstandings over Italy's role in suppressing the uprising in Eastern Bosnia.¹⁶

The Croatian Minister of Commerce, Dragutin Toth, conveyed another Croatian demand. While in previous meetings the Croats had sought concessions regarding civil authority and the introduction of Ustaša forces, Toth's mission focused on a key economic issue—the Croatian obligation to supply the Second Army. The letter from Italian diplomat Luca Pietromarchi revealed that Minister Toth met with several Italian dignitaries: Raffaello Riccardi, the Italian Finance Minister, and Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, president of the Italian–Croatian Economic Commission. Pietromarchi himself was present at the meeting. In his letter to Minister Ciano, dated 29 April, Pietromarchi reported that Toth complained about the difficulties of supplying the Italian Second Army—an obligation undertaken by the Croats under the aforementioned Treaty of Opatija. Toth explained that such supplies were stifling the Croatian economy. Showing some understanding, Volpi undertook to pass the Croatian request on to Mussolini. When presenting the issue to Mussolini, Volpi proposed the regrouping of Italian troops to a narrower area after the joint offensive in eastern Bosnia. The letter indicates that Benito Mussolini accepted these arguments, stating that he did not wish to stifle the Croatian economy, since Croatia owed its very existence to Italy.¹⁷

The Croatian representative in Rome, Stjepo Perić, informed Croatian Foreign Minister Mladen Lorković about the same meeting. Perić's letter indicates that Toth's action was successful in some respects, as the Italian authorities agreed that the Croats would pay a much smaller amount for the maintenance of the Second Army than before. From April onwards, the Croats were to provide 125,000,000 instead of 250,000,000 kunas for the army's upkeep.¹⁸ It is evident that the Italians accepted a reduced sum for the maintenance of their army, showing a degree of understanding for the Croatian requests.

¹⁶ *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945* (Hereafter: ADAP), E, 1941–1945, vol 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), doc. 179, pp. 300–302.

¹⁷ *DDI*, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 494, p. 547.

¹⁸ „The Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from April 28, 1942”, in *Mladen Lorković ministar urotnik*, ur. Nada Kisić–Kolanović (Zagreb: Golden marketing, Hrvatski državni arhiv, 1998), 146.

The Germans were informed of Toth's visit to Rome. In his report to Berlin, Kasche voiced concern over Volpi and Riccardi's plans for a customs union between Dalmatia and Croatia, which aimed to bind the Croatian economy more closely to Italy. He was alarmed by Riccardi's sharp declaration that Croatia belonged to Italy's economic sphere and could not conclude any far-reaching agreements with third countries without first informing Italy. At the same time, Kasche noted that, unlike Volpi and Riccardi, Mussolini received Toth warmly and listened attentively to his explanations.¹⁹

Lorković's report to Pavelić indicates that Lorković continued Minister Toth's diplomatic efforts. He discussed with Casertano issues to be addressed during Minister Košak's forthcoming visit to Rome, including the Italian return of civil powers over the territories they had occupied to the Croats. Casertano also acknowledged that the number of Italian soldiers in Croatia should be reduced. However, the Italian representative emphasised that this would depend on the state of relations between the Italian Second Army and the Croats.²⁰ Casertano's words indicate that Italian civil and military representatives had to coordinate their positions on the Croatian requests, especially since these demands had both military and civil dimensions. His remarks also align with Roatta's less conciliatory stance towards the Croatian proposals, as noted above. Moreover, the possibility that Italian military and civil authorities in Croatia might adopt differing views on the Croatian requests fits the broader political context, given that they had previously diverged on many issues concerning Croatia.²¹

The sources analysed above show that Pavelić, along with Ministers Toth and Lorković, made efforts to present Croatian demands to Italian military and diplomatic dignitaries. It should be noted that Croatian officials had attempted to secure the same concessions much earlier, but in April their efforts were more successful than before. The negotiations discussed above indicate that Italian diplomatic and military figures—Castellani, Cavallero, Roatta, Casertano, and even

¹⁹ ADAP, E, vol. 2, doc. 179, pp. 300–302.

²⁰ „Izvjješće poglavniku N.4” u *Mladen Lorković ministar urotnik*, 154.

²¹ Eric Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra. Gli italiani in Jugoslavia 1941–1943* (Roma: Carocci, 2007), 107–108; Miloš Vojinović, „The Independent State of Croatia and the Ustasha Violence at the Crossroad of Italian and Vatican. Documents”, in *Pope Pius XII and the Challenge of Totalitarianism in Yugoslavia, 1941–1958*, ed. Vojislav G. Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies SASA, 2025), 155–183.

Mussolini—showed some understanding of certain Croatian requests, among which was the restoration of Croatian civil authority, the reintroduction of Ustaša forces, and the alleviation of the Croatian obligation to supply the Second Army. However, Minister Košak's visit to the Eternal City on 10 May provided the occasion to officially present these demands and discuss them in more detail. The meeting in Rome left its mark on Croatian, Italian, and German sources.

The Second Croatian Diplomatic Episode: Košak's Mission

The letter from Count Ciano to Ugo Cavallero is a key source on Minister Košak's visit to Rome and his meeting with the Italian foreign minister. Košak, who was the president of the Permanent Croatian–Italian Economic Commission, requested economic relief in relation to expenditures for the Second Army, the return of civil powers, the reintroduction of Ustaša forces, the arming of the local population, and closer collaboration on railway protection. Košak substantiated each of these demands with a justification.²² The notes of Mladen Lorković indicate that Galeazzo Ciano accepted some of these Košak's demands. Specifically, the Italians agreed to allow the establishment of Ustaša militia in the Second Zone and to reduce the number of Italian soldiers. Lorković reported, however, that the Italians were most reluctant to grant requests concerning civil powers.²³

Castellani confirmed that the transfer of civil powers remained a disputed issue. He reported that Pietromarchi opposed any transfer of such powers, although he was prepared to support a reduction in the number of soldiers of the Second Army.²⁴ In the same vein, Galeazzo Ciano's initial report to Mussolini on the Croatian demands omitted any reference to the potential return of civil powers to the Croatian authorities, underscoring that this issue remained politically sensitive.²⁵ It appears that Italian diplomats were less willing to transfer civil authority in the Second Zone, though they readily supported the withdrawal of Italian troops. This divergence likely stemmed from their mutual antagonism, as mentioned above. At this stage, the civil authorities prevailed, as Mussolini

²² DDI, s. 9, vol. 8. doc. 550, p. 598. See also: Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 103.

²³ Notes for 10 May in: *Mladen Lorković ministar urotnik*, 157.

²⁴ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8. doc. 525, p. 575.

²⁵ Hrvatski Državni Arhiv (HDA), Poslanstvo NDH – Rim (232), k. 1, Izvješće ministra Perića ministru Lorkoviću, 20. 5. 1942.

adopted a similar stance: while he agreed to reduce the number of Italian troops in Croatia, he was reluctant to relinquish civil control in the Second Zone.²⁶

Even though the introduction of Ustaša militia seemed less sensitive than the return of civil powers, a solution was still far from being reached in this area, as the following episode illustrates—a failed Croatian–Italian attempt to agree on the details of returning the Ustaša militia to the Second Zone. On 12 May, General Roatta approved the return of some Ustaša militia to the Second Zone, due to increased Partisan pressure in Herzegovina, which pleased the government in Zagreb. However, upon the Ustaša’s arrival in Mostar, the commander of the VI Italian Corps, General Dalmazzo, protested that their number was much higher than had been previously agreed. The militia operated against the Partisans until General Giuseppe Amico threatened that all Ustaša forces must withdraw from the Second Zone. The First Ustaša Brigade, known as the Black Legion, led by the infamous Jure Francetić abandoned the Second Zone on 29 May to avoid armed conflict with the Italians. While their presence coincided with the joint Italian–German–Croatian operation “Trio”²⁷, the retreat of the Black Legion was deeply demoralising for the Croatians. Relations became particularly tense when the Ustašas were accused of attempting to assassinate the general of the Fascist militia, Alessandro Lusana, and the Serb Chetnik leader Dobroslav Jevđević.²⁸ In addition, numerous incidents between Italian and Croatian soldiers in Sarajevo from 31 May to 4 June threatened to disrupt Italian–Croatian negotiations and the preliminary agreements that had been reached.²⁹

Notwithstanding numerous disputes, the Italians largely granted Košak’s requests, at least formally. The Italian response to Košak’s requests was sent to the Croatian representative in Rome, Stijepo Perić. The *Italian Diplomatic Documents* include an attachment to Pietromarchi’s letter containing the official Italian response to Košak’s demands. In this verbal note, dated 2 June, the claims of Croatian Minister Košak are listed in five points, each followed by the corresponding response from the Italian Ministry.³⁰

²⁶ Matković, *Između Mačeka i Pavelića*, 115.

²⁷ For more detail about the operation see Nenezić, *Jugoslovenske oblasti pod Italijom 1941–1943*, 101–107.

²⁸ Obhodaš, *Glava za zub*, 56–61; Коста Николић, *Италијанска војска и четници у Другом свјетском рату у Југославији 1941–1943* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2009), 332.

²⁹ Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 105.

³⁰ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 569, p. 621; *Zbornik NOR-a*, tom 13/2, dok. 67, 463–466.

The first reason for Italy's acceptance of Košak's demands—largely overlooked by scholars—can be explained within the framework of Italian–German rivalry and Italy's efforts to strengthen the pro-Italian faction in the Croatian government. In particular, these concessions and gestures of goodwill were intended to provide the pro-Italian camp in the Croatian leadership with stronger arguments for advocating closer alignment with Italy.

In his correspondence, Casertano revealed that the Italian concessions were intended to strengthen the pro-Italian wing within the NDH government. In his letter of 13 June, Casertano referred to Roatta's letter of 29 April, in which General Roatta praised Pavelić's attitude towards Italy while criticising the behaviour of certain members of the Croatian government. After reviewing Roatta's letter, Casertano confirmed that he shared this positive impression of Pavelić. Conversely, the Italian representative in Zagreb stated that Croatian Marshal Slavko Kvaternik was hostile towards Italy and sought support from the German authorities. Casertano argued for concentrating power in Pavelić's hands and concluded that the Italian concessions, along with the acceptance of Košak's demands, would strengthen the Italophile fraction within the Croatian government.³¹

Similarly, other Italian sources reveal a willingness to improve relations with the Croats, while granting concessions that would not significantly diminish Italian influence in Croatia. In this context, Minister Ciano argued for granting the Croatian government purely formal powers, emphasising that even such nominal concessions would satisfy them.

In his letter to General Cavallero, dated 26 May, Ciano outlined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' proposals regarding the Croatian requests, which he had formulated after interim talks with Roatta. Ciano explained what the concessions entail. Stressed the need for close coordination between the Italian military and Croatian civil authorities, Ciano specified that the latter were to report to the Italian military on any actions exceeding routine administration or potentially affecting public order and peace. The Italians would have the right to say which Croatian provisions should be implemented and which should be discontinued. Another provision determined that the number and distribution of Croatian forces must be agreed with the command of the SUPERSLODA.³² Ciano further sti-

³¹ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 617, pp. 672–673.

³² On 9 May, the Italian Second Army was renamed *SUPERSLODA* (Comando Superiore Forze Armate di Slovenia e Dalmazia); Obhodaš, *Glava za zub*, 77.

pulated that all troops would remain under Italian supreme command, a rule that would also apply to the Croatian gendarmerie if it operated beyond maintaining public order and peace. He concluded the letter by once again stressing that the concessions were purely formal.³³

Similarly, on 27 May, Luca Pietromarchi informed Minister Ciano that his office had discussed Košak's demands with General Cavallero and Count Volpi. He noted that, in agreement with General Roatta, it had been decided to grant the Croatian authorities only formal satisfaction, thereby ensuring that the powers of the Italian command remained intact. After receiving Mussolini's orders, the High Command laid down the provisions to be given to General Roatta regarding the number of Italian soldiers. General Cavallero considered the question of civilian powers to be a political matter and left the solution proposed by the Foreign Ministry unchanged.³⁴

In addition to the Italian willingness to win over the Croatian leadership through certain concessions, Italian diplomats advanced other arguments for reducing the presence of the Italian army in Croatia, which involved granting Košak's requests. Chief among these was the growing dissatisfaction among Italian diplomats, both at the local and state levels, with the Second Army—dissatisfaction that called for decisive action and change regarding this force.

One of the sources supporting this argument is the set of notes and a letter by Mladen Lorković dated 2 and 3 May. These reveal the content of the talks between Luca Pietromarchi and Stijepo Perić. The documents show that Perić told Pietromarchi he would support the complete withdrawal of the Second Army from Croatia, explaining that its deployment there had been a failure in many respects. Pietromarchi also described the persistent dismay among Italian soldiers and the growing discontent within the Italian public.³⁵

Similarly, in his letter to Benito Mussolini, Galeazzo Ciano referred to the failure of the Second Army and argued for its withdrawal. Croatian representative in Rome testified that he had seen Ciano's letter concerning Košak's requests. Perić also reported Italian dissatisfaction with the notable losses of the Second Army, which could not contribute to the general war efforts.³⁶

³³ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 568, p. 620.

³⁴ Ibid, doc. 569, p. 621.

³⁵ Lorković's Report to Poglavnik from 2 May 1942, in *Mladen Lorković ministar urotnik*, 198–199; Lorković's notes about Perić for 3 May 1942 in *Mladen Lorković ministar urotnik*, 149–150.

³⁶ HDA, 232, k. 1, Izvješće ministra Perića ministru Lorkoviću, 20. 5. 1942.

In a similar context, in his letter to Pietromarchi of 8 May, Castellani reported widespread dissatisfaction within the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the Second Army. He relayed Colonel Guerri's expectation of an impending "offensive" by the ministry against it. During a meeting at the Chigi Palace, Guerri perceived a prevailing hostility toward this branch of the Italian army.³⁷

The third reason for the Italian acceptance of Croatian requests lay in the strategic interests of the Second Army, as recognised by the Italian military leadership. Cavallero's letter to Ciano dated 22 May, testifies that the Croatian request to reduce Italian forces aligned with Italy's current military interests. Cavallero was willing to leave minor operations and maintaining order in the Second Zone to regular Croatian troops, with Ustaša forces involved only in exceptional cases. Both forces, however, would remain under the authority of the Italian Supreme Command. Cavallero also supported the Croatian proposal to arm the local population under joint Italian–Croatian command so they could defend their homes. Regarding the transfer of civil powers, he argued that Italian authorities should retain veto rights and stressed that Croatian civil authorities must remain subordinate to Italian military authorities. In this way, he explained, Croatian demands could be met without significantly changing the existing arrangement.³⁸

In line with Cavallero's plans, the Germans were told that the Italian withdrawal was a strategic move. Whereas Lorković and Pavelić saw it as a sign of Italian weakness, Kasche believed the Italians were simply seeking to spare their army another winter in the region.³⁹ Moreover, Kasche's interpretation of the Italian move aligns with Roatta's previously noted desire to withdraw his army from Croatia, as well as with Perić's reports on Italian frustrations over heavy losses in the region.

The sources presented above lead to the conclusion that Italy's willingness to win over the Croatians—particularly in the context of Italian–German rivalry, Italian military interests, and pressure from the Italian diplomatic corps—contributed to the granting of Košak's requests.

³⁷ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 525, pp. 575–576.

³⁸ Ibid, doc. 557, pp. 603–604.

³⁹ Milošević, *Nemačko–italijanski odnosi na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1943*, 156–157.

The letter of the German Ambassador to Rome, Hans Georg von Mackensen, sheds further light on the reasons behind Italy's acceptance of Croatian demands. His correspondence reveals that the Italians were dissatisfied with the situation in Croatia and, regardless of Košak's requests, had been discussing various alternative solutions in the months preceding the Treaty of Zagreb. Mackensen acknowledged that Italy was already facing numerous problems in Dalmatia. On 9 June—just days before the treaty was signed—he reported that, in recent months, the Italians had considered several plans concerning Croatia. One proposal was the creation of a Kingdom of Dalmatia, united with the Kingdom of Croatia in a personal union under the Duke of Spoleto. According to Mackensen, this idea originated with Count Volpi, mentioned above, who had been tasked with strengthening Italian economic influence in Croatia. Testifying to the existence of competing currents within Italian policy, Mackensen noted that the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had distanced itself from this plan. He emphasised that his information was absolutely reliable and added that Ciano still favoured another approach: incorporating the Italian part of Dalmatia into Croatian territory and then uniting it with Italy under a personal union. Casertano, however, understood Pavelić's objections—namely, that such a union would undermine his own position by providing arguments to his opposition.⁴⁰

In his letter of 10 June, Mackensen again addressed Italian–Croatian disputes, reiterating some of the reasons why Italy accepted Croatian demands. He reported that a trusted source had informed him that Casertano actively supported Croatian aspirations, stressing the need to strengthen Pavelić's position against his domestic opponents—particularly those opposed to his pro-Italian policy. It is reasonable to assume that Mackensen was referring to Marshal Kvaternik, the second-ranking figure in the Croatian hierarchy, who was a prominent critic of Pavelić's alignment with Italy. Mackensen also pointed to other factors behind Italy's decision to grant the Croatian requests. Well-informed, Mackensen expressed the view that the Italians granted the Croatian requests primarily for military reasons—a conclusion consistent with Ugo Cavallero's statements mentioned above.⁴¹

Mackensen's letters underscore the role of Italian–German rivalry in meeting Croatian requests and highlight the Italian military's interest in with-

⁴⁰ ADAP, E, vol. 2, doc. 279, p. 476.

⁴¹ Ibid, doc. 280, p. 478.

drawing to the coastal zone. They also reveal that the Italians had been considering policy changes in Croatia well before Košak's demands. A major obstacle to formulating such plans prior to the Treaty of Zagreb was the absence of a unified policy between the Italian military and civil authorities.

The Treaty of Zagreb and the MVAC units

Between 2 June and the signing of the Treaty of Zagreb on 19 June, technical matters were discussed. Castellani's letter to Count Ciano, dated 5 June stating that General Mario Roatta agreed with the Italian response regarding the Croatian demands. Roatta objected to the phrase "Croatian territory temporarily occupied by the Italian army", arguing for the use of the term "Second Zone".⁴²

On 7 June, Ciano told Stjepo Perić that Pavelić had invited General Roatta to a meeting the next day to settle the technical details of Košak's demands. He added that the Croatian side should see the concessions as a friendly gesture and made clear that no further concessions would be considered.⁴³ Ciano's remarks indicate that the Croats were expected to fully accept all provisions that would formally be agreed upon in Zagreb on June 19.

The Treaty of Zagreb stipulated that in the Second Zone, authority was shared between the Italian military and Croatian civil administration, but Italian commanders had the power to override any Croatian decisions. The Croats gained civil and police control in the Third Zone. The Treaty of Zagreb required the gradual withdrawal of the Italian Army from the Third Zone, except for Karlovac, and from the Second Zone, except for Mostar and Trebinje. However, the Italians retained the right to reoccupy both zones if military necessity arose. Furthermore, the Croatian Government committed itself to preventing any retaliatory actions against civilians.

According to the second point of the agreement, the Croatian authorities were required to inform the Italians of any measures that might affect public order. The third point placed responsibility for railway control in Croatian hands, although overall command remained with the Italians. Jurisdiction over maritime traffic, fishing, and island defence also stayed

⁴² DDI, s. 9, vol. 8, doc. 588, p. 649.

⁴³ Ibid, doc. 597, p. 657.

under Italian control. The Treaty further stipulated that the Croatian army would fall under the authority of Croatian military courts, while civilian cases were to be handled by Croatian courts—except in instances involving crimes against Italian forces or violations of military orders. The final section regulated coordination between military units on NDH territory and obliged the Croatian Government to officially recognise the Anti-Communist Volunteer Militia (*Milizia volontaria anticomunista*, MVAC). In other words, the Treaty formalised the presence of MVAC units in Croatia, extending a system that had already operated in the First Zone, thereby reinforcing Italian influence through auxiliary anti-communist forces.⁴⁴ It is also stipulated that they must not be retaliated against, even if they previously participated in rebellions against the Croatian authorities. In this context, the MVAC would recognize and respect the supremacy of the NDH, and the Croatian Government received the obligations towards them that the SUPERSLODA command had up until then. Despite this, the MVAC remained under the command of the Italians.⁴⁵

An analysis of the provisions of the Treaty of Zagreb shows that Croatian requests were not fully met, as the Croats failed to gain complete control over the territories they demanded. Moreover, the Italian right of veto—the power to override any Croatian decision—clearly reflects the restrictive nature of the agreement. Similarly, the creation of MVAC units was presented as fulfilling Košak's earlier request to establish voluntary armed forces drawn from the reliable local population. However, while the Croats understood the arming of the local population to mean the creation of Ustaša preparatory battalions composed of Croats, in practice the MVAC was instead tied to the Chetnik movement and largely made up of Serbs. This represented a distortion of Košak's request, as the Croatian negotiators had envisioned the ar-

⁴⁴ More details about MVAC: Николић, *Италијанска војска и четници*, 334–335; Stefano Fabei, *I cetnici nella Seconda Guerra mondiale. Dalla Resistenza alla collaborazione con l'Esercito italiano* (Gorizia: LEG Edizioni, 2017), 85–101, 129–145; Massimo Bucarelli, „Disgregazione Jugoslava e questione serba nella politica italiana (1939–1943)” in: *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia (1941–1943)*, eds. Francesco Caccamo, Luciano Monzali, (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2008), 54; Schmid, *Deutsche und italienische Besatzung im Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien: 1941 bis 1943/45*, 276–280; Obhodaš, *Glava za zub*, 84–86; Matković, *Između Mačeka i Pavelića. Politički portret Davida Sinčića*, 119–126.

⁴⁵ Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Collection of Italian Military Records, (T821), roll 400

ming of the local population in a completely different way.⁴⁶ Given the tone of Ciano's 7 June message—mentioned above—which made clear that no further concessions would be entertained, the Croats accepted the formation of the MVAC on Italian terms. This allowed the Italians to legalise their collaboration with some of the Chetniks formations, in line with their objectives, as such cooperation had begun much earlier.⁴⁷

As Italy's military withdrawal corresponded with the broader regional context, the legalisation of the MVAC forces within Croatia likewise reflected Italy's wider policy towards the movement. In fact, by July 1942, the Italians had already formalised the status of the Chetniks in Montenegro and Sandžak, thereby extending a policy of cooperation with anti-communist Serb forces across multiple territories.⁴⁸

Apart from that, the formation of MVAC sheds further light on General Roatta's objectives regarding the Italian retreat. Prior to the Treaty of Zagreb, Roatta argued that Italian strategy required concentrating troops in larger garrisons to better respond to the growing insurgent threat.⁴⁹ In line with this, Stijepo Perić reported on 20 May to Minister Mladen Lorković that Roatta had expressed his willingness to withdraw Italian forces from Croatia.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, on 10 May, Roatta argued against granting any real power to the Ustaše, as this would cause a continuation of the violence seen in the summer of 1941.⁵¹

Roatta's remarks about his concern over violence are plausible, given his position towards the persecution of civilians in the summer of 1941, and his awareness of the damage that continued persecutions could inflict on the Italian army.⁵² Roatta also hoped that Chetnik forces would fill the power va-

⁴⁶ Obhodaš, *Glava za zub*, 79; Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 106; Talpo, *Dalmazia – Una cronaca per la storia 1942*, 420.

⁴⁷ About the roots of Italian-Chetnik collaboration see Николић, *Италијанска војска и четници*, 45–86.

⁴⁸ Милутин Живковић, *Сјара Рашка под италијанском окупацијом 1941–1943*, Књига прва (Београд: Catena mundi, Институт за савремену историју 2020), 122–123.

⁴⁹ *Zbornik NOR-a*, tom. 13/2, dok. 17, str. 78.

⁵⁰ HDA, 232, k.1, Izvješće ministra Perića ministru Lorkoviću, 20. 5. 1942.

⁵¹ Monzali, „La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia”, 104.

⁵² Mario Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette. L'esercito italiano in guerra dal 1940 al 1944*, (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1946), 170–171; Mila Mihajlović, *Jugoslavija: april 1941–septembar 1943. Italijanski izvori: dokumenti o masakru Srba u Dalmaciji, Lici i Bosanskoj Krajini* (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2020), 151–192.

cuum created by the Italian retreat. In this way, Italian influence would remain intact while Italian casualties would be minimised, as the Chetniks or “anti-Communist” groups clashed with the Partisans. This strategy was consistent with Roatta’s earlier views on the Chetniks, expressed in March 1942, when he remarked: “Given that we have found people who—albeit for their own purposes—instead of firing on us, fire on our enemies, is there really no other solution than to push these occasional allies into the enemy’s ranks?”⁵³

Beyond introducing the MVAC as a new and legalised participant in the war, the Italian retreat had lasting consequences for the conflict in Croatia and the development of both resistance movements (Chetniks and Partisans). Although the Croats initially expected to benefit from the withdrawal, they found itself in an awkward position, unable to replace the rapidly departing Italian troops.⁵⁴ This created a power vacuum that initially strengthened the Chetniks but, in the long run, also benefited the Partisans. The NDH forces lacked the strength both to replace Italian authority and to confront the Partisans effectively. Thus, the Italian retreat reshaped not only Italian–Croatian relations, but also the balance of power between Partisans, Chetniks, and the wider course of the war in Croatia.

The Italian Military Retreat and the Balance of Axis Power in Croatia

Given the importance of the Germans in all aspects of political and military developments in Croatia and the Balkans, their reaction to the Italian retreat and the Treaty of Zagreb merits closer attention. Italian and German authorities repeatedly sought to regulate their respective zones of interest in the Balkans and Croatia. Although the Germans formally accepted Italian dominance in Croatia, their actions indicate that they aimed to secure a dominant position there, acting as arbiters in Italian–Croatian relations.⁵⁵ This explains why attempts by Italy and Croatia to regulate their mutual relations through the Treaty of Zagreb aroused German suspicion. This assumption is

⁵³ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8. doc. 345. pp. 385–387.

⁵⁴ Ibid, doc. 672, p. 731.

⁵⁵ For more details see: Milošević, *Nemačko-italijanski odnosi na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1943*; Schmid, *Deutsche und italienische Besatzung im Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien: 1941 bis 1943/45*.

supported by Georges Gueyraud, who noted the intensification of Italian–German rivalry in the spring of 1942.⁵⁶

It is no coincidence that, in the days leading up to the signing of the Treaty of Zagreb, Kasche intensified his pressure on Casertano. Their meeting took place on 16 June. Kasche assured Casertano that he had no objection to Italy's dominant position in Croatia; however, Casertano explained that Kasche regarded this dominance as merely theoretical and platonic, anticipating changes in the practical application of Italian–Croatian agreements. The German diplomat argued that the Croatian authorities required German assistance to consolidate their internal situation and strengthen their independence. Casertano interpreted these remarks as an attempt to undermine Italy's position and as encouragement for the Croats to engage in what he described as the "Balkan game"—the strategy of exploiting Italian–German rivalry for their own benefit. Even more significantly, Kasche openly stated that Croatian independence was incompatible with Italian policy, which he characterised as "militant." Referring to the two spheres of influence within the NDH divided by the demarcation line, Kasche remarked on their existence, to which Casertano responded that the term was merely temporary and that the Italian sphere encompassed the entirety of Croatia. Kasche also emphasised that Croatian–German cooperation was a spontaneous and traditional process rooted in mutual sympathy—an observation that, by implication, highlighted numerous Italian–Croatian disagreements. He further underlined that there were no territorial disputes between Germany and Croatia. Casertano interpreted this as a veiled reference to numerous Croatian–Italian disputes. During the discussion, Casertano raised the issue of propaganda promoting Croatian nationalism and circulating rumours that, after the war, the littoral would belong to Croatia. According to Casertano, this remark visibly unsettled Kasche, who looked down, appearing uncomfortable.⁵⁷ It was obvious that Casertano implied that these rumours are produced by the Germans.

The meeting between Kasche and Casertano, along with the reports by Kasche and Mackensen analysed above, confirms that the Germans did

⁵⁶ Centre des Archives diplomatiques de la Courneuve (French Diplomatic Archive. Hereafter: FDA), Guerre 1939–1945, Vichy, Croatie, 946, Georges Gueyraud to Pierre Laval, 29. 6. 1942, N. 56, pp. 146–149.

⁵⁷ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8. doc. 628, p. 683–687.

not interpret the Italian retreat as a sign of weakness. Unlike the Croats, the Germans correctly assessed that the withdrawal aligned with their own interests. However, they also feared that the circumstances created by the retreat could encourage the uprising and thereby harm German economic interests.⁵⁸

Georges Gueyraud seemed to offer a reasonable analysis of events. He explained that the Germans were not happy with the situation in Croatia in the aftermath of the Treaty of Zagreb, referring to the increased instability. Georges Gueyraud believed that the Germans tolerated Italian behaviour in Croatia as they were currently occupied with other fronts.⁵⁹

Regarding the Croatian position in the Italian–Croatian rivalry, Pavelić appears to have skilfully managed his “Balkan game” during this episode. On the eve of the Treaty of Zagreb, he met with the Italian representative in Zagreb. In his report to Ciano, Casertano noted that Pavelić was already informed—through the Germans—about the Casertano–Kasche meeting of 16 June. Pavelić sought further details, seemingly wishing to compare the German account with the Italian one. Casertano, however, avoided revealing specifics and merely stated that the two sides had agreed to cooperate in the spirit of the Treaty of Rome. Understandably, he did not share his impression that Kasche viewed Italian influence as merely theoretical and platonic. Nonetheless, Casertano reported Kasche’s remark that German actions in Croatia reflected a ‘natural state of affairs,’ even using the term ‘protectorate’ to describe Croatia.⁶⁰ Although praised by Roatta and Casertano for his ostensibly pro-Italian stance, Pavelić simultaneously pursued closer ties with the Germans, Italy’s chief rivals in Croatia. Kasche reported to his ministry that Pavelić himself requested a meeting on 9 June. During the conversation, Pavelić complained about Casertano, describing him as hostile and unwilling to maintain contact with Croatian ministers other than himself, owing to their anti-Italian orientation.⁶¹ This episode illustrates Pavelić’s duplicity, as he sought to secure German support while cultivating Italian favour.

⁵⁸ *Zbornik NOR-a*, tom 12/2 (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1976), dok. 101, str. 531.

⁵⁹ FDA, *Guerre 1939–1945, Vichy, Croatie*, 946, Georges Gueyraud to Pierre Laval, 20. 7. 1942, N. 64, pp. 150–152.

⁶⁰ DDI, s. 9, vol. 8. doc. 632, p. 689.

⁶¹ Milošević, *Nemačko-italijanski odnosi na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1943*, 153; Krizman, *NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija*, 339.

Even though the term “Balkan game” was used pejoratively by both Italians and Germans, this strategy proved advantageous for Pavelić. It was in his interest, and that of the NDH, to maintain the best possible relations with both allies and to extract benefits from their disputes and rivalry. What ultimately proved detrimental for his regime, however, was the genocidal violence against the Serbs. Atrocities against the Serbs not only strained his relations with the Axis powers but also severely damaged the reputation of the NDH in the eyes of German authorities—and even more so among the Italians. This is why provisions guaranteeing the safety of civilians were included in the Treaty of Zagreb, as discussed above.

Conclusions

The Italian military retreat to the coastal zone was preceded by successful Croatian diplomatic efforts involving Ante Pavelić, Mladen Lorković, Stjepo Perić, Dragutin Toth, and Vladimir Košak. Although these efforts contributed to Italy's decision to withdraw, the Italians had already been debating what to do with Croatia, and competing plans prevented any clear strategy from being implemented before June 1942. Croatian diplomacy appears to have accelerated the Italian response and helped crystallise a short-term solution—namely, the next Italian political move in Croatia, articulated through the Treaty of Zagreb.

Italy's decision was primarily guided by its own interests rather than a desire to accommodate Croatian demands. The main motive was Italy's determination to secure Croatian support, particularly in the context of Italian–German rivalry. In other words, in planning to meet Croatian demands, the Italians sought to strengthen the pro-Italian faction within the Croatian government. In addition, Italian military and strategic considerations, along with the dissatisfaction of the diplomatic corps over the performance of the Italian army in Croatia, played a role in granting Croatian requests. The Italian retreat was a carefully considered decision, discussed at the highest levels of leadership—including Mussolini, Ciano, Casertano, Castellani, Roatta, Cavallero, Volpi, and Riccardi—who ultimately agreed on the withdrawal despite their numerous previous disputes. This episode confirms the existing divergence between Italian civil and military authorities.

The Treaty of Zagreb marked an Italian diplomatic victory in certain respects, as the Italians successfully framed their own strategic interests as a concession to Croatian demands. In this context, they secured the legalisation of the MVAC, an outcome fully aligned with their objectives, while simultaneously undermining the nature of Croatian requests for arming the local population. The establishment of the MVAC primarily served Italian interests and ultimately ran counter to both Croatian and German objectives. In other words, contrary to the interests of their German and Croatian allies, the Italians succeeded in establishing the potential foundation of a broader alliance with the Chetniks, extending across Croatia, Sandžak, and Montenegro—an outcome that illustrates the relative independence of Italian policy in the region. Likewise, in contrast to the general interpretation that German influence at the time expanded at Italy's expense, the sources presented above indicate that Italy's military decision to withdraw from parts of Croatia was made autonomously. Nevertheless, this particular episode cannot be generalised. Although the withdrawal corresponded with the broader political and strategic context in Europe of mid-1942, it ultimately reflected Rome's independent strategic objectives and the continued assertion of Italian political agency in Croatia.

The political context of the Treaty of Zagreb therefore underscored the intensification of Italian–German rivalry, further supporting the argument that this rivalry was one of the central reasons for Italy's decision to retreat. Yet, despite their reservations, the Germans had no choice but to tolerate Italian plans—an outcome that demonstrates the extent of Italian leverage in Croatia. This episode also highlights the hypocrisy of the German–Italian alliance, which masked deep-rooted rivalries under the façade of cooperation.

For the Croats, the Italian military retreat represented an unfulfilled hope of strengthening their position within their own country. On the contrary, the Italian retreat reinforced the uprising, running directly against Croatian expectations and interests. While the Croats interpreted the retreat as a sign of Italian weakness and expected to benefit from it, the Germans correctly assessed that it aligned with Italian strategic interests. Moreover, they feared that this move would bring Croatia closer into the Italian sphere of influence and undermine German economic interests.

Both Italian and German sources discussed above confirm that Marshal Slavko Kvaternik was regarded by the Italians as a threat because of his

pro-German stance, which by definition implied anti-Italian positions. Unlike Pavelić, who sought to balance between pro-German and pro-Italian orientations, Kvaternik was consistently and unequivocally perceived as a pro-German exponent. The resulting polarisation within the Croatian Government—between pro-Italian and pro-German factions—speaks volumes about the depth of Italian–German rivalry, as well as the extent to which Croatian politicians manoeuvred either to secure advantages or to safeguard their survival by aligning with one of the two foreign powers.

Given the profound influence of the withdrawal on the course of the war and the balance of power in the Balkans, the consequences of Italy's military retreat merit further, dedicated analysis. This is particularly important since studies of the Partisan victory rarely take into account the Italian military withdrawal and its long-term repercussions, despite its pivotal role in shaping later developments.

The conclusions of this study are necessarily limited. The analysis relies primarily on diplomatic correspondence, which, by its very nature, reflects strategic posturing and official rhetoric rather than revealing the genuine motivations of the actors involved.

SUMMARY

Although it played a central role in the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, Italy pursued a policy of political and military expansion at its expense. However, in June 1942 this policy changed abruptly, as the Italian authorities withdrew a large portion of their troops from Croatia. The withdrawal was preceded by Croatian demands and diplomatic efforts. While these efforts accelerated the decision to withdraw, the Italians had already been aware of the need to redefine many aspects of their policy in Croatia. The Italian withdrawal was primarily driven by Italy's own political and military interests and had long-term consequences not only for Italians and Croats, but also for the Partisans, the Chetniks, and the broader course of the war in Croatia. Unlike the Croats, the Germans correctly assessed the withdrawal as a calculated Italian move rather than a sign of weakness. Sources from this episode make it possible to examine Italian–Croatian–German negotiations, revealing the nature of their alliance as well as tensions between Italian military and civilian authorities. Although the Germans were dissatisfied with this

Italian move, they had no choice but to tolerate it—an outcome that illustrates the extent of Italian influence in Croatia. Through an examination of Italian correspondence, the article shows how the Italians formulated the provisions of the Zagreb Agreement of 19 June 1942, which redefined Italian–Croatian relations after the Italian withdrawal. In this context, the formation of the Volunteer Anti-Communist Militia in Croatia is also explained. Drawing on Italian, Croatian, German, French, Serbian, and Yugoslav archival sources and scholarly research, the article analyzes the causes of the Italian military withdrawal from Croatia in 1942 and its broader implications.

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Резиме

Данило Ковач

ОД ЕКСПАНЗИЈЕ ДО ПОВЛАЧЕЊА: УЗРОЦИ ИТАЛИЈАНСКОГ ВОЈНОГ ПОВЛАЧЕЊА ИЗ ХРВАТСКЕ 1942. ГОДИНЕ

АПСТРАКТ: Иако је одиграла централну улогу у оснивању Независне Државе Хрватске, Италија је спроводила политичку и војну експанзију на њен рачун. Међутим, у јуну 1942. ова политика се нагло променила, пошто је Италија повукла велики део својих трупа из Хрватске. Овај рад анализира узроке тог потеза, који је имао далекосежне последице не само за италијанске и хрватске власти већ и за партизане, четнике и целокупан ток рата у Хрватској. Такође, разматрају се италијанско-хрватско-немачки преговори, који откривају природу њиховог савеза и тензије између италијанских војних и цивилних власти.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: Независна Држава Хрватска, фашистичка Италија, Загребачки споразум, повлачење, Анте Павелић, Владимир Кошак

Мада је одиграла централну улогу у оснивању Независне Државе Хрватске, Италија је спроводила политичку и војну експанзију на њен рачун. Међутим, у јуну 1942. године ова политика се нагло променила, будући да су италијанске власти повукле велики део својих трупа из Хрватске. Повлачењу су претходили хрватски захтеви и дипломатски напори. Иако су ови напори убрзали одлуку о повлачењу, Италијани су већ претходно били свесни нужности редефинисања многих аспеката њихове политике у Хрватској. Италијанско повлачење било је првенствено вођено њиховим сопственим политичким и војним интересима, а имало је дугорочне последице не само за Италијане и Хрвате, већ и за партизане, четнике и шири ток рата у Хрватској. За разлику од Хрвата, Немци су исправно проценили да је повлачење било прорачунати италијански потез, а не знак њихове слабости. Извори из ове епизоде омогућавају ис-

питивање италијанско-хрватско-немачких преговора, откривајући природу њиховог савеза, као и тензије између италијанских војних и цивилних власти. Иако Немци нису били задовољни овим италијанским потезом, нису имали другог избора него да га толеришу – исход који илуструје обим италијанског утицаја у Хрватској. Увидом у италијанску кореспонденцију, приказан је начин на који су Италијани формулисали одредбе Загребачког споразума из 19. јуна 1942. године, који је редефинисао италијанско-хрватске односе након италијанског повлачења. У том контексту објашњено је и формирање Добровољачке противкомунистичке милиције у Хрватској. Овај чланак се ослања на италијанске, хрватске, немачке, француске, српске и југословенске архивске изворе и научна истраживања како би анализирао узроке повлачења италијанске војске из Хрватске 1942. године и његове шире импликације.