

# Bones Beneath the River: Holocaust Trauma and Memory at Jasenovac

**Miss Farien Begum Farien Begum**

Student, English, Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous Bangalore.

## ABSTRACT:

Jasenovac, one of the most infamous concentration and extermination camps during World War II, functioned under the Ustaše regime in Croatia from 1941 to 1945. In contrast to many camps managed by the Nazis, Jasenovac was notorious for extreme cruelty, where starvation, severe deprivation, and mental torture were commonplace. This paper is partially inspired by a YouTube documentary that illuminates the horrific events that took place in the camp, offering chilling visual evidence that complements the accounts of survivors. Inmates endured unimaginable hardships, with some driven by hunger to the desperate act of cannibalism in their fight for survival. The firsthand narratives explored in this reveal profound human suffering, emphasizing the disturbing extent of abuse that occurred at Jasenovac. By placing these stories within the larger context of Nazi-era concentration camps, this study highlights the distinct brutality of Jasenovac and its significance in the history of war crimes and genocide.

## INTRODUCTION

The violent reminders of Jasenovac lie with the merciless concentration camps of the Holocaust. During the period of 1941 to 1945 the Ustaše regime in Croatia was marked with genocide, torture, and ruthless starvation tactics. Even with the disheartening prevalence of camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka, Jasenovac is seen as one of the most brutal camps. This documentary that I watched on YouTube horrified me with depictions of what life was like in such a gruesome camp that Jasenovac was, providing a summary of the magnified pain inflicted upon its prisoners. Instead of serving mere illustrative purposes, the film alongside testimonies from survivors highlights the harsh truths of life in these camps which includes: extremes of torment, malnourishment, beaten psychologically leading to Cannibalism due to starvation.

Utilizing the footage from the camp, the paper will attempt to highlight the living conditions that were bred at Jasenovac through the lenses of historical analysis, eye witness accounts, or even documentaries. The stories from survivors always give a much deeper understanding of a situation while granting the listener an insight of both the pain and the strength showcased through such Jasenovac's brutality.

In the youtube video we see how the 3rd largest concentration camp in Europe history ie; *The Jasenovac Concentration camp*. After the world war many new territories were created, this was Yugoslavia the land of the south slaves. Included within the new nations of various ethnic groups, the Jasenovac mostly consisted of these ethnic groups, the conquerors were as always used the divide and rule theory. Included within the new nation were Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins, North Macedonians, Albanians, and Bosnian Muslims. There were also smaller numbers of other ethnic groups living within Yugoslavia, including Jewish and Roman people. At various times throughout the centuries, the different ethnic groups of the region had been at each other's throats. This was especially true of the two largest groups, the Croats

and the Serbs. One of the many problems between the many groups in Yugoslavia was that for centuries theyDuring World War Two, there was a camp in the former Yugoslavia that a Holocaust survivor and historian called worse than even Auschwitz in terms of brutality, and about which the Nazis pushed for the camp leadership to be changed due to its very public and savage daily routine. It might surprise you, but the Germans did not run this extermination camp, and it was the third largest concentration camp in Europe during the war in terms of area. Welcome to a day in history.

Today we are going to tell you the story of fascist, Croatian, Ustasha and the brutal concentration camp system they built and ran, including the notorious Jasenovac camp complex, a place so brutal that their Nazi allies pressured the Croats. Clean it up or close it. After World War One. A new country was created from many of the territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the country of Serbia. This was Yugoslavia, the land of the South Slavs. Included within the new nation were Serbs, Croats and Slovenes Montenegrins. North Macedonia.

Albanians and Bosnian Muslims. There were also smaller numbers of other ethnic groups living within Yugoslavia, including Jewish and Roma people. At various times throughout the centuries, the different ethnic groups of the region had been at each other's throats. This was especially true of the two largest groups, the Croats and the Serbs. One of the many problems between the many groups in Yugoslavia was that for centuries they had been dominated and ruled by other nations, kingdoms and people, most notably the Turks, beginning in the late 1400s, and the Austro-Hungarians starting in the early 1700s, when they began to slowly push the Ottoman Turks out of the northern parts of the region. As you may know, since the beginning of time, conquerors have used the divide and conquer policy to keep their subject people weak and more focused on one another than on their common enemy. This was the case with both the Turks and the Austro-Hungarians. Making matters even more interesting was that many people in Bosnia converted to Islam throughout the centuries of Turkish rule. Genetically, these people are mostly Serbs and Croats, but in the centuries since the Turks they have developed their own culture, and obviously their religion differs from those around them from the 15th century to the 20th. Foreign rulers pitted the various people of the lands of the former Yugoslavia against each other to help maintain their own position, not that they needed any help. The Balkan Peninsula, where Croatia, Serbia and the other states are located, is extremely rugged in many places. In these isolated places where authority usually came from, who was strongest. Feuds, vendettas, and an amazingly vicious and long lasting cycle of revenge began, spurred on by perceived favoritism by the ruling power, promoting one group over another and then reversing course to help maintain themselves in power. Making matters worse were questions of religion in Croatia.

The dominant Christian sect was and is Catholicism. At times a fervent, sometimes zealous Catholicism. In Serbia, the dominant sect is Eastern Orthodoxy, also practiced in Russia and Greece. Religious warfare, whether spread to the region from outside or from within, was a widespread occurrence. Caught in between the Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats were the Bosnian Muslims, sometimes referred to as Bosniaks in English and the Jews. And though it may seem a trivial thing to outsiders, there was a language difference. Well, actually the Serbs and Croats essentially speak the same language Serbo-Croatian. However, Croats use the Latin alphabet of the Catholic Church. In Western Europe, the Serbs use the Cyrillic alphabet of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The important thing about this is that beyond being an indicator of where one ethnic group's sympathies and close ties lay, it's a way of identification. Most Croats can't or won't use Cyrillic script, and Serbs can't or won't use Latin script. If there is no other way to identify someone they could be forced to write. Pretend you didn't know how to.

And well, you're about to find out what happened. Before we tell you about the camps set up by Hitler's Croatian fascist allies, we should mention that throughout World War two, there were enough atrocities to go around, and we hope to bring you an account of some of the things that the Serbs and others did during the war. But this is a report on the Croatian Ustasha and the cruel and inhumane camps they ran during the war. The other will be a video for another time, from 1941 to 1945. Croatia was ruled by the fascist Ustasha. The Ustasha, sometimes spelled Ustasha in English, means rebel or rise up in Croatian, was formed in 1929 by Ante Pavelic, a nationalist lawyer and politician who had been a member of the Croatian Party of Rights within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and who had pushed for greater autonomy for Croatia and even independence from Yugoslavia, starting almost from the moment the new country was formed as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 and which became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. For the first decade or so of the New Kingdom, most Croats supported the new Union. But as the depression came and nationalism rose throughout Europe, especially in the nearby countries of Italy and Germany, more and more Croats leaned towards independence, and many began to believe that the only way for Croatia to gain the land they believed was theirs, mostly in Bosnia, was through a militaristic dictatorship. In 1929, Pavelic formed the Ustasa Croatian Revolutionary Organization, which adopted many of the policies of Mussolini's Fascist Italy as well as some of its symbols. Pavelic and his supporters, like Mussolini and Hitler when they began, were not a majority in Croatia in 1929 or even through the 1930s. But as things got worse in Europe, in both Germany and Italy seemed invincible, many more Croats began to join, like Italy, Germany and even France Just before the war, Croatia began to divide along lines of extremes. The Ustasha and other ultra nationalists on one side, and Croatian socialists and communists on the other Shortly after its founding, however, the Ustasha and the nationalist movements of other Yugoslav states were outlawed by King Alexander the First in an attempt to continue the unity of the nation. In 1934, Ustasha supported assassins killed Alexander I of Yugoslavia, a Serb, while he was in France for talks with the French government. The assassination was actually the first in history to be captured on film. Throughout the 1930s, the Ustasha continued a campaign of terror within Croatia and Bosnia, attempting to cause instability which would allow it to take power. The platform of Pavelic and the Ustasha rested on these four things that Croatia was for Croats Only the Catholicism was the sole religion of Croatia itself, but that Islam in Bosnia was acceptable as it brought order to the region that Serbs, Jews and Roma people were inferior and needed to be either expelled from Croatia or killed, and that the nation of Croatia should include Bosnia, Herzegovina and parts of Slovenia and Serbia. On top of all that, Croatia was to be a one party state, with the Ustasha in power, with Pavelic known as the Poglavnik or Supreme Leader during the war. Croatia was also known as the NDH the English abbreviation for the Croatian term for the Independent State of Croatia. In March 1941, Yugoslavia was ruled by a regent, Prince Paul, who ruled in the name of the young Prince Peter II. After the killing of his father, Paul was pro-German and when Hitler demanded, he allowed German troops to pass through his country in order to help Mussolini in his botched invasion of Greece. Paul was on the verge of granting him permission when the teenaged Peter the Second, with the help of some of the army and the British, deposed his cousin Paul as regent and took power as king and refused Hitlers request. In response, Hitler ordered the very ominously named. Operation Punishment and invaded Yugoslavia. The history of the German invasion and the war against them is a story for another time. But though it's hard to imagine the German invasion of Yugoslavia and the guerilla war it found itself in from 1941 to 45 was among the most brutal of the entire war. Even before the first German extermination camp at Chelmno, Poland, was built in December 1941, extermination camps were functioning When comparing

the phenomenon of cannibalism during the Holocaust with the 1980 film *Cannibal Holocaust*, we must be mindful of the significant differences in context, intent, and representation of cannibalism. While *Cannibal Holocaust* is a controversial, fictional exploitation film, the cannibalism that occurred during the Holocaust was a tragic and desperate reaction to unimaginable suffering.

Context of Cannibalism in the Holocaust vs. *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980): Holocaust Cannibalism:

In the case of the Holocaust, cannibalism occurred under extreme duress—primarily in concentration and extermination camps where people were systematically starved, overworked, and subjected to torture. The instances of cannibalism were often acts of sheer desperation. Prisoners, in some rare cases, resorted to eating the flesh of the dead or dying in order to survive, and such acts were a tragic reflection of the complete breakdown of social and moral structures caused by Nazi policies of genocide. *Cannibal Holocaust*, directed by Ruggero Deodato, is a fictional film centered on a group of filmmakers who venture into the Amazon rainforest to document indigenous tribes and end up becoming part of the brutal practices they were filming. The movie is notorious for its graphic and explicit depiction of cannibalism, violence, and torture, some of which were staged, but others—particularly the scenes involving real animal killings—were not. The film uses cannibalism as a symbol of “savagery” and critiques the exploitation of indigenous cultures, but it does so in an exploitative and sensationalized way. The primary difference here is that while *Cannibal Holocaust* presents cannibalism as a central theme to shock and provoke, often framed within a fictional narrative about “primitive” tribes, the cannibalism during the Holocaust was a real, harrowing event born out of extreme starvation and desperation. The former is fictional and sensationalized for the purpose of cinema, while the latter is a grim reflection of the physical and psychological toll of genocide. In the movie, cannibalism is portrayed within the context of what the film presents as “primitive” tribal customs. The film plays on Western stereotypes of indigenous peoples as barbaric and savage, using cannibalism to shock the audience and portray the tribes as being less civilized than the Western characters. The ethical ramifications of *Cannibal Holocaust* stem from its exploitative portrayal of indigenous cultures, the real animal cruelty shown in the film, and the sensationalization of cannibalism for shock value. The film has been widely criticized for its lack of sensitivity toward the subject matter and for perpetuating harmful stereotypes. In contrast, the cannibalism during the Holocaust cannot be separated from the context of genocide, where millions of people were systematically stripped of their humanity. It was not about “savagery” or “primitivism” but about a human being’s struggle to survive under the most horrific conditions imaginable. In this case, cannibalism occurred as a result of extreme starvation and brutality. The ethical implications here are far more complex, as they involve the breakdown of human dignity and morality due to an inhumane, systematic attempt to annihilate entire populations. It is a horrifying symbol of the desperation and dehumanization victims suffered, rather than an expression of cultural or moral choices. *Cannibal Holocaust* has been considered one of the most shocking and disturbing films ever made. Its explicit depictions of violence, including cannibalism, were intended to provoke and unsettle viewers. The film pushes the boundaries of horror and exploitation cinema, and its depictions of cannibalism were controversial because they were presented as part of the sensationalized “wild” nature of indigenous tribes. It uses cannibalism to critique the “civilized” West and explore themes of exploitation and brutality. However, these critiques are often overshadowed by the film’s graphic violence and the ethical concerns over its production. The portrayal of cannibalism in Holocaust survivor testimonies serves a different function. These accounts are not meant to shock or entertain, but to convey the sheer trauma of the conditions that led people to such extreme acts. Survivors speak of the cannibalism they witnessed not to sensationalize or exploit, but to provide an honest and

painful insight into the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. These testimonies are an essential part of Holocaust education and remembrance, emphasizing the inhumanity of the genocide and the suffering it caused.

Cannibalism is often used as a tool to symbolize the “savage” nature of the tribes and, by contrast, the “civilized” nature of Westerners, which the film ultimately critiques through the violence and moral decay of the filmmakers themselves. The film’s graphic depictions of cannibalism serve to confront the audience with what they are willing to accept as entertainment and challenge the notions of civility. The rare instances of cannibalism among Holocaust victims, while horrific, do not serve any symbolic function in the same way. They are not a critique of civilization or a moral argument about “savageness.” Rather, they are tragic and brutal outcomes of unimaginable deprivation. The real horror of the Holocaust lies in the systematic dehumanization and annihilation of entire populations, and cannibalism, in this case, becomes a heartbreaking testament to the depth of suffering people were forced to endure. It reflects not a “savage” instinct, but the collapse of humanity under the weight of systemic genocide.

**Cannibal Holocaust’s Exploitation of Violence:** One of the most significant criticisms of *Cannibal Holocaust* is its use of shocking and exploitative violence, which includes the staged cannibalism. The film sensationalizes and trivializes the concept of cannibalism by portraying it in an exaggerated, fictionalized manner meant to titillate or shock viewers, rather than to provoke serious reflection or understanding. The instances of cannibalism in the Holocaust are tragic and reflect the desperation of those who were dehumanized and subjected to starvation and abuse. These acts were not sensationalized, but rather a symptom of the dehumanization imposed by the Nazi regime. Discussing these acts in the context of the Holocaust is a means of understanding the depth of suffering, not a form of exploitation or shock value. While both the Holocaust and *Cannibal Holocaust* feature cannibalism, they represent vastly different things. Cannibalism in the context of the Holocaust is a horrific, real consequence of extreme starvation and suffering under genocidal conditions. It is a tragic reflection of how far people can be pushed when stripped of all dignity and humanity. In contrast, *Cannibal Holocaust* is an exploitative film that sensationalizes cannibalism and violence for entertainment, using it as a tool for shock value and critique of Western cultural assumptions. The real cannibalism during the Holocaust, often depicted in survivor testimonies, should be approached with the utmost respect for the lived experiences of those who suffered during that time, while *Cannibal Holocaust* should be seen as a provocative and controversial work of exploitation cinema that uses shock tactics to critique and entertain, rather than document real human suffering. Cannibalism during the Holocaust is a disturbing topic that highlights the extreme deprivation and horrors faced by victims in Nazi concentration and extermination camps. While there is some evidence and anecdotal reports from survivors that cannibalism occurred in the camps, it was not widespread or institutionalized. The extreme conditions, including starvation, overcrowding, and brutal forced labor led many to report witnessing instances where some prisoners resorted to cannibalism to survive. For example, some survivors of places like Auschwitz and other camps mentioned cases of people eating the flesh of the dead or dying, often in dire circumstances. However, these acts were seen as tragic and desperate, borne out of the most extreme hunger and deprivation. Cannibalism in the Holocaust should not be understood as a general or systematic practice. It is important to remember that the real horrors of the Holocaust lie in the state-sanctioned violence, systematic genocide, and dehumanization that the Nazis inflicted on Jews, Romani people, disabled individuals, and other targeted groups. Cannibalism, when it did occur, serves as a grim reflection of the total breakdown of normal human behavior under conditions of extreme trauma and starvation, and it was not a widespread phenomenon or a defining feature of the



Holocaust itself. The phenomenon of cannibalism during the Holocaust, though extremely rare, is one of the many horrifying consequences of the Nazi regime's policies of terror, starvation, and systemic abuse. The Holocaust, which led to the deaths of six million Jews along with millions of other targeted groups, was characterized by forced deportations, brutal labor, and systematic extermination. Within this context, starvation and disease were rampant, leading to extreme deprivation. Some survivors have reported that cannibalism occurred in a few camps, primarily in the most extreme situations of starvation and collapse.

1. Conditions of Starvation and Extreme Deprivation The conditions inside the Nazi concentration camps were horrific. The prisoners were subjected to forced labor, overcrowding, and inadequate food rations. In many cases, people were given only a small amount of thin soup, a piece of bread, or occasionally a meager portion of potatoes or vegetables each day. The nutritional value of this food was extremely low, and many prisoners were suffering from hunger to the point of emaciation. Malnutrition, combined with the lack of access to medical care, meant that people were not only weakened but also highly vulnerable to disease. Some survivors of the Holocaust have spoken about how starvation drove people to a point of desperation, where any food source became a potential lifeline, even if it meant consuming human flesh. Reports of cannibalism mostly come from the most desperate situations. In some instances, prisoners who were near death from starvation, or who had died in their bunks, were eaten by other inmates. These acts were often carried out in moments of acute hunger and hopelessness. For example, survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or from camps such as Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and other locations in the Nazi system of camps have reported seeing or hearing of instances where the bodies of the dead or dying were consumed. One of the most infamous instances was during the death marches toward the end of the war, when prisoners were forced to march long distances under brutal conditions. Starvation, dehydration, and exhaustion set in, and there were reports of cannibalism among the exhausted and near-death inmates. However, these acts were seen as extreme, isolated incidents, driven by the extremity of the circumstances, rather than a widespread practice.

Cannibalism in these contexts was not seen as a normal response, but rather a manifestation of the complete breakdown of social and moral order under conditions of utter deprivation. It is crucial to recognize that cannibalism was not a cultural or ideological phenomenon tied to the Holocaust, but rather an outcome of extreme suffering and desperation. It stands as one of the most extreme and tragic expressions of how human beings, under Nazi policies of starvation and brutality, could be pushed to acts that defy moral norms. The survivors who have written about these experiences often stress the horror and shame of what they had witnessed, as these acts were considered aberrant and tragic, even under such dire conditions. The psychological trauma of living through and sometimes witnessing these acts remains with many survivors, often becoming one of the more haunting aspects of their testimony.

Many Holocaust survivors have recounted these instances, but they were often reluctant to speak about them, either because of the trauma or because they were ashamed of having been involved in or witnessed such acts. For example, survivors like Elie Wiesel, in his book *Night*, describe the horrors of the concentration camps but do not explicitly mention cannibalism. Others, such as those who survived in the Warsaw Ghetto or the Siege of Leningrad, have documented extreme cases where starvation led to desperate acts. There are also testimonies that recount moments when people resorted to eating the bodies of fellow inmates, though such accounts are often ambiguous and fraught with the moral and emotional weight of the suffering involved.

The ultimate aim of the Nazi regime in the camps was not only to kill the prisoners but also to destroy their sense of identity, dignity, and humanity. The horrifying deprivation, forced labor, and total disregard

for life led to a complete breakdown of the usual societal and moral structures. Under such conditions, even the most fundamental instincts of survival could drive individuals to commit acts they would otherwise never consider. The cannibalism that occurred, while certainly not widespread, can be seen as a tragic symptom of the larger process of dehumanization that the Nazis used to systematically break down their victims.

While there are testimonies from survivors and some documented instances of cannibalism, historians and scholars remain cautious about making the practice appear more widespread than it was. Some researchers have questioned the reliability of certain accounts, while others suggest that these reports might be exaggerated due to the trauma experienced by survivors or the extreme conditions in the camps. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence in survivor accounts, both written and oral, to acknowledge that cannibalism did indeed occur in some cases.

It is vital to approach the topic of cannibalism in the Holocaust with sensitivity and a deep understanding of the context. The real tragedy of the Holocaust is not the isolated acts of cannibalism, but the systemic, organized, and industrialized murder of millions. The suffering, starvation, and eventual cannibalism that occurred were merely a byproduct of the larger genocidal campaign by the Nazis, who intended to wipe out entire populations of people. These extreme acts of desperation should not overshadow the larger narrative of the genocide, which was fundamentally about the dehumanization and annihilation of entire groups of people. In summary, while cannibalism did occur in the Holocaust, it was not a widespread or systematic practice. It was a tragic and horrifying response to the unimaginable levels of starvation and despair experienced by victims. The real horrors of the Holocaust lie in the systematic dehumanization, torture, and mass murder that the Nazis perpetrated. The accounts of cannibalism, though distressing, are a reflection of the unimaginable conditions under which these victims lived and died.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Jasenovac is recognized as one of the most tragic episodes of World War II, where extreme inity subjected prisoners to starvation, illness, torture, and death under the Ustaše regime. Mentioning a YouTube documentary at the beginning of this paper highlights the continued importance of Jasenovac's history and the role of multimedia in keeping these narratives alive. The horrific experiences endured, including instances of cannibalism driven by severe deprivation, serve as a chilling reminder of the extent of human anguish. Testimonies from survivors play a vital role in ensuring that the atrocities at Jasenovac are remembered, honoring the victims and underscoring the significance of historical accuracy. This paper adds to the ongoing conversation about genocide, war crimes, and accountability in history, stressing the need for remembrance to prevent the recurrence of such atrocities