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Bargaining Chips: British Repatriations and Europe's Worst Post-Second World War Massacres, Yugoslavia 1945

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ABSTRACT
In May 1945, British forces in Austria forcibly repatriated over twenty-six thousand Yugoslav POWs to Communist Yugoslavia. Most repatriates had collaborated with Axis forces and fought against Josip Broz Tito's Communist-led Partisans and most were executed after their handover, in Europe's worst post-Second World War massacres. This article examines British motives for the repatriations, and argues that the lack of reciprocity, specifically the absence of any British POWs in the custody of anti-Partisan Yugoslav forces, removed a crucial restraint on British treatment of their captives. Unhindered, the repatriations helped extricate the British from an early Cold War geopolitical crisis in Austria. Reciprocity's importance is further revealed by comparing these repatriations with British opposition to Tito's mistreatment of German POWs, as well as Anglo-American forced repatriation of Soviet citizens to Stalin's Soviet Union.

Introduction

The killings perpetrated by Yugoslav Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito's regime against its wartime civil war opponents, and against Axis collaborators stand as Europe's worst post-Second World War massacres.[1] Hundreds of thousands of anti-Partisan troops, most of whom had collaborated in some fashion with the Axis occupiers of Yugoslavia, attempted to avoid capture by the Partisans by crossing into Italy and Austria in May 1945 where they surrendered to Anglo-American forces. They included Serb and Montenegrin Četnik detachments, the Serbian Volunteer Corps under Serb fascist Dimitrije Ljotić, the remnants of the Serbian State Guard that served the

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[1]The killings took place after VE Day on 8 May 1945, although they were inextricably linked to the events of the Second World War in Yugoslavia.

collaborating Serbian administration of Milan Nedić, the Slovene Home Guard, the forces of the Independent State of Croatia/Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (NDH), the Ustaše, Croatian Home Guard, and others. Most of the personnel that succeeded in entering Italy, which included the Serbian Volunteer Corps and Serbian State Guard, along with some Dalmatian and Bosnian Četnik detachments, were not repatriated to Yugoslavia, and would ultimately escape punishment by emigrating and forging new lives.

A different outcome awaited those units that attempted to enter the British-controlled southern Austrian provinces of Carinthia and Styria. The British barred the majority of NDH forces from entering Austria at the Austrian border town of Bleiburg, so they subsequently surrendered to Tito's troops. Nevertheless, some Montenegrin and Serb Četnik detachments, the majority of the Slovene Home Guard, a portion of the NDH forces, and many civilians did succeed in entering Austria. Before they could surrender to the British, they had to evade capture by Tito's Partisans, who had seized control of most of Carinthia south of the River Drava/Drau, leading to several battles between the anti-Titoist Yugoslavs and the Partisans. Some battles were witnessed by British troops and continued after VE (Victory in Europe) Day.

Those that made it north across the Drava, were disarmed by the British and placed into camps – divided between civilians and prisoners of war (POWs) – in the environs of Klagenfurt. NDH forces were placed in the camps of Grafenstein and Krumpendorf, while the Serbs, Montenegrins, and Slovenes, and a few Croats, were held in the camp near the village of Viktring. From 18-24 May, the British repatriated the Croats to Tito's Yugoslavia, and from 24-31 May the British repatriated the Yugoslav POWs from the Viktring camp, starting with the Serbs and Montenegrins and followed by the Slovenes. An order was issued on 31 May by British military authorities to repatriate 2,700 Slovene civilians the following day, but this order was ultimately cancelled through the intervention of the Canadian major in charge of the civilian refugees in Viktring camp, Major Paul Barre of the Allied Military Government (AMG).[2] In a number of cases, British forces carrying out the repatriations did not tell the anti-Partisan forces where they were going, nor did they disabuse them of rumours that Italy was the final destination. The total number repatriated remains in dispute owing to the speed in which the repatriations were carried out. The British Eighth Army's 5 Corps, which contained the units that carried out the repatriations, estimated that 26,339 Yugoslavs were repatriated, 12,196 Croats, 8,263 Slovenes, 5,480 Serbs, and 400 Montenegrins, while émigré and other historians have claimed this to be an underestimate, with figures for the Slovene Home Guard alone estimated at over

[2]John Corsellis and Marcus Ferrar, *Slovenia 1945: Memories of Death and Survival after World War I,I* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp.60-61.

11,000 repatriated.[3] Upon arrival in Yugoslavia, most captives were imprisoned briefly at a number of collection points in Slovenia, after which the vast majority, with the exception of some minors and very recent recruits, were summarily executed, mostly at karst sinkholes in Kočevski Rog, in abandoned mine shafts south of Celje, and in anti-tank ditches near Maribor. The postwar killings were ordered by Tito's regime and involved select units of the Department for the Defence of the People (OZNA) and the Yugoslav Army's security-intelligence units, the People's Defence Corps of Yugoslavia (KNOJ). The exact number of dead in all postwar killings in Yugoslavia, including those repatriated, those denied access into Austria and those captured in Yugoslavia, or even a close estimate, will probably never be known as no detailed records survive of who was executed. The estimates vary from sixty to seventy thousand victims, the conclusion of the 1990 analysis of Croatian demographer Vladimir Žerjavić and later Jozo Tomasevich, of over one hundred thousand postwar victims in Slovenia alone, is a figure put forth by the Slovene government's Commission on Concealed Mass Graves.[4] Tito's Yugoslavia was party to the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, which it inherited from the prewar Yugoslav government which had signed the treaty on 20 May 1931. The abuse and mass murder of the repatriated POWs at various killing sites in Yugoslavia was, in addition to being a crime against humanity, a clear violation of many of the Geneva Convention's articles.

This paper seeks to understand the context within which the British agreed to repatriate Tito's opponents from Austria to Yugoslavia. While several explanations have been offered as to why the British made the decision they did, what is often overlooked is the comparative value that the British ascribed to the anti-Partisan collaborating forces that had surrendered to them. The Geneva Convention's policies on POWs were certainly informed by idealistic and humanitarian principles, but what helped ensure that these laws were generally adhered to in the absence of a global authority to police them was the principle of reciprocity. In layperson's terms, reciprocity regarding POWs can be summarised as follows: you treat our prisoners well and we will treat your prisoners well. At the heart of reciprocity lies national self-interest, as two or more warring states hope to protect their own captured soldiers and facilitate their return home through the reciprocal example of humanely treating the captive POWs of their enemies. But reciprocity did not exist between the British

[3]Florian Thomas Rulitz, *The Tragedy of Bleiburg and Viktring, 1945*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), p.62.; Tadeja Tominšek Rihtar, 'The Post-War Retribution in Slovenia: Its Death Toll', *Slovene Studies*, 28, 1–2 (2006), p.97.

[4]Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.765.; Matej Avbelj and Jernej Letnar Černič, *The Impact of European Institutions on the Rule of Law and Democracy: Slovenia and Beyond,* (Oxford: Hart, 2020), pp.37-39.

and the anti-Partisan forces that had surrendered to them in Austria after the war had ended in May 1945. There were no British or Allied troops held by the remnants of these forces; so, these units were at the mercy of the British. The paper will argue that the lack of reciprocity was critical to the British decision to withhold the granting of POW status, and all its ascribed obligations enumerated in international law, to the surrendered Yugoslav forces. Instead, for several reasons that have been well described by previous scholars, it was in the interest of the British to repatriate them to what the British commanders knew would be a very dangerous and perhaps lethal reception in Yugoslavia. In short, without reciprocity, the anti-Partisan POWs in the hands of the British became flexible bargaining chips, untethered from any mutual restraining obligations, that could be 'cashed in' to help resolve the tense geopolitics that flared up in British occupied southern Austria in May 1945. The British disregard for the health and wellbeing of the postwar Yugoslav repatriates will be compared to the prominent British opposition to their ally Tito's mistreatment of German POWs in Partisan custody during the Second World War, a concern that was driven by wartime reciprocity between Britain and Germany in regard to POWs, but one that largely dissipated after Germany's defeat and the liberation of Western POWs from German captivity. An additional comparison between the British forced repatriations of anti-Partisan Yugoslavs and the Western powers' forced repatriations of Soviet citizens to Stalin's Soviet Union after VE Day will reveal that reciprocity can, in certain circumstances, also drive inhumane forced repatriations.

Possible Motives for Repatriations from Austria

Postwar anti-communist émigrés could rationalise why Tito's forces summarily executed so many of their domestic opponents after the war, as these crimes mirrored their anti-Partisan wartime propaganda, which described the Partisans as harbingers of godless, genocidal communism. These same writers had a far more difficult time in understanding why the British would repatriate anti-Partisan and collaborating forces, especially as many of these units were under the impression that the Western Allies shared their anti-communism views, with the most optimistic – and perhaps deluded – believing that the British would join them in driving Tito from power. Many explanations have been offered. The British-Russian writer Count Nikolai Tolstoy pulled the repatriations out from obscurity with his 1986 book, *The Minister and the Massacres* – an expansion of his 1983 article 'The Klagenfurt Conspiracy' that appeared in the British literary journal *Encounter* – and, in which he pointed an accusatory finger at: Brigadier Toby Low, the British Conservative politician Lord Aldington, and the British Minister Resident in the Mediterranean and later British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, of having been part of a 'conspiracy' to repatriate Soviet and Yugoslav anti-communist 'patriots' from Austria into Stalin's and Tito's hands.[5] This conspiratorial circle ensured that the repatriations went ahead, contrary to the alleged position of

[5]Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres*, (London: Century Hutchinson, 1986).

their superiors, notably the then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and British Field Marshal Harold Alexander.

In the wake of Tolstoy's sensational charges, Brigadier General Anthony Cowgill held his own inquiry in 1988 into the British role in the repatriations and was joined by British journalist Christopher Booker. Booker's resulting work argued that Tolstoy had an overly victim-centred approach that took the British position on repatriations out of historical context.[6] Booker highlighted that repatriations of warring factions back to the countries where they fought was not inconsistent with British Second World War policy as voiced since 1941.[7] Indeed, repatriations were recognised as official operating procedures at the February 1945 Yalta Conference, where in two bilateral agreements between the USA and the USSR, and the USSR and the UK, Soviet citizens liberated by Anglo-American forces, and Anglo-American citizens freed by Soviet forces, would be handed over to their respective states. On the question of the forced or involuntary nature of these repatriations, the Yalta agreements made no specific mention of repatriating POWs or citizens against their will. A quarter century before Booker's work, Julius Epstein's 1973 study *Operation Keelhaul* – the codename for the American and British repatriations of Soviet citizens – described the operation as a 'crime against humanity,' maintaining that repatriations against one's will was definitely not standard operating procedure in the decades before the Second World War.[8] In relation to the present study, Yalta could not be used to justify the British repatriation of Yugoslav troops and citizens to Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was not a signatory to the Yalta agreements, and the protocols on repatriation only applied to Soviet, British and American, and later to French and Belgian, citizens, not Yugoslavs.[9] Nevertheless, some commentators, such as Carol Mather, a former liaison officer with Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, claimed that Yalta extended unofficially to Stalin's communist ally Tito. Applying reciprocity by highlighting the fate of British POWs liberated from German camps by the Soviets, Mather claimed that not returning 'all those fighting against our Allies into their custody … might have jeopardised the return not only of our own prisoners "who may be in the area" but thousands of others who were now behind Russian lines.'[10] Historian Florian Thomas Rulitz cast doubt on such interpretations by pointing to the Americans who also accepted the surrender of anti-Partisan Yugoslav POWs while staring down Tito's

[6]Christopher Booker, *A Looking-Glass Tragedy: The Controversy over the Repatriations from Austria in 1945*, (London: Duckworth, 1997).
[7]Ibid., pp.145-146.
[8]Julius Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul: The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present,* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1973), p.1, pp.13-21.
[9]Rulitz, *Tragedy*, p.154.
[10]Carol Mather, *Aftermath of War: Everyone Must Go Home,* (London: Brassey's, 1992), p.107.

aggressive irredentism in northeastern Italy, and who also had their troops behind Russian lines, but did not forcibly repatriate their Yugoslavs.[11]

Booker, Mather, Rulitz and others all highlighted the perceived emergency situation in Carinthia in May 1945, when the British confronted the surrender of tens of thousands of German troops and their collaborators of various nationalities, and associated civilian refugees, at the same time that Tito's Yugoslav People's Army (YPA) had entered Carinthia in violation of the four-power postwar administration of Austria in pursuit of irredentist territorial claims to southern Carinthia. Contemporary sources claimed that British personnel were outnumbered 1:25 in Carinthia by these sundry remnants of Hitler's empire.[12] There was, thus, a pressing need to 'clear the decks' of these surrendered units, words used by Alexander in his cable to Churchill on 16 May in anticipation of the British Army's plan – codenamed Operation Beehive – to forcibly remove Tito's units from Carinthia.[13] It was in this chaos that the surrendered anti-Partisan POWs in Carinthia became pawns in the negotiations between local British commanders in Austria and their communist Yugoslav counterparts.

While most scholars agree that the approximately twenty five thousand strong British 5 Corps in Carinthia, led by Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Keightley, faced enormous administrative hurdles, with the surrendered detritus of Hitler's multinational army – Germans, Volksdeutsche, Russians, Cossacks, Caucasians, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs and others – needing to be guarded, housed and fed all while facing down Tito's irredentist claims to the region, they disagree on whether administrative difficulties drove the forced repatriations.[14] Booker argued that the administrative chaos of overseeing tens of thousands of POWs and refugees, or Mather's improbable figure of one million men 'to feed and guard', would obstruct Operation Beehive, and left 5 Corps with no other choice than to repatriate.[15] Others reject this explanation. Barre, who oversaw the civilian camp of mostly Slovene refugees at Viktring, testified that there was no administrative justification for the British repatriations. He witnessed no administrative chaos and noted that the Slovene refugees were disciplined and organised, along with the impressive punctual assistance of the local Austrian *burgomeisters*, in sharp contrast to the administrative disarray of his earlier posting in northeastern Italy.[16] Rulitz saw

[11]Rulitz, *Tragedy*, p.155.
[12]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) War Office (hereinafter WO) 258/93, letter from Secretary of War, J. J. Lawson to Duchess of Atholl, 24 October 1945,
[13]Booker, *A Looking-Glass Tragedy*, p.197; Mather, *Aftermath of War*, p.113.
[14]Mather, *Aftermath of War*, p.81.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM) https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80010810. Accessed 9 October

the repatriations less as a decision that was forced upon the British by administrative difficulties, which he agrees the British custody of anti-Partisan Yugoslavs contributed to, but more as opportunism on the part of the British to entice Tito's forces to withdraw behind the pre-war Yugoslav-Austrian border. Key to his argument were the negotiations, which he claims were 'deliberately ignored by some historians,' that were held between the British and the YPA on May 15, 19 and 20 when 'the actual deal [to repatriate] was most certainly made'.[17] For Rulitz, the 'countless anti-Communist refugees in Carinthia were undoubtedly an asset, a security, in the hands of the British, which were traded to make the Partisan units of the Yugoslav Army withdraw from Carinthia relatively quickly, especially as the new authorities in Yugoslavia seem to have been very keen on catching the military refugees above all things – because they posed the potentially biggest threat to the successful establishment of the new power.'[18] The fact that the first British repatriations began on 15 May, the first day of negotiations between British and YPA forces, was, thus, not surprising to Rulitz.[19] Booker disagreed, noting that 'Tito's unilateral decision on 18 May to retreat from Austria had no direct connection with the British decision to hand over to his forces the eighteen thousand Yugoslavs who had been "'fighting in uniform with the Germans" and "their camp followers"' and that the British decision to repatriate 'had been taken strictly in accordance with the British interest to clear the area, to meet both operational and administrative requirements'.[20] However, Rulitz's argument is borne out by some archival testimony. The commander of the British 5 Corps reported in September 1945, several months after the repatriations, that to not repatriate the anti-Partisan Yugoslavs would give Tito 'a very strong and justifiable cause for complaint' and might serve as a further incentive for Yugoslav forces to remain in Carinthia, or perhaps even invite stronger Soviet intervention in support of Tito's claims.[21] Continuing, the commander reported that 'During the negotiations which led to the evacuation of Tito forces from Austria, the main conditions pressed by the Tito representatives was the return of surrendered personnel who had been fighting against them. As this was in accordance with our instructions, this condition was agreed to, and the details were fixed up at conference between the respective chiefs of staffs.'[22]

2025. Audio interview of Paul Herbert Barre, 17 November 1989. Time period 25:46-27:38.

[17]Rulitz, *Tragedy*, p.156.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Booker, *A Looking-Glass Tragedy*, p.216.

[21]TNA WO 258/93, Report by Commander of 5th Corps, Repatriation of Yugoslav personnel, 7 September 1945.

[22]Ibid.

The Legality of the Repatriations from Austria

Thus, in assessing motives for the repatriations, many British commanders saw them as a reasonable solution to the overcrowding and administrative chaos in Carinthia, as a useful lubricant in maintaining stable relations with Tito's forces, and as a carrot to encourage them to retreat behind the agreed upon southern border of Austria. The 5 Corps commander was particularly unperturbed by reports of mistreatment of those repatriated,

> Rumours concerning the treatment of surrendered personnel by our Allies were not considered valid grounds for cancelling a transaction that is normal between Allies,

adding that,

> It is considered outside the sphere of military responsibility either to investigate the alleged treatment of surrendered personnel by an Ally, which is taking place in that Ally's sovereign territory or in any other way to protect our enemies from our Allies.[23]

In a curt July 1945 reply by Field Marshal Alexander's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General William Duthie Morgan, to Miha Krek, a Slovene member of the wartime Yugoslav government-in-exile who in a 7 June letter became one of the first émigrés to raise the possibility that Tito's forces were executing the repatriates, Morgan concluded that the 'Quisling forces of one sort or another … were handed over to the latter forces [YPA] in the course of a normal military transfer of prisoners of war.'[24]

Morgan's response raises a critical question: was the British forcible repatriation of anti-Partisans to Yugoslavia in May 1945, where most were summarily executed, 'normal' according to international law at the time? The 1929 Geneva Convention was created to account for conventional interstate conflicts, not civil wars, which is how the wartime struggle between Tito's Partisans and their domestic Axis collaborators and opponents is often understood, notwithstanding the reservations of some scholars who fear the 'civil war' moniker whitewashes the treason of the anti-Partisan units.[25] This interstate bias was evident in Article 75 of the Geneva Convention, which spelled out the practice of repatriations of POWs,

[23]Ibid.
[24]TNA WO 258/93, letter from William Duthie Morgan to Miha Krek, 31 July 1945.
[25]See, for example, Oto Luthar, 'Slovenia: History between Myths and Reality,' *Slovene Studies*, 27, 1–2 (2005), p.117.

> When belligerents conclude an armistice convention, they shall normally cause to be included therein provisions concerning the repatriation of prisoners of war. If it has not been possible to insert in that convention such stipulations, the belligerents shall, nevertheless, enter into communication with each other on the question as soon as possible. In any case, the repatriation of prisoners shall be effected as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace.[26]

Article 75 made repatriation 'an issue for bilateral agreements' between two belligerents who had concluded an armistice and who were working towards a peace agreement. But which state represented the hodgepodge anti-Partisan Yugoslavs? Royalist Yugoslavia, to which some of them had sworn oaths of loyalty before the war, no longer existed, having disbanded itself in March when a new Titoist-dominated Yugoslav provisional government was created from the Tito-Šubašić Agreement.[27] Moreover, Article 75 never addressed the issue of POWs who refused to be repatriated, a description that applied to almost all of the anti-Titoist Yugoslavs in British custody, nor did it contain 'any provisions explicitly forbidding forced repatriation of prisoners of war and displaced persons.'[28] Many scholars, perhaps most forcibly Epstein, made various claims 'that historically a right of option has been given to prisoners of war'.[29] Focusing especially on the many former Russian POWs which the Allies did not forcibly repatriate to a post-1918 Russia wracked by revolution and civil war, Epstein concluded that 'international practice after World War I shows that no prisoners of war were forcibly extradited to their countries of origin.'[30] Yet legal scholar Christiane Shields Delessert's exhaustive legal review of repatriations at the end of hostilities concluded that clauses promising choice and only voluntary return inserted into specific repatriation treaties 'should actually be seen as exceptions.'[31] Delessert's conclusion is all the more surprising given that the Geneva Convention was comparatively clear in expressing its humane intentions towards POWs, with Article 2 stating that 'prisoners of war . . . shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity.

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[26]International Committee of the Red Cross Geneva: Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929, International Humanitarian Law Databases, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-pow-1929/article-75?activeTab=. Accessed 6 June 2026..

[27]Walter R. Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and The Allies, 1941-1945,* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp.316-317.

[28]Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul*, p.14.

[29]Christiane Shields Delessert, *Release and Repatriation of Prisoners of War at the End of Active Hostilities*, (Zurich: Schulthess Polygraphischer Verlag, 1977), p.175.

[30]Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul*, p.14.

[31]Delessert, *Release and Repatriation*, p.175.

Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden.'[32] As for the urgency of repatriations, Article 75 offered 'legal cover' to slow roll repatriations when it suited national interest, as it stipulated that repatriations were to be instituted 'as soon as possible *after the conclusion of peace*.'[33] For example, with no Versailles-like peace treaty between Britain and a divided Germany, and with dire labour shortages, hundreds of thousands of German POWs were retained and employed as labourers in Britain in the three years following VE Day.

British treatment of anti-Partisan POWs during their brief sojourn in Austria did not always uphold the letter, to say nothing of the humane spirit, of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Article 26 of the convention stipulated that 'In the event of transfer, prisoners of war shall be officially informed in advance of their new destination.'[34] The 5 Corps commander seemingly ignored this requirement, stating that 'surrendered personnel were not told of their destination as it is not the normal practice when dealing with surrendered personnel or PW [prisoners of war] of any nationality, to keep them informed of our plans for disposal.'[35] Nigel Nicolson, the intelligence officer for the 1 Guards Brigade that provided guard detail for the repatriations, offered what he saw as,

> the British point of view' for dispensing with Article 26 in Carinthia, stating that 'there was no alternative other than lying to the refugees. Had the British told them the truth, the refugees would have hastily left the wagons and lorries. The deception is justified with the argument that the refugees could be guarded more easily and that no mass panic erupted among them.[36]

Indeed, many surviving eyewitnesses of the repatriations recalled being under the impression that they were being relocated to Italy, not Yugoslavia. Major Barre testified that deception was integral to the repatriations from Viktring camp.[37] When he was first verbally ordered by Lieutenant Ames, the commander of the POW camp at Viktring, to ready Slovene civilians to be 'entrained, to be sent' the next morning,

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[32]Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul*, pp.13-14.
[33]Joan Beaumont, 'Protecting Prisoners of War, 1939-95,' in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *Prisoners of War in the Second World War: An Overview*, (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p.282.
[34]International Committee of the Red Cross Geneva: Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929, International Humanitarian Law Databases, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-pow-1929/article-75?activeTab=. Accessed 6 June 2026.
[35]TNA WO 258/93, Report by Commander of 5th Corps.
[36]Rulitz, *The Tragedy*, p.63.
[37]IWM Audio interview, Barre, Time period 21:44-23:00

'he wouldn't tell me where or how', an order that Barre ultimately ignored.[38] In relation to the mostly Slovene POWs repatriated from Viktring, Barre testified that they were transported in rail cars at night to conceal the direction that they were travelling in, and that 'they were supposed to be sent to Italy, but they were actually sent to Yugoslavia.'[39] British units involved in the repatriations understood that the final destination was Yugoslavia, as YPA troops took command of the repatriation trains already in the Austrian border town of Rosenbach. Nicolson wrote in his daily situation report on 18 May,

> The Croats have been given no warning of their fate and are being allowed to believe that their destination is not Yugoslavia but Italy until the actual moment of their handover. The whole business is most unsavoury and British tps [troops] have the utmost distaste in carrying out the orders. At the moment it is not known what higher policy lies behind the decision.[40]

British command was evidently sensitive about Nicolson's admission and admonished him,

> I was sent for by the General or his chief of staff and told that, whatever truth there was in this, I should never have stated it in a public document and, further than that, I was told, and it was more or less dictated to me, that in the next day's situation report I must deny what I'd written the day before and say that we have every reason to believe that they would be well treated once they got to Yugoslavia. That was totally untrue.[41]

While it is unclear if the British units were ever instructed to tell the repatriated anti-Partisan forces that they were being sent to Italy, they were ordered not to divulge to them their real destination nor dispel rumours that Italy was the destination. Major General Horatius Murray, the commander of the 6 British Armoured Division, reported on 25 June that care was taken 'not to encourage or deny' the rumour among those being repatriated that they were being transferred to Italy, and that the British soldiers overseeing the repatriations were told to respond with 'no comment' after

[38]Ibid., Time period 14:20-15:08.
[39]Ibid., Time period 20:55-21:45.
[40]*History Extra*, 17 January 2020; Laurence Rees, 'Falsified Yugoslav handover to Tito' in 'What would you have done? 6 terrible choices people had to make during the Second World War'. https://www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/terrible-choices-decisions-ww2-how-volunteer-jews-kamikaze-ss-prisoner-of-war/. Accessed 7 June 2026.
[41]Ibid.

the inevitable news leaked out that they were in fact being transported to Yugoslavia.[42] This same report noted that the commander of the Slovene Home Guard, General Franc Krener, who visited 8 Army headquarters and demanded to know where his troops were being taken, was 'told in writing that he had no right to know.' The 5 Corps' Deputy Assistant Adjutant General Major Taylor told Major Johnson, the head of the AMG's Displaced Persons Branch in Carinthia, that the British were not employing force to repatriate the Slovenes, and justified their refusal to disclose the real destination to them by stating that 'subterfuge did not constitute force.'[43]

While the refusal to clearly identify the destination of the repatriations was designed to ensure they went ahead smoothly, it also supports the view that the British knew something awful was in store for the repatriated in communist Yugoslavia. Some British military commanders and politicians claimed that Yugoslav émigré reports of atrocities having been committed against the repatriated were 'exaggerated' and that 'there was no reason to believe that any arbitrary and deliberate ill-treatment would occur to these soldiers'.[44] Yet, numerous wartime reports by British liaison officers stationed with the Partisans emphasised the viciousness of the civil war raging in Yugoslavia. British Special Operations Executive agent Lieutenant Colonel Peter Moore noted as much in his February 1945 'Report on Slovenia',

> some discreditable excesses by the Partisans, are unfortunately only too likely after the departure of the Germans, … Missions from all organizations in Slovenia should be reduced to an absolute minimum, and in particular the number of senior officers should be reduced. Otherwise the goodwill we have earned with the civil population will be lost, by our being identified with possible excesses by the Partisans over whom we have no control whatever.[45]

A 17 May telegram from Field Marshal Alexander seeking from the Combined Chiefs of Staff's urgent 'direction regarding final disposal' of Cossacks, Četniks and Croats noted that 'to return them to their country of origin immediately might be fatal to

[42]TNA WO 204/12970, Report by Major-General Horatius Murray to Main 5th Corps, 'Handing over of Jugoslavs', 25 June 1945.
[43]TNA WO 258/93, Major William Johnson, 'Report on the Repatriation of Slovenes', undated but composed between 8-16 August 1945.
[44]TNA WO 258/93, Report by Commander of 5th Corp, letter from J. G. Tahourdin, WO to A.C.W. Drew, Foreign Office (hereinafter FO) 26 November 1945.
[45]Thomas Barker, *Social Revolutionaries and Secret Agents: The Carinthian Slovene Partisans and Britain's Special Operations Executive,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.158.

their health.'[46] As early as the night of 26/27 May, Ljotić's son, who managed to escape the transport train and returned to Viktring, told the remaining Slovenes that Yugoslavia was the final destination, not the Italian town of Palmanova as many believed, and that massacres awaited them.[47] Such reports evidently made it up the British chain of command, as they were critical to suspending the repatriation order for Slovene civilians issued on 31 May. Major Barre's superior in the AMG, Major Johnson, who claimed not to have been consulted about the repatriations that were being carried out by 5 Corps, had discussed 'the verbal reports' which he had received 'regarding the robbing and slaughter of a first batch of Serbs who were returned' with the General Staff of 6 Armoured Division overseeing the repatriations. The General Staff's response was that they 'were aware of all the circumstances and that there was nothing we could do about it.'[48] Nevertheless, Johnson was able to have the 5 Corps' repatriation order rescinded for Slovene civilians because unlike the NDH forces, the Četniks and the Slovene Home Guard, repatriating Slovene civilians also required 'the knowledge and consent of [British] Military Government' – consent which Johnson at Barre's urging denied.[49]

In addition to the Geneva requirement to notify POWs on their transfer destination, the Convention set standards on the treatment of POWs, including housing conditions, caloric intake, and the type of labour POWs could be assigned. Confronting a tsunami of Axis forces who would be surrendering to Allied forces in the aftermath of VE day – by one estimate almost 3.5 million, in addition to the 4.2 million already in Allied custody at war's end – and whose treatment would be bound by the Geneva Convention, British and American forces had already decided in March 1945 to redesignate all Germans in uniform who surrendered after war's end as 'surrendered enemy personnel' (SEP) and as 'disarmed enemy forces' (DEF) in British and American parlance respectively.[50] Contemporary documentation reveals an almost uniform avoidance in the communications of British command of describing surrendered Yugoslavs in Carinthia as POWs. The most common designation was 'surrendered personnel', 'surrendered enemy military personnel', and 'disarmed hostile troops', but also 'dissident forces', 'Yugoslav quislings' and – in the aftermath

[46]TNA FO 371/48918, telegram from Field Marshal Alexander (AFHQ) to Combined Chiefs of Staff / British Chiefs of Staff, 17 May 1945.,
[47]TNA WO 258/93, Report, 'About the deliverance of the Slovene National Army to the Tito Partisan Authorities by the British military authorities in Carinthia', 1 June 1945, Klagenfurt.
[48]Ibid., Major William Johnson, 'Report on the Repatriation of Slovenes,' undated but composed between 8-16 August 1945.
[49]Ibid.
[50]Bob Moore, *Prisoners of War: Europe, 1939-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp.420-21.

of the forced repatriations – as 'the Parties which returned to Yugoslavia'. The consistent use of the 'surrendered enemy personnel' designation was deliberate, as 'the decision of the Allies to place surrendered enemy personnel in a special category … deprived the surrendered individual of the rights and privileges inherent in the status of prisoner of war, as defined by the [1929] convention'.[51] Or, as historian Bob Moore summarised, the redesignations of POWs 'removed them from the protection of the Geneva Convention and allowed local commanders to feed them at levels below those stipulated by the Convention.'[52] Indeed, the British had begun denying POW status to 'nationals from neutral or Allied states who had served in German uniform during the Second World War' as early as August 1944.[53] According to the British, these individuals, which included the repatriated anti-Partisan POWs, 'could not claim POW status and Geneva Convention protection but could be delivered "unconditionally" to his own state.'[54]

Reciprocity at Work: Opposition to Tito's Mistreatment of German POWs

While British authorities denied POW status to the surrendered anti-Partisan forces in Carinthia in May 1945, the British insisted fastidiously that Geneva Convention protections be applied to German POWs captured by the Partisans during the war in Yugoslavia in areas of joint Partisan-Allied operations. The difference in these two British approaches appeared to be based on the existence of reciprocity, for as long as there were significant numbers of British POWs held by German forces, British authorities insisted on strict adherence to the Convention. This utilitarian application of the Geneva Convention was apparent in a 12 April 1944 telegram marked 'emergency' from the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, General Henry Maitland Wilson, who brought to the attention of the Air Ministry, War Office (WO) and Foreign Office (FO) reports that the Yugoslav Partisans had shot forty-five German POWs as war criminals on the Adriatic island of Vis. Wilson's key concern was that that the presence of Allied garrisons on Vis made them potentially complicit in the eyes of the Germans for any Partisan mistreatment of their POWs, and risked reprisals being taken against British or Americans POWs in German custody, stating 'repercussions might ensue if details reached Germans with possible reprisals on Allied P.W's taken this theatre. Enemy may further accuse us of connivance with these

[51]AMEDD Center of History & Heritage, United States Army Medical Department, *Preventive Medicine in World War II*, IX, 1969, p.369.
[52]Moore, *Prisoners of War*, p.421.
[53]Richard Wiggers, 'The United States and the Denial of Prisoner of War (POW) Status at the End of the Second World War', *Militärgeschichtlichen Mitteilungen*, 52, 1 (1993), p.95.
[54]Ibid.

shootings.'[55] As a result of this 'protest has been made to Marshal Tito over such action and request made that in the future international law be observed in such matters.'[56] In a subsequent urgent message to Tito on 11 May, Churchill made clear the reciprocity that underpinned British adherence to the Geneva Convention, demanding that in joint British-Partisan operations 'we ask that Germans who have surrendered themselves as prisoners of war shall be treated in accordance with International Law. … We have always adhered most strictly to the Geneva Convention, not only because the Germans have 120,000 British prisoners in their hands, but also on grounds of principle. We cannot have our position in this matter impaired.[57]

Tito's contrite reply to Churchill, in which he agreed to intervene to avoid any similar future incidents, nonetheless justified the executions on the grounds of reciprocity, arguing that the Germans had not observed international law and shot thousands of Partisans and their wounded, and hence 'rare cases' of 'revenge' were not unexpected.[58] In response, Churchill recognised the 'intolerable provocation' that Tito's troops faced by the Germans' 'total breach of all the laws of war', but that 'we have for our part still been able to maintain with the Germans a certain observance of the Geneva Convention … and as the Germans hold so many of our prisoners, we are anxious that this contact should not be broken.'[59]

The British continued to intervene whenever reports surfaced of Partisan executions of German POWs in areas of joint Allied-Partisan operations, including in the execution of fifty German POWs on the island of Korčula in May 1944. After British troops reported that the Partisans had executed over two hundred German POWs near the Montenegrin town of Grahovo – a charge that Tito claimed to be 'completely untrue'– Wilson wrote to Tito in January 1945, with reciprocity as the cornerstone of his objections: 'If such actions continue in areas of joint operations with our forces they can seriously imperil the lives of many thousands of British and American prisoners held by the enemy.'[60]

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[55]TNA FO 371/44365, telegram from AFHQ to Air Ministry and Britman Washington, 12 April 1944.
[56]Ibid.
[57]TNA FO 371/44365, draft letter from Prime Minister Winston Churchill to Tito, 11 May 1944.
[58]Ibid., telegram from Tito to Churchill, Bari to Foreign Office, 23 May 1944.
[59]Ibid., telegram from Churchill to Tito, 24 May 1944.
[60]TNA FO 371/48906, telegram from Resident Minister's Office Central Mediterranean Caserta to FO, 19 January 1945, and Draft Statement From General Wilson to Marshal Tito, January 1945.

British concern for German POWs in Yugoslavia evaporated in the final days of the war, as the British distanced themselves from Tito and any 'discreditable excesses' – to borrow Lieutenant Colonel Moore's February 1945 description – he would take against surrendered Axis forces. If judged by Anglo-American policies, already in effect, to deny POW status to surrendering German troops after war's end, instructions from AFHQ to the Allied Balkan Air Force on 13 April 1945 appeared particularly hypocritical. They counselled that the AFHQ,

> do not consider it desirable that we should be associated with action Tito may take to obtain surrender of German forces in Yugoslavia. He will not be in a position to feed large numbers or treat them in any way comparable to PW status under international law.[61]

During the war, with Germans imprisoning large numbers of British POWs, reports of Partisan executions of German POWs had garnered the attention of Churchill and top British generals. Now, with the war coming to an end, such scrutiny disappeared as the British felt little compulsion to support the application of the Geneva Convention to German POWs in Yugoslav custody, not least because the British would themselves soon deny Convention status to German POWs in their custody.

One vivid example of the British dissociating themselves from Tito's breaches of the Geneva Convention emerged from an 11 June 1945 report by Colonel J. Clarke, the military attaché at the British embassy in Belgrade, who, citing a 'reliable source', described a column of ten thousand POWs made up of Germans, Turkmen Axis auxiliaries, and a few Četniks and Ustaše, who had marched from Zagreb to Belgrade. Borrowing the Soviet policy of *Sühnemärsche,* atonement marches,

> whereby captured enemies were force-marched through as many communities as possible to show the extent and totality of the victory,'[62]

the source described

> one of the most beastly scenes I have ever seen.… many were barefooted, starving, haggard with large percentage suffering from dysentery and even typhus. To the delight of the populace they were marched through the city in broad daylight. Laggards were kicked by Partisans and Bulgarian elements of the crowd. Rear files of the column were carrying 3 dead men.[63]

[61]TNA 23/8176, telegram from AFHQ to Balkan Air Force, 13 April 1945.
[62]Moore, *Prisoners of War*, p.82.
[63]TNA FO 371/48906, telegram from AFHQ to WO, 11 June 1945.

The German general who spoke for the POWs told the source of the 'dreadful treatment' the men were enduring and solicited British intervention.[64] With little urgency, Clarke's report would make the rounds of various British government offices over the next month. The British WO was perhaps bluntest in their recognition that the mistreatment of German POWs in Yugoslavia after the war was no longer of any reciprocal interest to them. Citing the Grahovo cables of January 1945, the last time that high-ranking British officials had intervened with Tito in a 'case involving the shooting of German prisoners of war by the Yugoslav Authorities', the WO communicated to their FO colleagues that 'we no longer feel that we are qualified to comment since there is no longer any question of the interests of British prisoners of war being affected.'[65] The FO had a similar attitude, noting in a draft letter to the British Ambassador to Belgrade, Ralph Stevenson, that 'the basis of our previous representation to Tito about Yugoslav treatment of German prisoners of war was the risk of reprisals on our own prisoners in German hands', adding that 'it might well be dangerous to take up with the Yugoslavs this evidence of ill-treatment' and would most likely garner a denial by them.[66] The FO's instructions to Stevenson emphasised that the previous British interventions on behalf of German POWs that had been shot on the island of Vis and in Dalmatia was done 'on the basis of reprisals on our own prisoners of war in German hands.'[67] While the FO suggested that 'taking up the present case with the Yugoslavs has to be judged on the basis of humanity and of expediency', humanity appeared not to be worthy of the effort, as the FO concluded that 'any representations from us are not likely to improve the treatment of these unfortunate people.'[68]

With advice like this, it is little surprise that Stevenson decided on 6 July 'that it would serve no useful purpose' for the British government to intervene on behalf of the mistreated German POWs, and that any joint Anglo-American representation would probably not have 'any practical impact.'[69] Instead, Stevenson attempted to justify the behaviour of the Yugoslavs, noting 'The vilely inhuman treatment which the Germans themselves meted out to the Yugoslavs is too fresh in the latter's memory for them to be able to appreciate the feelings of people who have not suffered as they have.'[70] As further evidence that British officials were already well aware of the abysmal treatment of Tito's domestic opponents, Stevenson – in a demeaning stereotyping of

[64]Ibid.
[65]Ibid., letter from Henry Phillimore (WO) to John Addis (FO), 16 June 1945.
[66]Ibid., Draft letter from John Addis (FO) to British Ambassador Stevenson, Belgrade, 22 June 1945.
[67]Ibid., telegram from FO to R.C. Skrine Stevenson, Belgrade, 28 June 1945.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Ibid., letter from British Embassy, Belgrade to Douglas Howard WO, 6 July 1945.
[70]Ibid.

Yugoslavs – added that 'it is not only the Germans who are ill-treated. Very similar handling is given to their own quislings, partly in revenge for what the latter have themselves done, and partly out of the sheer insensibility which seems to be inherent in the character of these people.'[71]

Reciprocity at Work: Forced Repatriations of POWs to Stalin's USSR

The classic comparison of the forced repatriation of anti-Partisan Yugoslavs in May 1945 is the even larger-scale Western Allied forced repatriations of Soviet POWs back to Stalin's Soviet Union. Yet, unlike the repatriation of anti-Partisan Yugoslavs, the existence of reciprocity in the shape of hundreds of thousands of Western POWs who had been liberated by the Soviet Red Army from German camps in 1944 and 1945, is critical to understanding the speed and scale of the Western Allies' repatriation of Soviet POWs. In only a two-week period in late May and early June 1945, the Soviets handed over 171,069 POWs to Western powers, while the Western Allies repatriated 620,998 Soviet POWs and civilians from their custody.[72] By March 1946, the two sides had exchanged a little over one million POWs each.[73] While there were concerns raised in Britain and elsewhere over the fate of those returned to Stalin – only underscored by the suicidal terror of the Cossacks repatriated by the British in Austria in May 1945 – Churchill's Assistant Private Secretary John Colville emphasised the immovable reciprocal logic behind the repatriations. [74]

> A refusal by us to return Russian prisoners or, for that matter, Russian traitors, would have been matched by a refusal on their part to return British and American prisoners. What, after the long years of captivity, would the British and American public have said to that?[75]

Clearly, the existence of reciprocity on its own does not ensure correct treatment of POWs, as evident in the reciprocal atrocities committed against POWs and civilians by Germany and the Soviet Union during the Second World War or in the 'shackling crisis' between Britain, Canada and Germany in 1942-43.[76] Yet Anglo-American treatment of Soviet citizens captured in German uniform was rather different a year

[71]Ibid.
[72]Moore, *Prisoners of War*, p.91.
[73]Ibid.
[74]Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia, 1944-47*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974) pp.124-165.
[75]Moore, *Prisoners of War*, p.390.
[76]For a discussion of negative reciprocity see Sean Watts, 'Reciprocity and the Law of War', *Harvard International Law Journal*, 50, 2 (Summer, 2009), pp.365-434. For the 'shackling crisis' see Neville Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy: Britain, Germany, and the Politics of Prisoners of War, 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

earlier when the Germans still imprisoned large numbers of Western POWs and the Soviets had not advanced sufficiently to liberate many of the Western captives from German camps. The Americans in particular were reluctant to allow their captive German POWs - who 'were apparently entitled to claim Soviet citizenship, according to representatives of the Soviet Union' – to be repatriated to the Soviet Union and to be treated as anything but German prisoners 'for fear that the German Government might be afforded a pretext to subject American POWs in its custody to reprisals'.[77] As there were a number of non-US citizens in the American armed forces, 'it was the concern of the American Government that they should be protected.'[78] Similarly, among Soviets captured in German uniform by the British in the Middle East theatre, there was, according to a communication between the British WO Under Secretary Sir Frederick Bovenschen and the FO's Sir Orme Sargent, a practice in which,

> We did not tell the Russians that those who were unwilling to be repatriated are not in fact being handed over. This condition was agreed between the Foreign Office and the War Office – I think at the War Office suggestion – in order to prevent a situation arising in which the Russians maltreated their compatriots who were handed back to them and the Germans found in this a pretext for reprisals on British and American prisoners of war.[79]

Shaped by reciprocity, US and British authorities attempted to thread the needle between their fear of German reprisals against their own captured troops that might be provoked by their repatriation of Soviet citizens in German uniform to Stalin, and their fear of the prolonged retention of their own troops 'liberated' by the Red Army in reprisal for Western foot-dragging in their handover to Stalin of captured Soviet citizens. The fact that the British Cabinet revisited their approval of repatriations of captured Soviet POWs in German uniform, in a manner that 'protect[ed] British and American prisoners from all risk of reprisal,' several times in the summer of 1944 underscores their torturous calculation of risk to their imprisoned troops.[80]

Conclusion

The lack of similar reciprocal pressures between the Western Allies and the anti-Partisan Yugoslavs in their custody allowed the Western Allies a degree of latitude in how they responded to them, with the Americans in Italy refusing wholesale repatriation of Yugoslavs while the British repatriated them en masse from Austria. The forcible repatriation of anti-Partisan Yugoslavs was in the national interest of the British at that time and in that place. The need to remove as many POWs from

[77]Delessert, *Release and Repatriation*, p.153Fn39.
[78]Ibid.
[79]Mather, *Aftermath of War*, p.96.
[80]Ibid., p.197.

strategic Carinthia in preparation for possible British military action to secure the four-power agreement by ejecting the YPA from Austria, or, better yet, using the repatriations to entice Tito's voluntary withdrawal of his forces, all weighed on the British decision. So too did the knowledge that many of these forces had collaborated and 'borne arms for the Germans against the Allied Yugoslav troops of Marshal Tito', at a time when Tito was still popular in the West on account of his anti-fascist credentials.[81] Yet, as Bob Moore noted, 'even the partisans were surprised by their [the British] lack of interest in anti-communist forces when the Cold War agendas were coming to the fore.'[82] Nevertheless, it is arguable that these listed factors would not have been sufficient to motivate the British decision to repatriate had the situation been different with significant numbers of British troops imprisoned and threatened with reprisals – as fantastic as that may sound – by Yugoslav quisling forces.

As evidence for this hypothetical scenario, this paper compared the British treatment of anti-Partisan POWs in Austria in May 1945 and British attitudes towards Tito's abuse of Axis POWs and his domestic opponents in postwar Yugoslavia, with the striking wartime British demands to Tito's Partisans to abide by the Geneva Convention in their treatment of captured German POWs. In the case of Yugoslav POWs who surrendered to the British in Austria in the days after VE Day, the British refused to grant them POW status and the protections of the Geneva Convention, consistent with their policy towards all so-called Axis 'surrendered enemy personnel' who came into British custody after 8 May 1945. The British denied their captives knowledge of where they were being repatriated to, before unloading them to an enemy that they knew had a penchant for applying 'Soviet-style' justice to their opponents. In the case of German POWs who experienced what the Geneva Convention prohibited, namely 'acts of violence, … insults and … public curiosity' in their forced march through Belgrade in June 1945, the British response was silence that was justified by the assumed inherent cruelty of the Yugoslav population and the assumed lack of impact that any interventions would have.[83] Yet during the Second World War, none other than the British Prime Minister and a Field Marshal intervened with Tito to prevent further Partisan abuses of German POWs captured in areas of Allied-Partisan operations. In the case of the Anglo-American policy of repatriating Soviet citizens in German uniform to Stalin's USSR, the fear of German reciprocal reprisals against Western POWs in Nazi captivity, especially in 1944, was the main source of internal opposition against this policy. The ultimate Anglo-American decision to sideline these concerns and repatriate hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens, in many cases involuntarily, to the Soviet Union, was the arguably even more significant reciprocity that could have witnessed Stalin retaining and mistreating Western POWs

[81]TNA WO 258/93, letter from William Duthie Morgan to Miha Krek, 31 July 1945.
[82]Moore, *Prisoners of War*, pp.281-282.
[83]Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul*, p.13.

in his custody in reprisal for Western intransigence on the return of Soviet POWs. As a draft communication between the British FO and WO made clear, should the British not repatriate Cossacks who had fought on the side of Hitler, 'It might … have very unfortunate reactions *upon the Russian treatment of our prisoners of war uncovered by them*.'[84]

The Geneva Conventions of 1929 contained no legal right to asylum for POWs who feared return to their home country, and as Delessert concluded, 'the fact that a prisoner might be liable to severe punishment upon return has not previously been considered a bar to repatriation.'[85] Yet despite the lack of legal prohibition against forced repatriation, Epstein's survey of the first half of the twentieth century led him to conclude that it was 'this overriding consideration of humanness,' evident in Article 2 of the 1929 Geneva Convention – 'Prisoners of war…shall at all times be humanely treated and protected' – and in Article 12 of the 1949 Geneva Convention – 'Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated' – that in his view formed 'the very foundation of both Geneva Conventions of 1929 and of 1949'.[86] Confronted with numerous pragmatic arguments for why repatriating the defeated Yugoslav POWs was beneficial to the British position in southern Austria in the spring of 1945, and with no British POWs held by the various anti-Partisan forces, only the Geneva Convention's 'consideration of humanness' militated against repatriation. However, as historian Stevan Pavlowitch concluded, 'to repatriate them, and shut one's eyes to the consequences was, perhaps, an easy way to get rid of the burden and the danger' that the surrendered anti-Partisans posed to the British in Austria in May 1945.[87]

[84]TNA FO 371/48918, Draft Letter from FO to War Cabinet Office, 26 May 1945, [author's italics]
[85]Delessert, *Release and Repatriation*, p.195.
[86]Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul*, pp.13-14.
[87] Moore, *Prisoners of War*, p. 282.