
‘Your Salvation is the Struggle Against Fascism’: Yugoslav Communists and the Rescue of Jews, 1941–1945

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Abstract

This article recounts a little-known episode in which Yugoslav partisans, led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, rescued some 2,500 Jews from the former Italian camp for Jews in the northern Adriatic in the autumn of 1943. By focusing on this historical event, the article argues for broadening the notion of rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. Rather than locating ‘rescue’ in the motivations of individuals, the article takes as a point of departure the collective aspect of rescue and investigates the importance of the ideological considerations of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in its decision to rescue the Jews. Rather than in abstract ethical notions, the partisan rescue of the Jews was rooted in their political vision of the future socialist federation, of which the Jews were part.

In the early autumn of 1943, Yugoslav partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito’s Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*, KPJ), evacuated some 2,500 Jews from the former Italian camp on the northern Adriatic island of Rab to the Croatian hinterland. Over the next year and a half, until the end of the war, the former inmates were protected in the territory controlled by Tito’s army, many of them fighting in its ranks. The overwhelming majority of these Jewish men, women and children lived to see the end of the war.

The magnitude and success of this forgotten operation evoke the most celebrated instances of the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. Yet the episode challenges much of our understanding of Holocaust rescue in the European context, and is thus critical

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for the reframing of this category to include collective undertakings not necessarily understood in terms of ‘rescue’ at the time. Pioneering scholarship on Holocaust rescue in Europe tended to understand the phenomenon as an individualistic, one-to-one relationship between the rescuer and the rescued, locating the motivations for the rescue of Jews in the principles of Christian faith, or positing an ‘altruistic personality’ predisposed to rescue people at risk in dark times regardless of individual consequences.¹ More recent scholarship has discarded ahistorical explanations, embracing complex models that take into account the different historical contexts of rescue.² The most prevalent understanding of the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust, however, remains rooted in the rescuers’ individual motivations, as exemplified by Israel’s bestowal of the title ‘righteous among the nations’ to non-Jewish individuals who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.³

However, understanding Holocaust rescue in the European context is inseparable from recognising its collective aspect. Large underground networks were critical for providing, maintaining and provisioning hideouts for individual Jews or Jewish families in Warsaw and other ghettos in eastern Europe, but also in cities such as Amsterdam.⁴ Well-organised underground movements across Europe, from the Belgian and French resistance to Soviet partisans behind enemy lines, accepted Jews in their ranks, providing a perilous and uncertain path to survival.⁵ And changes in government policy, especially after the summer of 1943, when the tide of the war had turned perceptibly and irreversibly, resulted in previously collaborationist state institutions rethinking or altogether cancelling the already considered or planned deportations of Jews – such as in the cases of Denmark and Bulgaria.⁶

¹ See, for example, Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

² For a relatively recent overview of different directions in the current scholarship on rescue, see Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu and Sarah Gensburger, eds., *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

³ For the title’s criteria, see Mordecai Paldiel, ‘To the Righteous Among the Nations Who Risked their Lives to Rescue Jews’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 19 (1988), 403–25.

⁴ For a classic argument, see Gunnar Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁵ In many instances, especially in the case of the Soviet partisans, resistance commanders or rank-and-file proved to be anti-Semites who sometimes deliberately mistreated or outright abandoned Jewish fighters, in effect sentencing them to death. Despite crucial differences in national contexts, joining underground movements – especially ones dominated by communists – was nevertheless one of the few avenues that individual Jews could take in Hitler’s Europe, from Paris and Brussels to Belarus and the Balkans, to try to survive and resist. For the case of Belgium, see Pieter Lagrou, ‘Belgium’, in Bob Moore, ed., *Resistance in Western Europe* (New York: Berg, 2002), 27–63. For France, see Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), especially 417–20. For the Soviet Union, see Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 505–16.

⁶ Hence the references to the ‘rescue’ of Jews in both of these countries. While the situation in political contexts was vastly different, the failure of the German pressure to deport the Jews from Denmark and Bulgaria was ultimately rooted in the flagging German influence among its allies and neutral countries in Europe and government decisions to change policy. In the case of Denmark, it was the result of the Danish government’s resignation (which in effect ended state collaboration with Nazi Germany) and a

Taking as a point of departure this collective aspect of Holocaust rescue, this article investigates the role of political ideology in the decision of the Yugoslav partisans to rescue a large number of Jews in 1943. Like other communist-dominated resistance movements in Europe, Yugoslav partisans considered Jews as equals and welcomed them in their ranks. But unlike others, they went to great lengths to rescue and protect an enormous group of Jews when ideological concerns dictated the need for such action. The Rab operation saved the lives of more than 2,000 Jews, and yet its actors did not consider it a ‘rescue’ operation. For Yugoslav partisans, ‘rescuing’ Jews from Nazi and fascist anti-Semitic persecution was not an ethical or political objective, and they did not use the word. Rather, they understood their *de facto* rescue of the Jews as a process, ideally brought about by the objects of rescue themselves, in which the Jews joined their (i.e., the partisans’) ideological vision. To the extent they considered its aspects, ‘rescue’ was not an individual act – neither for the rescuer, nor for the one rescued. On the contrary, it was inseparable from the collectivist vision of the Yugoslav partisans, their ‘struggle against fascism’, through which a new Yugoslav socialist federation would be created. Once the prospect of Jews joining this project became viable, the partisans went to great lengths to protect the Jewish population in their care, even though this brought hardship and occasionally elicited anti-Semitic grunting from low-level operatives.

Communist primary sources do not speak of ‘rescuing’ or ‘saving’ the Jews directly, so I have relied on several different source bases in order to support my argument. For the KPJ’s understanding of the nature of the war in Yugoslavia, its position on ethnic violence in general and anti-Semitism and the wartime persecution and murder of the Jews in Yugoslavia in particular, I have relied on published contemporary party documents. For the partisans’ Rab operation and the Jews’ experiences of rescue and subsequent life with the partisans, I have consulted the surviving contemporary Jewish sources, as well as post-war Jewish testimonies. The testimonies vary enormously in terms of genre and the political context in which they were collected. Two sets of written testimonies – one compiled in socialist Yugoslavia, the other published in post-Milošević Serbia – were collected by the Federation of Jewish communities in Belgrade. Another set of testimonies I have used is part of a much larger, global Holocaust video archive based at the University of Southern California and collected after the 1991 breakup of Yugoslavia. Despite the significant differences between them, a critical reading of these testimonies yields a remarkably uniform Jewish understanding of what had happened in and after Rab. Finally, I have also relied on

U-turn in Swedish asylum policy, which assured Jews in Denmark that they would be granted asylum if they managed to reach Sweden. In the case of Bulgaria, the government decided to reverse its policy (it had previously deported to their deaths in Treblinka close to 15,000 Jews from Bulgarian-occupied territories in Yugoslavia and Greece) and dismantle its already existing infrastructure for deportations in the summer and autumn of 1943 because of the changing tide of the war. See Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969) and Frederick Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972).

contemporary communist documents pertaining to the Jews in partisan care after September 1943.

The KPJ's Understanding of Anti-Semitism and the Wartime Persecution of Jews in Yugoslavia

The KPJ did not have a specific or well-articulated ideological position on anti-Semitism and the persecution and mass murder of Jews during the war. An underground revolutionary organisation beholden to Moscow, its priorities included organising a pan-Yugoslav resistance movement, liberating the country and leading a socialist revolution that would transform post-war Yugoslav society. While the KPJ-led partisan movement was the only one in Yugoslavia that was not anti-Semitic and accepted Jews as equals in its ranks, it did not perceive or address anti-Semitism or, more specifically, the organised persecution of Jews by various new regimes in Yugoslavia, as political issues separate from the general situation in the country.

This disinclination was rooted in the communists' understanding of the nature of the war in Yugoslavia. The leader of the movement himself offered perhaps the earliest and clearest articulation of this position. As early as the summer of 1941 Tito wrote in the party's mouthpiece, *Borba*, that KPJ was forging 'brotherhood and unity of the peoples in Yugoslavia' in the 'struggle for national liberation'.⁷ The liberation of Yugoslavia from foreign occupiers and their domestic collaborators, according to this vision, was to be a heroic achievement of the KPJ-led, multi-ethnic, inclusive Yugoslavist socialist movement, in which all Yugoslav peoples would take part and to which all would contribute more or less equally. During the war, the inclusive Yugoslavist 'brotherhood and unity' rhetoric aimed to address, counterbalance and reverse genocidal intra-Yugoslav ethnic violence – most urgently the mass murder of Serbs and Jews by the Croatian *ustaše*, and the murder of Bosnian Muslims and Croats by the Serbian *četniks*.⁸ After the war the paradigm was fortified by the historiography of the war and served as a retroactive legitimisation of the communist revolution. But, at the time, the semantic blanket of the phrase 'peoples of Yugoslavia' extended far beyond just the Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims, and included all nations and nationalities in Yugoslavia. Though mentioning Jews only occasionally, the KPJ and, by extension, the partisan movement, were widely (and correctly) understood to accept Jews in their ranks as equals. Jews, in other words, were Yugoslavs, part of the future political project.

The communists did not understand the persecution of the Jews separately from other ethnic persecution in Yugoslavia. 'Brotherhood and unity' was a revolutionary

⁷ Josip Broz Tito, 'Komunistička partija Jugoslavije u današnjoj narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi', reprinted in Josip Broz Tito, *Stvaranje i razvoj Jugoslovenske armije* (Belgrade: Glavna politička uprava Jugoslovenske armije, 1949), 16–9.

⁸ In many ways, one of the most important factors that contributed to the victory of the partisans in Yugoslavia was their ultimate ability, in the face of serious obstacles, to forge a truly multi-ethnic, pan-Yugoslav liberation movement. For this argument, see Marko Attila Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia: The Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941–1943* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

alternative to radical ethnic exclusion and genocide unfolding in various parts of the country, and Jewish victims of ethnic persecution were, in theory, no different from other Yugoslavs. In practice, however, mass violence against Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims – as well as its spiral of reciprocity – posed a substantial challenge to the communists in practical terms of building a multi-ethnic resistance movement. Mass persecution of the Jews, who constituted less than 1 per cent of the Yugoslav population on the eve of the war, was of little strategic importance. Yet from the very beginning, KPJ reports and public announcements nevertheless routinely denounced the persecution of Jews along with that of other Yugoslav ethnic groups. Party organisations from Vojvodina to Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia proper and Macedonia denounced fratricidal mass murder in Yugoslavia, including the persecution and murder of the Jews.⁹

For KPJ, anti-Semitism was an alien ideology imposed by the fascist invaders and taken up by their collaborators. ‘The fascist conquerors, with the help of their *ustaša* servants, introduced to our homeland the barbaric legacy of the “new order”, anti-Semitism’, announced the regional party committee for Dalmatia towards the end of the genocidal summer of 1941, specifying that anti-Semitism was ‘the murder, spoliation, humiliation, and persecution of the Jews’. The task at hand, according to the committee, was to ‘resist the persecution and terror against the Jews’.¹⁰ Resisting anti-Semitism, however, was inseparable from resisting other ethnic persecution carried out by the occupiers and collaborators. In its calls to the peoples of Yugoslavia to resistance, KPJ addressed the various Yugoslav nations and nationalities individually and jointly, in accordance with the situation and ethnic makeup of the region in which a party cell was operating and the fratricidal violence that needed to be stopped and reversed. In Vojvodina, for example, it called on Serbs, Hungarians, Germans, Romanians, Croats and Slovaks to resist; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it addressed Serbs, Muslims, Croats and Jews.¹¹ Resisting ethnic persecution by forging a Yugoslavist movement was KPJ’s priority, and resisting the persecution of the Jews was part of this project.

Several party announcements from Macedonia illustrate this tendency to subsume anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews under broader ethnic persecution in Yugoslavia and see joint resistance as a way to fight against it. In July 1942 the

⁹ See, for example, ‘Proglas Pokrajinskog komiteta KPJ za Vojvodinu početkom juna 1941. godine narodima Vojvodine za stvaranje jedinstva svih nacionalnosti u borbi protiv nemačkih i mađarskih okupatora’, in *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1949–1986), vol. 1, book 2, 16–22 (henceforth, *Zbornik*); ‘Pismo Okružnog komiteta KPJ za Niš od 19. februara 1942. godine Pokrajinskom komitetu KPJ za Srbiju o masovnom streljanju u Nišu’, in *Zbornik*, vol. 1, book 3, 80–1; ‘Proglas Pokrajinskog komiteta KPJ za Bosnu i Hercegovinu od maja 1941. godine’, in *Zbornik*, vol. 4, book 1, 3–6; ‘Poziv Centralnog komiteta KPH koncem srpnja 1941. godine na oružanu borbu protiv okupatora i njegovih slugu’, in *Zbornik*, vol. 5, book 1, 23–6; etc.

¹⁰ ‘Uputstvo Pokrajinskog komiteta KPH za Dalmaciju od avgusta 1941. rukovodstvima NOP Dalmacije za stvaranje narodnooslobodilačkog fronta’, in *Zbornik*, vol. 5, book 30, 11–5.

¹¹ ‘Proglas Pokrajinskog komiteta KPJ za Vojvodinu’, 16–22; ‘Proglas Pokrajinskog komiteta KPJ za Bosnu i Hercegovinu’, 3–6.

regional committee of the KPJ for Macedonia published a leaflet entitled 'What does Anti-Jewish Persecution Aim to Achieve?' 'The vile fascist propaganda is tireless with its lies, fabrications, and stigmatisation of the Jews', the leaflet claimed. 'Every thinking and objective person would refute' the anti-Semitic accusations against the Jews. It went on: 'Jews are not being persecuted because of [their alleged sins], but for the basest demagogic goals of the fascist beasts. . . . Anti-Semitism is the most repulsive mask of the fascists, meant to cover their darkest, most beastly goals against the people'. The proclamation urged the Macedonian people to 'see through and denounce the base demagoguery of. . . fascist occupiers', and pointed out to the Jews that 'your salvation is the struggle against fascism. Do not become disheartened by fascist persecution, and do not be passive in its face. The ranks of the people's anti-fascist struggle are your ranks as well'.¹² A local party committee circulated another leaflet in Bitola, in the aftermath of the deportations of Jews from Yugoslav Macedonia to Treblinka by the Bulgarians in March 1943. Situating this 'crime against Macedonian Jews' within the broader history of the persecution of the Jews, the leaflet denounced 'Bulgarian fascist occupiers' and reminded the local population that the 'overwhelming majority of the Macedonian people has felt, in these tragic days, a strong love, a genuine sympathy, and solidarity with the Jews'. The leaflet then called on Macedonian mothers, women, workers, peasants, youth, as well as 'Macedonian Slavs, Vlachs, Greeks, Turks [and] Albanians [*Armauti*]' to unite against fascism. 'Down with fascism! Long live our fellow Jewish citizens! Long live Macedonia!', the pamphlet concluded.¹³

Such open and unequivocal communist denunciations of anti-Semitism and genocide against the Jews did not result in KPJ ascribing corresponding urgency to the rescue of Jews. On the contrary, such proclamations are few and sporadic, and acts of rescue or aid even more rare. Most importantly, however, the question of anti-Semitism and the unfolding European-wide Nazi genocide simply did not figure prominently on the Yugoslav communists' agenda – which itself is a revealing fact about their 'Jewish policy', insofar as there was a consistent policy, or even one at all. Rescue of the Jews from the hands of the Nazis or any of their collaborators was thus never formulated as a stated objective of the Yugoslav communists. This was as much a consequence of ideological priorities as it was of practical circumstances: as a guerrilla movement constantly pursued by Germans, Italians, Hungarians and Bulgarians, as well as by local collaborationist militias, the partisans were confined to remote mountains and forests for much of the war and were not in a position to reach the few cities – Zagreb, Sarajevo, Belgrade – in which the overwhelming majority of Jews lived, and where they were murdered or from where they were deported to their deaths. Additionally, the Jews were a tiny population dispersed across enormous distances. There were no towns in Yugoslavia in which Jews came even close to being a majority or even plurality of the population, and the camps to which they were

¹² Žamila Kolonomos and Vera Veskovic-Vangeli, *Evreite vo Makedonija vo Vtorata svetska vojna (1941-1945). Zbornik na dokumenti*, vol. 1 (Skopje: Makedonska Akademija na naukite i umetnostite, 1986), 478–80.

¹³ Kolonomos and Veskovic-Vangeli, *Evreite*, 796–800.

deported, if they were not in occupied Poland, were positioned strategically in easily defensible areas and were guarded heavily.

For the Yugoslav communists, the rescue of Jews thus featured neither as an ideologically-driven, conscious decision made against the background of the unfolding genocide, nor as a realistic military objective. Instead, it was the ideological construct of ‘brotherhood and unity’ that in effect provided the refuge for the Jews. In this ideological vision, the roles were reversed, and agency de facto rested with the rescued, rather than the rescuer. The ‘peoples of Yugoslavia’ were joining the partisans and actively participating in the ‘struggle for national liberation’. That, in the case of the Jews, this actually meant rescue from certain death, was usually glossed over, or, at best, implied, as in the case of the quoted Macedonian leaflet: ‘your salvation is the struggle against fascism’ – or, as another party cell in Bosnia-Herzegovina put it, the ‘way to a better life for you [Jews] too is the joint struggle with Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, led by the communist party’.¹⁴ The Jewish case was not unique in this respect: partisan forces were a refuge for other populations at risk, such as, for example, Serbs or Bosnian Muslims, who also, in different times and places, ran for the forest fleeing genocidal violence. Although joining the partisans thus de facto also meant saving one’s life (at least for the time being), the communists preferred to emphasise the formal act of joining the resistance movement and then endow it with ideological meaning: the brotherly peoples of Yugoslavia joining, of their own free will, the struggle for national liberation led by Tito and the partisans.

Joining the Partisans as Rescue

In the late spring of 1943 the Italians evacuated the four camps for the internment of Jews in its occupation zone of the Independent State of Croatia and transported the inmates to the camp on the island of Rab.¹⁵ This camp was on the territory of Italy proper, and this fact put an end to the German and *ustasha* pressure to deport the Jews to ‘the east’. The Italian fascist regime had resisted this pressure, but it was only marginally driven by concerns about the fate of the Jews. As Davide Rodogno has shown, the Italian decision to ‘protect’ the Jews was made amidst anti-Semitic measures and by fiercely anti-Semitic bureaucrats; it was mostly influenced by the Italian interest in projecting the image of a sovereign partner in the German-Italian relationship, keeping the *ustase* at bay and not alienating key segments of the local population, primarily anti-communist Serbs.¹⁶

¹⁴ ‘Proglas Pokrajinskog komiteta KPJ za Bosnu i Hercegovinu’, 5.

¹⁵ For a history of the Independent State of Croatia, see Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ For an overview of Italian Jewish policy in occupied Yugoslav territories, see Davide Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 362–85.

The Rab camp had already housed at least 6,500 Slovenian civilian internees under the so-called 'precautionary internment'.¹⁷ This was a category that extended to individuals whom the Italian occupation authorities considered harmful to Italian interests: from former Yugoslav army officers to workers, intellectuals, civil servants and other groups that the Italians suspected could potentially organise acts of resistance against Italian rule.¹⁸ Some 3,000 Jews who arrived at Rab in May and June 1943 were interned, in contrast, under so-called 'protective internment'. This category applied to, in Rodogno's summary, 'individuals eluding recruitment by the partisans, those who asked of their own accord to be evacuated and those who had collaborated with the occupiers and begged for protection against partisan reprisals'.¹⁹ Although it is unclear which of these actions provided a basis for this categorisation of the Jews, they were henceforth, at least for the time being, de facto protected from the Germans and the *ustaše*. Once at Rab, the Jews were housed in two newly created sub-camps, separated from one another, as well as from the pre-existing camp that housed the Slovenes. As internees under 'protective internment', the Jews were treated much better than the Slovenes: they were not forced to work, and their food rations were more substantial. While the general living conditions in the two Jewish sub-camps were inferior to those in the camps from which the Jews had been deported to Rab, they were still significantly better than those of the Slovenes.

Already before the deportations to Rab, a number of Jewish camp inmates in the Italian occupation zone had maintained connections with underground cells of the KPJ on the outside. Even though the communist presence in these camps often hinged on enthusiasm and ideological convictions of one or two individuals, the KPJ had cells in all Jewish internment camps within the Italian occupation zone. After the deportations to Rab these cells merged into a single camp committee for camps II and III (the Jewish sub-camps), which coordinated its work with the communist committee in the Slovenian camp.²⁰ This joint coordinating committee maintained contact with KPJ cells outside the camp, most immediately in the town of Rab itself.

In the months preceding the collapse of fascist Italy, the work of Jewish communists in the camp was focused on ensuring that the rescue of the Jews from the camp took the active form of their joining the partisans, in accordance with the ideological expectations sketched above. In a report smuggled out to their mainland comrades in the late summer of 1943, members of the Jewish camp committee outlined their

¹⁷ Claims of numbers of Slovenian internees in the Rab camp at this time differ. According to General Mario Roatta, the commander of *Supersloda* (the Italian supreme command for Slovenia and Dalmatia), there were 6,577 Slovenes confined at Rab (of the total of 19,369 interned by *Supersloda*) in late 1942. Rodogno, *Empire*, 351. According to Jaša Romano, whose numbers most likely come from the Yugoslav state commission, there were 13,000 Slovenian internees at Rab at the time. Jaša Romano, 'Jevreji u logoru na Rabu i njihovo uključivanje u Narodnooslobodilački rat', *Zbornik Jevrejskog istorijskog muzeja*, 2 (1973), 15–6.

¹⁸ Rodogno, *Empire*, 350.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Rodogno quotes the number of 2,661 Jews at Rab. Rodogno, *Empire*, 353–4. Romano establishes the number of 3,577 Jews interned at Rab, which is almost certainly too high. Romano, 'Jevreji', 17–20.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 20–7.

work among Jewish internees in the camp. Apart from ‘work on the party line’ and similar tasks within the category of ideological work and propaganda, the committee stressed that ‘the entire work is focused on preparing and grooming the fighters for the struggle for national liberation’.²¹ A clandestine unit of 150 people was created and organised as a partisan military detachment, ready to join the partisans when the moment came.²² It was clear that these preparations were most relevant for young, able-bodied men and the few women who could join the partisan units in battle.²³ What was less clear was what was going to happen, when such opportunity arose, to the people unsuitable for partisan life: the sick, the elderly and children.

The moment came soon enough. On 8 September 1943 the news of the armistice between Italy and the allies reached the camp. The exact chronology of events in the camp over the next few days remains murky; what is clear is that the nascent Jewish military detachment, with the help of the Slovenian prisoners from the adjacent camp, disarmed the Italian guards who remained on duty and then proceeded to pillage the weapons caches. The clandestine Jewish military unit, now with weapons and in Italian uniforms, proclaimed itself the ‘Jewish Rab battalion’ and immediately announced its decision to join the partisans. Partisan representatives, who arrived in the camp from the mainland, coordinated what turned out to be the single largest Jewish rescue operation in Yugoslavia during the war. Elvira Kohn, a pre-war photojournalist interned in the camp, described the occasion in her diary:

On 10 September, a festive rally took place in the afternoon. Comrades from mount Velebit [i.e., partisan representatives from the mainland] came to inform us that we are free and that the days of camp are over for us, and that they are inviting [*pozivaju*] all able-bodied fighters to join the partisan ranks. At that moment, the flag with our five-pointed star unfurled. . . . Our youth went around the camp with the flag.²⁴

Kohn’s brief diary is critical for understanding how exactly the communists ‘rescued’ the Jews, as it provides the only contemporary account of the liberation of the camp. Kohn was in no doubt about what had happened: the partisans from the mainland arrived in the camp and announced to the Jews that they were now free. Yet her sentence does not end here: the partisans also ‘invited’ able-bodied Jews to join their ranks. These were two inseparable propositions, being free and

²¹ ‘Report of the camp committee of the communist party for camps I and II’, 8 Sept. 1943, RG-49.007M, reel 1, Archive of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington (henceforth USHMM). The original is in the Jewish historical museum, Belgrade, no archival number. The document is also reprinted in Romano, ‘Jevreji’, 25–6. For an argument discussing the provenance of the document and why it must have been written before 8 Sept. 1943, when it was dated, see Romano, ‘Jevreji’, 24–7.

²² ‘Report of the camp committee’, 8 Sept. 1943, RG-49.007M, reel 1, USHMM.

²³ A limited number of women took part in this clandestine formation of a Jewish partisan unit in the Rab camp. More generally, however, Tito’s partisan army mobilised enormous numbers of women across Yugoslavia for non-traditional gender roles in the movement, including some 100,000 armed fighters. For a discussion of this history and its legacy, see Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁴ Diary of Elvira Kohn, undated, RG-61.019M, reel 3, USHMM. The original is in the Croatian history museum, Zagreb, inventory number 6753.

joining the partisans; the communists announced them simultaneously, and Elvira Kohn related them together in one sentence. Being free, rescued from fascist anti-Jewish persecution, was thus synonymous with the partisan vision of the future – a multi-ethnic federal Yugoslavia of equal nations and nationalities. Kohn's diary is also interesting because it points to a tension between this understanding of liberation and the individual Jews' own notions of what it meant to be rescued. The already quoted report of the communist camp committee left no doubt that there was overwhelming Jewish support for the partisans in the camp, and that most Jews were prepared politically for the liberation through political work of the committee – 'the entire work is focused on preparing and grooming the fighters for the struggle for national liberation.'²⁵ Kohn, however, wrote in her diary:

The morning of 8 September appeared like any other day in our camp. We did not know that the day would bring the long-awaited freedom and liberation from the camp. In the evening, around 7 o'clock, the news spread around the camp of the capitulation of Italy, which nobody believed at first, until the [Italian] soldiers themselves started approaching the [barbed] wire (which was forbidden until then), confirming the veracity of the news. Of course, everyone was exhilarated, as we thought this was the end and now everyone was going home.²⁶

Not only were most Jews unprepared – contrary to the thrust of the committee report – for imminent freedom, once the freedom came (in the guise of the partisans), they hoped they would go home. That is, *not* join the partisans.

The option of going home, of course, was unrealistic, given the geo-political circumstances of the early autumn of 1943. Over the next several weeks, therefore, the command of the partisan movement in Croatia organised the evacuation of the Jewish Rab battalion and all Jewish civilians who wanted to leave Rab for the remote regions of Lika, Kordun and Banija in Croatia, the 'liberated territory' in which the partisans had taken control and organised nascent institutions. The operation was enormous and challenging logistically. It involved rescuing some 2,500 people, transporting them by boats to the mainland (often under German air bombardment), transporting the infirm by trucks overland and provisioning the operation over several weeks. Of the about 500 Jews who had decided not to be evacuated by the partisans, some 300 found a way of reaching Jewish internment camps in southern Italy; most survived the war. The rest, about 200 people who were mostly too weak or ill to either go with the uncertainty of partisan life or try to reach southern Italy on their own, were captured by the Germans in late March 1944, when the Wehrmacht landed in the islands of the northern Adriatic with the intention of thwarting a possible landing of the Allies. Most of the Jews captured then were murdered in Birkenau. A handful of people had managed to hide in Rab with the help of locals and thus evade capture by the Germans.²⁷

²⁵ 'Report of the camp committee', 8 Sept. 1943, RG-49.007M, reel 1, USHMM.

²⁶ Diary of Elvira Kohn, undated, RG-61.019M, reel 3, USHMM.

²⁷ Zdenko Levental, *Zločini fašističkih okupatora i njihovih pomagača protiv Jevreja u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština Jugoslavije, 1952), 132.

Once on the mainland, the Jewish Rab battalion was disbanded by the order of the partisan high command; individual Jews were distributed into the various units of the Seventh Banija division of the Army of national liberation of Yugoslavia, the official name of the partisan army. This division, which was now recuperating in liberated territory, had been decimated in the late spring battles of the so-called Operation Schwartz, in which combined German, Italian, *ustaša*, *četnik* and Bulgarian forces numbering well over 120,000 men sought to annihilate some 20,000 partisan fighters, including the partisan high command headed by Tito.²⁸ Many Jews from the Rab transport who had not been members of the Jewish Rab battalion joined the partisan forces once they reached liberated territory in late September and early October. Others took up positions in burgeoning partisan institutions in towns and villages. Elvira Kohn, for example, whose diary entries and photographs documented the dramatic developments in the Rab camp in early September, became a photographer for the agitprop department of ZAVNOH, the provisional communist-dominated government of Croatia.²⁹ Aleksandar Goldštajn, another former Rab inmate, organised the partisan court system in the liberated territory, and became director of the legislative department of ZAVNOH.³⁰ Others found similar, if not so prominent, positions in the emerging partisan state system. Jewish refugees who were not active partisan fighters were housed in accommodations requisitioned by ZAVNOH in various towns and villages of Lika, Banija and Kordun. In November, ZAVNOH formed the ‘commission for evacuation and care of Jews’, which was to provide humanitarian care to most vulnerable Jewish refugees – ones who were neither in the ranks of the partisans, nor could work or otherwise take care of their most basic needs.³¹

Experiences of Jews rescued from Rab, both in partisan units and in non-combat situations in the nascent communist state, illustrate well the various aspects and ambiguities of the question of Yugoslav communists and rescue. Undoubtedly, the Rab operation and its aftermath is a remarkable case of the rescue of some 2,500 Yugoslav Jews by the KPJ-led partisan army, and its magnitude is astounding, especially given the circumstances in which it had been carried out. Questions remain, however, about the Jewish experiences in the partisans, as well as the partisans’ attitudes to Jews more generally. There is the question of anti-Semitism, and, perhaps related, the question of why the Jewish Rab battalion was promptly disbanded and Jews sent, without training, into battle as individual fighters in the division that had sustained heavy losses in battles with Germans in late 1943 and early 1944. Although mostly

²⁸ The numbers are quoted by Hoare, *Genocide*, 340–1. For a brief overview of operations Weiss and Schwarz in the winter and spring of 1943, see Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 231–56.

²⁹ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Elvira Kohn, interview code 4014, tape 1, segment 33. ZAVNOH is the acronym for *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*, The state anti-fascist council of the national liberation of Croatia.

³⁰ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Aleksandar Goldštajn, interview code 6204, tape 5, segments 130–4.

³¹ Romano, ‘Jevreji’, 50.

dispelled by research, arguments have been made that, because of the lack of training, Jews who were distributed in the various partisan units were killed in disproportionate numbers.³²

As noted previously, once the Jewish Rab battalion was on the mainland, the partisan high command disbanded the unit and distributed the fighters into the military units of the Seventh Banija division. Many Jews who had not been members of the Jewish Rab battalion now joined the units of this division as well. Whether or not it may have been perceived as an overtly anti-Jewish gesture at the time – or even after the war – the reasons for disbanding the Jewish Rab battalion were quite simple, and probably had nothing to do with anti-Semitism. First, the Jewish battalion had had no military training prior to the liberation of the camp and had no combat experience whatsoever, and would most likely have fared disastrously in combat. Second, precisely in order to foster ‘brotherhood and unity’ in practice, partisan military units were not organised on an ethnic principle, but on a regional basis. The Banija division was thus comprised primarily of ethnic Serbian and Croatian fighters, but also of other nationalities.³³ And, finally, the ranks of this particular division had been badly decimated in battles around the Neretva and the Sutjeska the previous spring, when the combined partisan forces lost about a third of their fighters, some 7,000 people. Abolishing the Jewish Rab battalion and redistributing its Jewish fighters thus made sense practically, politically and even, arguably, in terms of the safety of Jewish fighters themselves.³⁴

The overwhelming majority of former Rab inmates – practically all of them – remember the role of the partisans in their rescue positively. Despite describing hardship over the following months, particularly during the renewed German offensive to destroy the partisan army in the late fall and winter of 1943–4, virtually none relate any episodes or doubts that would cast suspicions that the large-scale transfer from Rab was anything other than rescue and liberation. Testimonies to that effect were collected by the Federation of Jewish communities in Belgrade during the period of socialist Yugoslavia.³⁵ But if those are perhaps liable to be dismissed, or at least warrant suspicion and careful reading between the lines, as they in effect reinforce the reigning communist Yugoslavist ideology of the period, testimonies of former Rab inmates collected by the USC/Shoah foundation also overwhelmingly confirm this view.³⁶ This is all the more significant as the bulk of

³² Romano, ‘Jevreji’, 48–9.

³³ A report on the social and national makeup of the Seventh division from the autumn of the following year (1944), counted Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Czech, Muslim, Italian, Jewish, Russian, Dutch, Polish, Montenegrin, Hungarian and German fighters in its ranks. ‘Pregled socijalnog i nacionalnog sastava 7. NOU divizije od 22. novembra 1944. godine’, in *Zbornik*, vol. 5, book 35, 370–1.

³⁴ Put differently, the best way to decimate Jewish ranks – had this been the objective, as suggested by arguments about disproportionately high Jewish casualty rates – would have been to preserve the poorly trained, inexperienced Jewish unit run by inexperienced Jewish officers and send it to the front line to fight the Germans.

³⁵ See the list of testimonies quoted by Romano, ‘Jevreji’, 55.

³⁶ The USC Shoah Foundation is a non-profit organization established by Steven Spielberg in the early 1990s. Based at the University of Southern California, it houses one of the largest repositories

those testimonies were collected in Croatia from August to December 1995. These were the very first months after the Croatian army had retaken the Serbian-held territories in Lika, Banija and Kordun, the very regions to which the Rab refugees had been evacuated some five decades earlier. This was the final episode of the Croatian war of independence, the foundational historical event of the post-Yugoslav independent Croatia. Nationalist jubilation and prevalent revisionist memory of the Second World War at this particular historical juncture certainly had the potential to reframe contemporary recollections of the war and question the actions and motivations of the partisans, the communists or the Serbian populations from Lika, Banija and Kordun. One can trace such revisionist influences in the leading questions of one particular interviewer, who persistently asked about whether Jewish casualties in the partisan units of the Seventh Banija division had been ‘accidental’ (with palpable scare quotes), or whether Jews had ‘problems’ with the local population in Serbian villages. Answers to these questions, however, are remarkably consistent, relegating the frictions and problems that the Jews faced in 1943 and 1944 to a plane entirely different from the one salient politically in the mid-1990s.³⁷

And there certainly were tensions and problems. Jews were predominantly an urban population, who had joined partisan units populated mostly by peasants. In addition, those units had just gone through a devastating string of battles that decimated their ranks. Gracija Džamonja, one of the Rab refugees, related that ‘compared to [the partisans], we were well-clothed and well-fed’. According to her, ‘there was no resistance to us as Jews’, but the partisans were ‘predominantly peasant folk’ and ‘we were from the city’. It was because of this class distrust that, according to Džamonja, most Jewish fighters wanted to prove themselves in combat, and this, combined with the lack of training, contributed to the number of Jewish casualties. But Džamonja was also quick to distinguish this distrust and tension from the clearly anti-Semitic measures of the *četniks*, who, until the autumn of 1941, were loosely allied with the communists in their resistance to the Germans, and who had refused to accept into their ranks some Jews in late 1941 on purely anti-Semitic grounds, returning them to Sarajevo, well aware that this was in effect a death sentence.³⁸

Other Rab evacuees also noted the general absence of anti-Semitism in the partisan ranks and among the local population, and ascribed tensions to other sources. Elvira Kohn, whom we already know through her diary, stressed that ‘personally, I never

of video testimony given by Holocaust survivors. For more on the Foundation, see its website at <http://sfi.usc.edu/> (last visited 19 Aug. 2015).

³⁷ Similarly, written testimonies of former Jewish Rab inmates, collected by the Federation of Jewish communities in Serbia in a very different political context (yet one similarly revisionist with respect to the history of the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia) of Belgrade in the 2000s, convey an almost identical self-evidence of joining the partisans as an act of liberation and rescue. See the following testimonies in the five volumes of *Mi smo preživeli: Jevreji o Holokaustu* (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština Srbije i Crne Gore, 2001–5), edited by Aleksandar Gaon: Lea Salcberger (vol. 2, 57–68), Sara Mandelbaum (vol. 2, 69–73); Sida Levi (vol. 2, 74–8); Đuro Seleš (vol. 3, 45–53) Moric Montiljo (vol. 3, 58–66); Bjanka Auslender (vol. 4, 39–53); Drago Auslender (vol. 4, 54–60); Josip Papo-Baro (vol. 5, 133–42) and Eduard Tauber (vol. 5, 148–57).

³⁸ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Gracija Džamonja, interview code 7126, tape 4, segments 80–8.

felt anti-Semitism, even though 'I always purposefully emphasised that I had been in [the camp] at Rab' and everyone knew she was Jewish.³⁹ Božidar Štraus put it succinctly:

Most people [in the partisans] were peasants used to that way of life, it was not a big deal for them to sleep in the forest, not to be able to wash up in the morning . . . and there were fewer of us from the city, who had different habits and different needs . . . and that is what seemed odd to them, and they tended to ridicule it, in the sense that [we were] gentlemen.

Štraus continued:

However, I noticed that I myself, over time, began to see people the same way. . . . After a year or so in the partisans, and when someone from Zagreb would join us, I laughed together with the [old partisans], [if the newly arrived person] wanted to brush teeth in the evening. . . . There existed a kind of difference among people, otherwise we did not notice anything against us as Jews.⁴⁰

The general absence of anti-Semitism, of course, does not mean that Jewish experience in the partisans was idyllic. Tensions with other partisans and local peasants were still tensions, and although the consequences were not deadly (like, for example, in the Soviet context), they were clearly reminiscent of earlier anti-Semitic prejudice and could have isolating consequences.⁴¹ Mila Ajzenštajn-Stojić recounted an incident when she was told by a partisan woman that she could not take her elderly mother to join a partisan unit with her and that her mother belonged with the 'elderly Jews' cared for by the commission for evacuation and care of Jews, after which Ajzenštajn-Stojić decided not to join the partisan unit. The comment recounted by Ajzenštajn-Stojić might or might not have been anti-Semitic, but the fact that she remembered it and narrated it as such is important; she was, however, quick to note that this was a single incident, and that there were no other instances of anti-Semitism.⁴² Maja Bošković-Stulli claimed in her testimony that there, 'undoubtedly, was anti-Semitism, though she qualified it as a prejudice of peasants against town folk. She recounted an incident in which she was denied an administrative post in a local partisan institution because, as she was informed, 'there are, in such positions, too many people of your race'. After this, however, she appealed to a non-Jewish friend who presumably had some clout, because he made a 'big stink' after which she was able to assume that post.⁴³

This last episode points to what may be the key framework for understanding the Jewish experience in the partisans and among the local peasant population in

³⁹ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Elvira Kohn, interview code 4014, tape 2, segment 45.

⁴⁰ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Božidar Štraus, interview code 4306, tape 2, segments 56–7.

⁴¹ Rampant anti-Semitism among Soviet partisans in German-occupied parts of the Soviet Union (mostly in Ukraine) led to many situations in which Jews who had fled annihilation in the ghettos and wanted to join the partisans were turned down, if not robbed and murdered. This was probably not a typical reaction, and it was certainly not sanctioned by official ideology. Still, this makes it a very different context from that in Yugoslavia. See Arad, *The Holocaust*, 505–16.

⁴² USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Mila Ajzenštajn-Stojić, interview code 5149, tape 3, segments 85–90.

⁴³ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Maja Bošković-Stulli, interview code 4015, tape 3, segments 79, 87–9.

liberated territory. There were myriad individual misunderstandings and tensions with potentially alienating effects for the Jews, incidents that may or may not have been properly anti-Semitic, but were certainly sometimes perceived as such. None of the incidents, however, had deadly consequences: the local population was generally not anti-Semitic, and partisans never abandoned their commitment to Jewish non-combatants. The partisan hierarchy welcomed Jewish fighters and protected Jewish civilian refugees, underscoring its ideological commitment to equality with concrete actions. In the late autumn of 1943, for example, the Germans renewed their offensive against the partisans in Lika, Banija and Kordun. At risk were not only the partisan units but also the entire evacuated Jewish population, as well as most of the local peasant population. Because of this danger, the commission for evacuation and care of Jews investigated the possibility of evacuating the Jews further and sending them to another liberated territory, in western Slavonia. In early November the commission tasked Mirko Levinger, Mosko Kaveson and Aleksandar Goldštajn, all evacuees from Rab, with exploring this possibility. They were to visit civilian Jews housed in the various villages and see if there was interest for such evacuation. They were also to liaise with the partisan units in Slavonia and see if a transport of a large number of people over substantial territory was feasible.⁴⁴

A letter to ZAVNOH from early November 1943, from one particular group of some ninety evacuated Jews in Otočac, provides a good example of their prevailing mood, and signals that the majority of the Jews were not enthusiastic about further evacuations:

Our physical state is largely determined by our spiritual depression. For two and a half years, we were hunted down and persecuted, we hid and escaped as best we could. Our best people were murdered or taken to German and *ustaša* camps. There is not a single one among us who is not mourning at least two of his loved ones, and there are many whose entire families have disappeared. . . . [We] finally reached the end, lived to see our victory – ours, we repeat – since we were convinced that the victory of Yugoslavia, Russia and the Allies was ours as well[. At] that moment we were men again, equal again. Since we have had an opportunity to see your leniency and understanding for us, we again dare to appeal to your humanity and plead: do not send us to the cold and the snow when we do not have where to go, do not send us to long and insecure journeys, we are not up to that task, we are ashamed when we see our comrades fight [when we are not able to], but we dare say this to you, since we know we will be met with understanding. We appeal to you to save our children, the sick, and the elderly, this is our testament, we feel obliged to bring them back to our homes alive. So we beg you and appeal to you, leave us here for the winter, give us back the feeling that we are men again, we would be grateful to the end of our lives and we will strive to show it to you with our feeble powers.⁴⁵

The situation on the ground, however, prevented the evacuation. One of the leading partisan commanders in Slavonia, with whom Levinger, Kaveson and Goldštajn consulted, flatly rejected the possibility of a large transport to Slavonia as

⁴⁴ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Aleksandar Goldštajn, interview code 6204, tape 4, segments 125–7.

⁴⁵ Adolf Renert et al. to ZAVNOH, 8 Nov. 1943, RG-61.019M, reel 3, USHMM. The original is in the Croatian history museum, Zagreb, inventory number 2099.

too dangerous.⁴⁶ Through the winter and into the spring, therefore, Jewish civilians remained in place. The paucity of preserved ZAVNOH documents from this period does not allow for a thorough reconstruction of their situation, but the extant ones allow us to glean the precarious position in which they found themselves. One memorandum from this period, from the ZAVNOH department of social affairs to the provisional regional administration, mentions ‘the question of Jews’, noting that able-bodied Jews should be conscripted for labour or drafted into the partisan army. ‘It can be no longer tolerated’, the memorandum states, ‘that they eat, and do nothing’.⁴⁷ Another, similar one sent to the provisional regional administration, urged the regional authorities to ‘help the Jews as much as possible, and care should be taken that anti-Semitism does not appear, since the allies are sensitive to this and it would be incorrect in the political sense’.⁴⁸ These and similar documents point to the problem hinted at in survivor testimonies: namely, the tension between the ideological unacceptability of anti-Semitism and the unquestionable need to help the Jewish evacuees on the one hand, and, on the other, the circumstances of extreme want amidst the enemy offensive, coupled with social and cultural frictions between Jewish evacuees and partisans and the local population, which sometimes descended into anti-Semitic incidents.

In the end, however, the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Jews evacuated from Rab survived the war is what matters most. Perhaps the best, and certainly most poignant, illustration of the experience of Jews from Rab of one and a half years with the partisans is the so-called ‘partisan Haggadah’, recorded by Šalom Altarac, one of the Rab evacuees from Bosnia, and kept in the oral tradition of the Sarajevo Jews in a bastardized Serbo-Croatian version of Ladino well into the post-war period. Altarac cast the travails of Jewish refugees in a decidedly irreverent, self-deprecating narrative, which is nevertheless framed as the Haggadah, the retelling of the biblical story of liberation of ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt.⁴⁹ The main themes, survival and liberation, trump all hardship, disappointments and misunderstandings. Altarac’s comic, foul rendering of *dayenu* – traditionally, the Passover song that gives thanks to god for all he has given to the Jews – instead foregrounds the role of the partisans in the deliverance.

When considering the story of rescue from Rab and discussing the issue of partisan anti-Semitism and ideological conceptions of rescue, it is important to keep the

⁴⁶ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Aleksandar Goldštajn, interview code 6204, tape 4, segment 127.

⁴⁷ ZAVNOH department of social affairs to the council of national liberation of Banija, 7 May 1944, RG-61.019M, reel 3, USHMM. The original is in the Croatian history museum, Zagreb, inventory number 3254.

⁴⁸ ZAVNOH department of social affairs to the council of national liberation of Kordun, 22 Mar. 1944, RG-61.019M, reel 3, USHMM. The original is in the Croatian history museum, Zagreb, inventory number 3234.

⁴⁹ See Eliezer Papo, ‘Hagadat ha-partizanim: Tsahok karnevali ke-derekh hitmodedut ’im traumot ha-redifa ve-ha-lohama, u-ke-emtsa’i le-havnayat ha-zikaron ha-kevutsati’, in David M. Bunis, ed., *Languages of the Sephardic Jews and Their Literatures* (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim and Bialik Institute, 2009), 142–216. I would like to thank Yedida Kanfer for her help with this document.

episode in context and consider other possibilities of rescue that never materialised. Ever since the collapse of Italian rule in Rab, international Jewish organisations, as well as representatives of the Jewish agency, had urged the British government to evacuate the Jews. This question became especially relevant once the Germans renewed their attacks on the partisans in Lika, Banija and Kordun; since the British were helping the partisans with military supplies from southern Italy, there was a ready availability of empty planes to take the Jews back to the already existing camps. However, the British government stalled in these negotiations and invoked bureaucratic reasons to postpone the evacuation; the real reason was probably the reluctance to have large numbers of Jews in southern Italy, since this would raise a possibility of their further transfer to Palestine – something the British wanted to avoid at any cost.⁵⁰

Iso Papo's testimony provides what is perhaps the most succinct summary of some of the issues considered in this article:

The issue was very simple. In those years, the partisans were the only ones who were fighting against the Germans. All the others were, under one guise or another, in favour of the Germans. Jews joined that movement not so much for political reasons or because they felt they were communists, but because [the communists] were the only ones, there was no choice. This was best seen when Italy collapsed, and out of 3,500 Jews on the island of Rab [sic!], in the camp, a small number reached Italy, one group joined the partisans, and over 2,500 went to the liberated territory and, in fact . . . survived in this manner. It was not a matter of political convictions, but of survival . . . [Jews] were equal as far as military command and directives from above were concerned . . . but were de facto not equal because they had just come from the camp, they were in a bad physical state, fared worse in forced marches, were starved, and were, which is very important, city dwellers, not used to forests and mountains . . . Apart from individual cases, one can claim that there was no anti-Semitism.⁵¹

Conclusion

Regardless of whether Yugoslav partisans considered the Rab operation 'rescue', the fact remains that this was one of the largest single operations of rescue of Jews in Hitler's Europe. Because of the political decision of the communists to transport the former Rab inmates to the precarious territory in their control, and organise care for non-combatants through the end of the war, some 2,500 Jews survived the war and avoided the fate of those who remained on the island. By the autumn of 1943 the systematic and genocidal nature of the German assault against the Jews everywhere in Europe had become known, and the partisan leadership – which had maintained official relations with western allies since the spring of that year – must have been aware of the fate that would have awaited the Jews had they remained in Rab after September.⁵²

⁵⁰ For a discussion of this issue, see Menahem Šelah, 'Sudbina jevrejskih izbeglica na otoku Rabu', *Zbornik Jevrejskog istorijskog muzeja*, 7 (1997), 190–6.

⁵¹ USC/Shoah foundation testimony of Iso Papo, interview code 4583, tape 1, segments 52–7.

⁵² On 17 December 1942 the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom, on behalf of all anti-Axis allies, issued a declaration that condemned 'in the strongest possible terms [the] bestial

Yet it is difficult to interpret this historical episode as a moment ‘when light pierced the darkness’, as the title of Nechama Tec’s book refers to the rescue of the Jews.⁵³ The partisan operation was not motivated by abstract ethical considerations or the partisans’ concern for individual Jews and their fate in Hitler’s Europe. Rather, the undertaking was dictated by their ideological vision, in which the Jews, together with other peoples of Yugoslavia, belonged to the future political project of Yugoslavia of equal nations and nationalities. As such, they needed to be included – just like the Slovenes from the adjacent camp – in the ranks of the struggle for national liberation, the only way to achieve that goal. That this inclusion in effect saved their lives, a fact that was clear and self-evident to the Jews, was of secondary importance, and was glossed over in official communist documents.

The Rab operation is critical for our understanding of the importance of ideological considerations of political movements in Holocaust rescue, and the collective aspect of Holocaust rescue of Jews in the European context more generally. Broadening the study of the category of rescue to include historical events and actions that were not necessarily understood in terms of absolute ethical imperatives by their actors, and which do not fit the prevalent normative understanding of Holocaust rescue today – but which saved lives of Jews who otherwise might have been murdered – brings us a step closer to understanding the complexity of the Holocaust and one of its least studied aspects.

policy of cold-blooded extermination’ of the Jews in Europe. ‘11 Allies Condemn Nazi Terror on Jews’, *The New York Times*, 18 Dec. 1942, 1.

⁵³ See note 1.