



# WER IST WALTER?

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Edited by

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## SS-Men Against Nazism? The Controversial Case of the Mutiny in Villefranche-de-Rouergue (17 September 1943)

*Xavier Bougarel*

On the outskirts of Villefranche-de-Rouergue, a town in southwestern France, a monument stands representing four men shot dead. Next to it, a plaque honours the memory of “freedom fighters who rose up against Nazism on 17 September 1943”. This tribute is made in the name of “their compatriots from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina” and the people of Villefranche themselves. However, it is not specified that these insurgents coming from afar actually belonged to the Waffen-SS. This raises several questions: Who were they, really? What were their motives? Did they act alone? To answer these questions, we must go back to February 1943, consult various archives, books and newspapers, and try to put together the puzzle of the Villefranche mutiny.

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On 10 February 1943, Adolf Hitler signed a decree creating the 13th SS Division, commonly known as the *Handschar* Division.<sup>1</sup> At that time, the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH), led by the Ustasas (Croatian fascists) covered roughly the territory of present-day Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It considered not only Catholics, but also Muslims in these regions to be Croats. Against this background, the Nazi leaders planned to create an SS division of Muslim volunteers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, led by German officers from the Reich or from the German minorities of southeastern Europe. However, not enough Muslims were willing to join this division, and the Waffen-SS leaders had to re-

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1 On the 13th SS Division, see Xavier Bougarel, *La division Handschar: Waffen-SS de Bosnie 1943-1945* (Paris: Humensis, 2020); George Lepre, *Himmler's Bosnian Division: The Waffen-SS Handschar Division 1943-1945* (Atglen: Schiffer, 1997).

wise their plans, taking several thousand Muslim soldiers from the ranks of the NDH's regular army, on the one hand, and admitting Catholic recruits into the 13th SS Division, on the other.

In July 1943, the 13th SS Division was sent for training to southwestern France. Its pioneer battalion, numbering around 1.000 men, was billeted in Villefranche-de-Rouergue. On the night of 16 to 17 September 1943, a serious mutiny broke out, during which the insurgents executed five of their six German officers and took control of the town for a few hours, before part of the troops turned against the mutineers, and reinforcements arrived from Rodez. The ensuing battle was followed by severe repression, with an unknown number of executions. An equally unknown number of insurgents managed to escape; some would join the French Resistance.

The Villefranche mutiny was an important event because it was the first case of armed rebellion within the Waffen-SS. In the following weeks, the 13th SS Division was transferred to Germany to complete its training. In March 1944, the division returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it brutally fought Tito's Partisans, before disintegrating in the autumn of 1944 under the effect of massive desertions. These are, roughly speaking, the facts that historians who have worked on the 13th SS Division or on the Villefranche mutiny agree on. But what else do we know?

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Let's begin by looking at the French sources.

The first written account of the mutiny comes from Louis Fontanges, then mayor of Villefranche-de-Rouergue.<sup>2</sup> In his journal, he recounts the mutiny as seen from the French side: the street fights; the only surviving German officer, Dr. Wilfried Schweiger, commanding the soldiers hostile to the mutiny and sounding the alarm; the arrival of reinforcements. According to Fontanges, the Germans suspected that the "communists" or North African soldiers hospitalised in the town were behind the mutiny. For his part, the mayor was mainly concerned with exonerating the local population of responsibility, to avoid reprisals. He estimates that some 20 SS soldiers died in combat and that 10 to 50 others were executed and buried in the

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2 Louis Fontanges, *Journal de l'occupation allemande à Villefranche en août et septembre 1943*, unpublished and undated document, Municipal Archives/Archives municipales de Villefranche-de-Rouergue, dossier 4H11.

Sainte Marguerite field (which we will refer to again in the following pages). He also notes that, on All Saints' Day, anonymous people laid flowers on the mass grave of the executed soldiers. Thus began the commemoration of this mutiny, just as the pioneer battalion had left the town.

At an undetermined date, but close to the end of the war, Jean Baudin – the new mayor of the town, elected after the Liberation in 1944 – also compiled his memories.<sup>3</sup> Baudin attributes the mutiny to the harsh discipline imposed by the German officers on their men. He also mentions a “secret order from Marshal Tito” and the presence in Toulouse of a representative of the Yugoslav government. According to Baudin, the French Resistance helped some SS soldiers desert, but never envisaged a mutiny. He estimates that this mutiny resulted in the execution of 300 to 400 mutineers, 20 to 25 of whom were shot and buried in the Sainte Marguerite field.

An article published by Paul Gayraud in 1947 in the *Revue du Rouergue* provides little new information, but assumes that the SS soldiers had mutinied for fear of being sent to the Eastern Front.<sup>4</sup> He estimates that about a hundred of them managed to hide with help from the population, and reports the rumour that Schweiger escaped execution because that night, he was at his mistress' house. But the author doubts the truthfulness of many of the eyewitness reports, and hopes that the German archives, once opened, would provide much more information on the event.

Finally, a report written in the 1950s by André Pavelet, a former Resistance leader for the Languedoc-Roussillon region, largely repeats Louis Fontanges' journal and Paul Gayraud's article, but explains that Schweiger was spared by the mutineers because he pretended to support their actions.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Pavelet claims to have met personally at that time a Yugoslav who spoke perfect French, and whom he identified wrongly as the owner of the hotel where the officers were staying. With this unnamed Yugoslav's help, he wrote a leaflet urging the SS soldiers to be patient. In fact, according to him, the French Resistance did not plan to push them to revolt unless the Allies landed on the French coast.

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3 Jean Baudin, *Note pour servir au récit de la tragédie du 17 septembre 1943*, unpublished and undated document, Archives municipales de Villefranche-de-Rouergue, dossier 4H11.

4 Paul Gayraud, “La mutinerie des Croates à Villefranche-de-Rouergue”, *Revue du Rouergue*, no. 1, 1947, 228-238.

5 André Pavelet, *La rébellion des Croates à Villefranche de Rouergue le 17 septembre 1943*, unpublished and undated document, Defence Historical Service/Service historique de la défense (SHD) (Vincennes), dossier GR 13 P 155 (région R 3).

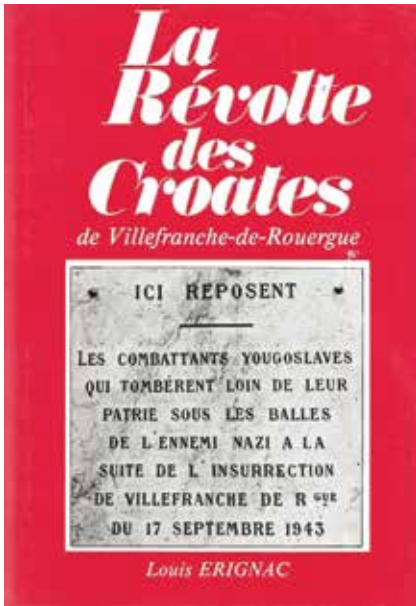


Fig. 1: Cover of the book published by Louis Érignac in 1980. (© Louis Érignac)

Although these various documents provide a certain amount of information, they are incomplete and somewhat contradictory, and they say little about the identity or motivations of the mutineers. It was not until 1980 that a semi-official French account of the mutiny appeared, namely the book *La révolte des Croates de Villefranche-de-Rouergue* (The Revolt of the Croats of Villefranche-de-Rouergue) by Louis Érignac, a history teacher, communist activist and president of the local branch of the National Association of Resistance Veterans (*Association Nationale des Anciens Combattants de la Résistance* – ANACR).<sup>6</sup> This

book repeats the previous accounts but is also based on the Yugoslav press – to which we will return – and on the testimony of Božo Jelenek, a former member of the 13th SS Division. He cites as leaders of the mutineers Ferid Džanić, the only Muslim officer in the battalion; Nikola Vukelić, a Catholic Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO); and Božo Jelenek himself, another Catholic Croat. Érignac writes that Dr. Schweiger, an ethnic German (*Volksdeutscher*) from Slovenia, is said to have introduced himself to the mutineers as a Yugoslav, and points to SS Imam Halim Malkoč as the one who allegedly persuaded some of the troop to oppose the mutiny. He also presents the Yugoslav Milan Kalafatić and the Brazilian Apolino de Carvalho, two former members of the International Brigades, as outsiders who helped organise the mutiny. Finally, he refers to the mutineers as “Croats”, the term used by the SS soldiers when they introduced themselves to the townspeople, but also speaks of “Bosnian Croats and Muslims”, and believes that the most appropriate term would be “Yugoslavs”. Moreover, on the book’s cover, a photo of the commemorative plaque erected in 1950 to honour the mutineers refers to the “Yugoslav fighters” (Fig. 1).

<sup>6</sup> Louis Érignac, *La révolte des Croates de Villefranche-de-Rouergue* (Villefranche-de-Rouergue: L. Érignac, 1988).



Fig. 2: Press clipping from 1946, the legend reads: “View of the Croats’ grave after the ceremony”. The text on the provisional monument reads: “To the Yugoslav patriots who died for their country and for freedom”. (Source: Božidar Vitković’s personal archive, origin unknown)

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Now let’s have a look at the commemoration of the mutiny.

On 17 September 1944, shortly after the liberation of Villefranche-de-Rouergue, a first public commemoration was held on the Sainte Marguerite field, with members of French Resistance organisations participating. At the request of the Yugoslav Military Mission in Paris, the decision was made not to exhume the bodies. It was not until 1946 that an official ceremony was organised by a Franco-Yugoslav Remembrance Committee, in the presence of Resistance veterans’ associations, local and departmental authorities, and a large Yugoslav delegation. A provisional monument was erected, with Yugoslav flags and wreaths (Fig. 2). At that time, the Yugoslav authorities seemed to attach some importance to the Villefranche mutiny, and planned to erect a monument on the Sainte Marguerite field by the Croatian artist Vanja Radauš, representing four men falling under German bullets. But their interest quickly waned, and Radauš’s statues were eventually used for a war memorial in the town of Pula, in Croatia.



Fig. 3: The old monument in Villefranche, established in 1950. (Source: Zvonimir Bernwald's personal archive, origin unknown)

This first memorial phase ended in 1950 with the installation of a more modest monument on the Sainte Marguerite field, now called the Field of the Yugoslav Martyrs (*Champ des martyrs yougoslaves*). This monument paid tribute to the “Yugoslav fighters who fell far from their homeland under the bullets of the Nazi enemy” (Fig. 3). From this time onwards, there was an ambiguity concerning the national identity of the mutineers: while the people of Villefranche spoke of the “revolt of the Croats”, the official name was “Yugoslavs”. This blurring of identities did not create any major difficulties

at the time, as Croatia was then part of Yugoslavia, but it would be at the centre of the controversies of the 1990s, as we shall see later on.

In the following years, the Yugoslav authorities stopped attending the annual commemoration. However, Croatian anti-communist organisations took advantage of this absence to join the ceremonies, leaving the French authorities perplexed as to how they should react. This explains why the Yugoslav embassy again sent its representatives to the 17 September ceremonies from 1960 onward. Around the same time, the left-wing municipality led by Robert Fabre took two important decisions. Firstly, at the suggestion of a Croat living in France, the road leading to the Field of the Yugoslav Martyrs was christened... Avenue of the Croats (*Avenue des Croates*). Secondly, the town's elected officials asked the Yugoslav authorities to organise the twinning of Villefranche with a Croatian town. From 1968 onward, the Yugoslav authorities emphasised the role played by Božo Jelenek, a member of the pioneer battalion who, after the mutiny, joined the maquis of the Montagne Noire, located south of Villefranche. Jelenek was presented as one of the leaders of the mutiny, and he took part in the annual commemorations until his death in 1987. This second memorial phase was characterised by a broad consensus that the Villefranche mutiny was both Yugoslav and anti-fascist – a consensus barely disturbed by the (Catholic)

masses organised by the anti-communist association *Amitié France-Croatie* in homage to the (mainly Muslim) victims of German repression.

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Now let us look at the Yugoslav sources.

In Yugoslavia, certain aspects of the Villefranche mutiny were known from the early post-war years. In 1947, the State Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes of the Occupiers and their Local Collaborators stated that the mutiny had been led by the Muslim officer Ferid Džanić, who had ties with the French Resistance and the British secret services.<sup>7</sup> According to the same commission, the mutiny was supposed to spread to other units of the division, but the surviving German officer and Imam Halim Malkoč thwarted this plan. A few months earlier, the district court in Bihać had sentenced Malkoč to death, citing his role in the events in Villefranche, among other misdeeds.<sup>8</sup>

In the following years, Božo Jelenek wrote several confidential reports about the Villefranche mutiny.<sup>9</sup> He attributed it to the harsh discipline and poor rations, and also mentioned the impact of the Italian surrender on 8 September 1943. Jelenek claimed to have infiltrated the 13th SS Division at the request of the Yugoslav Communist Party and to have organised the mutiny with Džanić, Vukelić and two NCOs whose names he had forgotten. According to him, contacts had been established with the French Resistance, which was to provide guides to help the mutineers reach the maquis, but the date of the mutiny had to be brought forward because of the growing suspicions of the German officers and, in the absence of the guides, the mutineers had to fight in the town. Jelenek estimated that around 50 mutineers were shot dead. Finally, he told of having joined the maquis of the Montagne Noire with help from Villefranche residents and Yugoslavs enrolled in the French Resistance, including Milan Kalafatić.

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7 Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, *Referat o 13. SS diviziji 'Handžar'*, 20 March 1947, Military Archives/*Vojni Arhiv* (Belgrade), Reich Collection, carton 9, fascicle 4, document 25.

8 District court Bihać, 5 November 1946, no. 320/46, Archive of Bosnia-Herzegovina/*Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine*, Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes of the Occupiers and their Local Collaborators, Verdicts, box 3.

9 See in particular Božo Jelenek, *O herojskoj pobuni bataljona prinudno mobiliziranih Hrvata u Villefransu*, unpublished and undated document, author's personal archive.



Until the late 1960s, however, the Villefranche mutiny was unknown to the Yugoslav public. At that time, in a context of political liberalisation and recognition of a specific Muslim nation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, several Croatian and Bosnian newspapers began writing about the event.<sup>10</sup> The journalists relied on the eyewitness accounts of former SS soldiers living in Yugoslavia – including Božo Jelenek – or went to Villefranche to meet French witnesses and consult the municipal archives. But the results of their investigations do not make things any clearer. Several serials focused on the personality of Ferid Džanić, who was actually a Partisan captured in the spring of 1943 by the Germans before reappearing shortly thereafter as a Waffen-SS officer. From then on, some believed him to be an agent infiltrated into the 13th SS Division by the communists, and others thought he was a traitor. The question of the mutineers' links with the French Resistance was just as controversial; some believed that there were no such ties, and others questioned the absence of the guides supposedly promised by the Resistance. More generally, all journalists debated whether the mutiny was spontaneous or premeditated. Some points of agreement nevertheless emerged, such as the harmful role played by Imam Malkoč. In one of the serials published in the press, Jelenek stated that Džanić had given up on plans to execute Malkoč, for fear of sparking a negative reaction from Muslim soldiers. Finally, the journalists seemed to agree on the number of 60 executions at the end of the revolt. Louis Érignac drew on these articles to write *La Révolte des Croates*, cherry-picking the facts that suited him and adding his own. In this way, French and Yugoslav sources were intermingled.

At the same period, French and Yugoslav memorial practices also converged, before rapidly diverging. Indeed, Yugoslav journalists who had stayed in Villefranche echoed the request for twinning with a town in Croatia. But the official response was evasive. The Standing Conference of Yugoslav Cities proposed the city of Slavonski Brod in Croatia, but the latter showed no interest; later, the city of Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Ferid Džanić was born, was put forward, but with no more success. Above all, the associations of former Yugoslav Partisans were openly hostile to these plans, as they deemed it inappropriate to honour the memory of SS

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10 See in particular *Večernje novine* (Sarajevo) 8-16 May 1967, 17 May-16 June 1967 and 27 July-18 August 1967; *Vjesnik* (Zagreb) 31 March-2 April 1968; *Vjesnik u srijedu* (Zagreb) 21 August-16 October 1968.

soldiers. The twinning project therefore remained stillborn. This hostility to the promotion of the Villefranche mutiny was also visible in the press. Thus, in October 1967, shortly after publishing three successive serials on the revolt, the Sarajevo newspaper *Večernje novine* had to publish a fourth one devoted to the crimes of the 13th SS Division.<sup>11</sup> In the following decades, attacks on Muslim political and religious elites during World War II gathered strength, as they were accused of having been complicit in the creation of this division.<sup>12</sup> As the Yugoslav federation slowly disintegrated, the consensus around the Villefranche mutiny also began to crack.

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Let us now turn to the 1990s, when this consensus was ultimately shattered.

Several decades of peaceful commemorations were followed by a third memorial phase from 1990 onwards, marked by heated controversy over the nationality of the mutineers, their motives, and their real or supposed links with the French Resistance. The Yugoslav federation finally collapsed in 1991-1992, and war broke out in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the young independent Croatia, a new reading of the mutiny was put forward: as the Croatian-born historian Mirko Grmek declared, it had to be shown that the revolt was “the work of Croatian nationalists and not of Yugoslav communists”.<sup>13</sup> To do this, some played on the fact that in 1943, Catholics and Muslims were considered “Croats” by the Ustasha regime. The Croatian embassy in Paris therefore denounced the reference to “Yugoslav fighters” as a communist lie, and demanded that the Croatian nationality of the mutineers be emphasised during the annual commemorations.

After the presence of Croatian delegations caused various incidents, the municipality of Villefranche decided to withdraw from the official ceremony in 1993. The ceremony was then organised by the National Association of Resistance Veterans (ANACR) and reduced to a commemoration to the tune of the *Chant des Partisans* (Partisans’ Song), without any speeches. In 1997, the ANACR decided that it would no longer organise the annual ceremony, which was taken over by the association *Solidarité France-Croatie* of

11 Jeso Perić, “Krv na kućnom pragu”, *Večernje novine* (Sarajevo) 14 October-5 December 1967.

12 See in particular Derviš Sušić, *Parergon* (Sarajevo: Oslobođenje, 1980).

13 “Hrvatski nacionalisti, a ne jugoslavenski komunisti”, *Nedjeljni vjesnik* (Zagreb), 19 November 1995.

Toulouse, with no official French delegation in attendance. The controversies were not limited to the nationality of the mutineers. In 1993, the leaflet accompanying a commemorative stamp of the Croatian postal service repeated the thesis that the French Resistance had not provided the promised guides to lead the mutineers to the maquis.<sup>14</sup> This assertion provoked an indignant reaction from the ANACR and partly explains its decision to no longer organise the commemorations.

It was not until the 2000s that a new memorial consensus took shape. At that time, the independence of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were facts accepted by all. Additionally, there was an important local factor: the election of a right-wing municipal government in Villefranche in 2001 led by the new mayor Serge Rocques. He decided to attend the annual 17 September commemorations again, alongside the Croatian delegation. In 2005, the appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Philippe Douste-Blazy, a right-wing politician from southwestern France who was very involved in supporting Croatian independence, further facilitated the rapprochement that was then taking shape between the French and Croatian authorities.

The final shift came in 2006, when the monument installed in 1950 was replaced with a memorial including a copy of Vanja Radauš's statues and the plaque mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (*Fig. 4*). It should be noted that the expression “compatriots of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina” made it possible to overlook the Croatian and/or Bosniak (i.e., Muslim<sup>15</sup>) national identity of the mutineers, since only their geographical origin is indicated. This persistent blurring of identities was obvious in the speeches made at the inauguration of the memorial on 17 September 2006: Philippe Douste-Blazy spoke of “young Croats and Bosniaks”, but Ivo Sanader, the Prime Minister of Croatia, referred to insurgents “of Muslim or Catholic faith”.<sup>16</sup> This ushered in a fourth memorial phase wherein the Croatian delegation occupied a central, even dominant, place, before representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Bosniak community in France joined the commemoration. This new memorial consensus was sealed by

14 *Prigodna poštanska marka Republike Hrvatske: pobuna hrvatskih vojnika u Villefranche-de-Rouergue 1943*, Zagreb: Hrvatska pošta i telekomunikacije, 17 November 1993.

15 The national name “*Musliman*” (Muslim), adopted in the 1960s to designate Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was replaced by “*Bošnjak*” (Bosniak) in 1993.

16 Speeches delivered at the commemorative ceremony on 17 September 2006 in Villefranche-de-Rouergue (Aveyron), accessed on 15 April 2010 on the website of the Croatian Embassy in France: [http://www.amb-croatie.fr/actualités/villefranche\\_allocutions2006.htm](http://www.amb-croatie.fr/actualités/villefranche_allocutions2006.htm).



Fig. 4: The new monument in Villefranche established in 2006. (Photo: Xavier Bougarel)

the twinning of Villefranche with the Croatian town of Pula in 2008 and the Bosnian town of Bihać in 2010. But it remained incomplete, as in 2006, the ANACR opposed the decision to take down the former Yugoslav monument and decided to boycott the inauguration of the new one.

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We shall now focus on how historians viewed the event over this same period.

As the commemorations in Villefranche were being transformed, a vast effort was under way to rewrite the history of the mutiny. In 1993, the historian Zdravko Dizdar published an article in the *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* (Journal of Contemporary History) in Zagreb entitled “The First Uprising in the Nazi Army”.<sup>17</sup> Based on the sources already mentioned, plus the Croatian archives, this paper reconstructs in detail the creation of the 13th SS Division, as well as the mutiny, step by step. According to Dizdar, the mutiny’s leaders were in contact with the French Resistance and the

17 Zdravko Dizdar, “Prva pobuna u nacističkoj vojsci: pobuna 13. pionirskog bataljuna 13. SS divizije ‘Croatia’ u Villefranche-de-Rouergueu 17. rujna 1943”, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, no. 25, 1993, 117-142.

British secret services, and the absence of the promised guides was one of the reasons for their failure. Dizdar estimates the number of mutineers shot at 150, and further reports that 300 others were deported to the Sachsenhausen camp, where most perished. He insists that the mutiny was premeditated and describes it as “Croatian and anti-fascist”. This account is thus partly an extension of the communist narrative, while nationalising it. Writing during the war in 1993, Dizdar considered that casting light on the Villefranche mutiny was a good way to fight against the perception in France of the Croatian people as “Ustashas”.

Around the same time, on 26 November 1993, a conference entitled *The Revolt of the Croats of Villefranche-de-Rouergue* was held in Zagreb, organised jointly by the Croatian Institute of History and the French Embassy in Zagreb. As the title of the conference suggests, the emphasis was on the Croatian identity of the mutineers. Several speakers also emphasised the mutineers’ links with the French Resistance, asserting that these ties proved the premeditated, and therefore political, nature of the mutiny. Among the participants, the French historian Christian Font was the only one who rejected this thesis. He underlined that, in the autumn of 1943, the maquis were almost non-existent in the Villefranche region, and considered that ties between the mutiny’s leaders and the French Resistance were highly improbable.<sup>18</sup>

Henrik Heger, a professor at the Sorbonne of Croatian origin, attacked Fadil Ekmečić, a Bosniak living in Paris, who had published a book in 1991 entitled *La révolte des Bosniaques à Villefranche en 1943* (The Revolt of the Bosniaks in Villefranche in 1943).<sup>19</sup> In this book, which never reached a large audience, Ekmečić relies on familiar sources to tell the story of the mutiny, but he presents it as the work of Bosniaks, not Croats; some Sarajevo newspapers promoted the same narrative. Besides this competition between Croats and Bosniaks to take ownership of the events of Villefranche, the most interesting detail in Ekmečić’s book is that he claims to have spoken on the telephone with the former Resistance fighter Milan Kalafatić. Kalafatić is said to have denied any involvement in organising the mutiny, although he did admit that he later helped some of the mutineers join the French maquis.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Christian Font, *Résistance et troupes allemandes au moment de la révolte des Croates de Villefranche-de-Rouergue*, unpublished and undated document, author’s personal archive.

19 Fadil Ekmečić, *Pobuna Bošnjaka u Vilfranšu* (Paris: Librairie Ekmečić, 1991).

20 *Ibid.*, 133.

However, it was not until 1998 that a comprehensive Croatian account of the Villefranche mutiny appeared, with the book *Les révoltés de Villefranche* (The Villefranche Insurgents) by Mirko Grmek, a Croatian-born medical historian based in France, and Louise Lambrichs, a novelist.<sup>21</sup> In this book, the two authors draw on a variety of sources, in particular German and local archives. Among the German sources, they cite SS documents already used by other historians, and refer to the diary of Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, plenipotentiary general in the Independent State of Croatia, but omit the passage in which he attributes the mutiny to the harsh treatment by the officers, the refusal by the ethnic German ones to use Croatian language and a lack of food.<sup>22</sup>

Grmek and Lambrichs' main discovery is a set of documents originating from Karl Rachor, the intelligence officer of the 13th SS Division, and concerning the Villefranche mutiny. While probably authentic, these documents do not come from a clearly identifiable archive, but were circulated as photocopies within the circles of German veterans of the 13th SS Division. They include first-hand accounts by Willfried Schweiger and Halim Malkoč, which shed light on their role in the failure of the mutiny, and a (comprehensive?) list of fourteen people sentenced to death. But Grmek and Lambrichs are most interested in Rachor's report, which lists Ferid Džanić, Nikola Vuletić and two other NCOs (Luftija Dizdarević, a Muslim, and Eduard Matutinović, a Catholic) as leaders of the revolt.<sup>23</sup> Armed with these four names, the two authors accuse Božo Jelenek of lying about his role in the mutiny, and thus their narrative excludes the individual who was allegedly the link to the Yugoslav Partisan movement.

Karl Rachor also states that Ferid Džanić saw himself as the "liberator of Croatia", and that Nikola Vuletić was a "fanatical supporter" of an independent Croatia that would rid itself of the Ustashas and join the Allies. Grmek and Lambrichs thus point to this as proof that the Villefranche mutiny was not the work of Yugoslav communists, but of Croatian patriots. In their haste, they neglect the fact that Rachor also accuses Spanish prostitutes,

21 Mirko Grmek and Louise Lambrichs, *Les révoltés de Villefranche. Mutinerie d'un bataillon de Waffen-SS, septembre 1943* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

22 Peter Broucek ed., *Ein General im Zwielficht. Die Erinnerungen Edmund Glaises von Horstenau, volume 3* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1988), 296.

23 "Rapport de Karl Rachor, officier de renseignement de l'état-major de la 13<sup>e</sup> division SS sur les événements du 17 septembre 1943 à Villefranche-de-Rouergue", in Grmek and Lambrichs, *Les révoltés*, 318-322.

Balkan Jews, North African soldiers, “Gypsies” and “two Negroes and a Negress” of having been involved in the preparation of the mutiny. His report obviously contains a strong dose of paranoia, as is often the case in such documents. Nor do Grmek and Lambrichs question how Rachor could have been aware of the real motivations of Džanić, who died in battle, and of Vukelić, who was captured, tortured and shot shortly afterwards.

Yet this is not all that our two authors discover. In the Villefranche municipal archives, they find a *Vitkovitch file* containing information on Božidar Vitković, a Serbian doctor who had lived in Toulouse since 1937 and was cited in various official certificates as the instigator of the Villefranche mutiny. Here again, Grmek and Lambrichs have what they need: If this Serb linked to the French Resistance was behind the mutiny, then he must also be the Machiavellian man who betrayed the mutineers by not providing them with the promised guides! The two authors also believe that Vitković was a Serbian nationalist linked to the Yugoslav royal government in exile in London and manipulated by the British secret services, without providing any evidence of this. Falling deeper into more or less convoluted conspiracy theories, Grmek and Lambrichs also suggest that the mutineers had ties with high-level Ustasha officials who wished to join the Allies, and believe that the Yugoslav secret services – eager to cover up the truth about these events – were actually responsible for the seemingly accidental deaths of several protagonists of the Villefranche mutiny. Should we regard this new version of the Villefranche mutiny as the definitive story?

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To find out, let's go back to the French archives.

When he died in 1985 in Toulouse, Božidar Vitković left behind his personal papers, consisting primarily of press clippings about the Villefranche mutiny and its commemoration, official certificates confirming the involvement of several Yugoslavs in the French Resistance, and scattered handwritten notes about his life history, political commitments and his role in the preparations for the mutiny.<sup>24</sup>

These documents contradict the image of Vitković conveyed by Grmek and Lambrichs: He was not a Serbian nationalist linked to the royal

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24 As Božidar Vitković's handwritten notes are written on unnumbered loose sheets, it is impossible to give a precise reference.

government in exile, but a Yugoslav patriot who admired Tito's Partisans and was a member of the *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans* (FTP), a Resistance movement linked to the French Communist Party. This political choice of Vitković during the war years is confirmed by the fact that after the Liberation, he participated in the creation of the National Liberation Movement of Yugoslavs in France, and then of the Association of Yugoslavs in France, two organisations closely linked to Tito's communist regime.

Among the press clippings, several are articles written by Vitković himself in the early post-war years, dealing with the Villefranche mutiny. These articles show good knowledge of the mutiny as it unfolded, at a time when the sources mentioned in the previous pages did not yet exist, or were not accessible. Vitković's knowledge of the events of 17 September 1943 can therefore be explained either by his participation in its preparation, or by his meeting with former mutineers – or both. In *Le Patriote du Sud-Ouest* of 17 September 1945, he presents the mutiny as having been organised by "Yugoslav Resistance fighters in the French ranks".<sup>25</sup> However, his version of the facts diverges from those we have encountered so far. In particular, in *La République du Sud-Ouest* of 17 September 1946, he explains that the Yugoslav officers were spared by the mutineers, unlike the German officers.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, according to Vitković, Džanić, Vukelić and the others merely took over the leadership of a mutiny started by others.

Vitković's account becomes even more surprising if we look at his handwritten notes. Indeed, he explains that he first came into contact with soldiers of the 13th SS Division while waiting outside the brothels of Toulouse, and that he became friends with a young Croatian soldier who introduced himself as "Zvonimir" and belonged to the Villefranche pioneer battalion. After several days of discussions, Vitković says that he managed to convince "Zvonimir" to organise a mutiny, and also demanded that the mutineers execute their officers so that there could be no turning back from joining the French Resistance. In the face of "Zvonimir's" hesitations, he finally agreed that the Yugoslav officers should be spared. In other words, Džanić, Vukelić and the others narrowly missed being executed by the mutineers! Vitković also explains his goals in organising this mutiny, namely to break the morale of the soldiers of the 13th SS Division and to sow discord within their ranks, in order to force the Germans to withdraw this division, which

25 "Le soulèvement de Villefranche-de-Rouergue", *Le Patriote du Sud-Ouest*, 17 September 1945.

26 "Le soulèvement des Croates", *La République du Sud-Ouest*, 17 September 1946.



Vitković believed had come to southwestern France to fight the French Resistance. He ends this account published in *La République du Sud-Ouest* with these words: “A month later, all these units left for Germany: they were considered useless for the repression of the French maquis. The goal of the mutineers had thus been achieved.”<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, Vitković’s handwritten notes have many gaps and are sometimes hard to believe. Above all, they tell us nothing about the day of 17 September 1943 and the role that Vitković might have played in it. But, in any case, the scattered facts gathered from Božidar Vitković’s personal papers undermine all of the existing accounts of the Villefranche mutiny. So how should the events of 17 September 1943 be interpreted? And where can we find the answer?

\* \* \*

Let’s try our luck in the files of the French military archives.

In his personal file as a former Resistance fighter, Božidar Vitković recalls the Villefranche mutiny.<sup>28</sup> He recollects that his first contacts with SS soldiers were on 29 July 1943, that he called on them not to fight the French Resistance and to rise up against German oppression, and that the mutiny of 17 September resulted in 84 deaths, including five German officers. He adds that “more than 150 of the mutineers, after checks, [were] directed towards the French Resistance (Carmaux and Mende)”.<sup>29</sup> In a letter to the Ministry of Veterans’ Affairs dated 30 November 1977, Vitković further states that the mutiny “resulted in the death of 47 Germans, including five officers” and that, “judging this unit to be unreliable following this revolt, the German High Command decided to withdraw it from France on 1 October 1943. Apart from the state of siege [...], the people of Villefranche suffered no damages, no internments, no deportations, no executions.”<sup>30</sup>

The files of the Yugoslav Resistance fighters mentioned in Božidar Vitković’s personal papers also reveal that he did not act alone. Janko Dragančić, Sava Ilibašić, Bogdan Madjarev and Stevo Mihanović all refer to their

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27 Ibid.

28 SHD (Vincennes), file GR 16 P 597770 (Božidar Vitković).

29 FFI rank certification, certificate of membership, 6 January 1949, SHD (Vincennes), file GR 16 P 597770 (Božidar Vitković).

30 Letter from Božidar Vitković to the Minister for Veterans and Victims of War, 30 November 1977, SHD (Vincennes), dossier GR 16 P 597770 (Božidar Vitković).

participation in the preparations for the mutiny, confirmed in some cases by an attestation from Božidar Vitković as president of the Yugoslav Liberation Committee in Toulouse.<sup>31</sup> There is nothing of the sort in the file of Milan Kalafatić, who did, however, participate in the defection of Soviet soldiers in Carmaux in July 1944.<sup>32</sup> According to these files, the “revolt of the Croats” was therefore prepared by a group of Yugoslavs acting without consultation with French Resistance organisations. Subsequently, these men joined the 35th brigade of the FTP and participated in the liberation of Toulouse in August 1944. The files kept at the French Ministry of Defence history department also give us some information on these men’s activities after the Liberation. In particular, Vitković, Draganić, Madjarev and Mihanović were commissioned by the Yugoslav Military Mission to interrogate German prisoners from Yugoslavia and identify possible war criminals. This official function held by Vitković also attests to his close ties to the Yugoslav authorities of the time.

The French military archives also preserve an interesting exchange of letters between Božidar Vitković and André Pavelet, author of the report mentioned at the beginning of this chapter on the Villefranche mutiny, and assigned to work in the Ministry of Defence history department. On 17 February 1959, Pavelet asked Vitković to share his memories with him, promising that they would remain confidential.<sup>33</sup> In a letter dated 25 February, Vitković replied:

Further to your letter concerning the uprising of the Croats on 17-9-1943 in Villefranche de Rouergue, I have the honour to confirm that I am indeed fully aware of it. Not only did I arrange the dispersion and accommodation of the rebels after the uprising – planned, moreover, before the uprising itself – but along with my former compatriots, I had taken a certain part in its very organisation, as a French Resistance fighter. [...] While it is generally considered that this uprising was a failure – especially in Villefranche – I have to tell you that it was a complete success despite its appearance, a great success even, because there was a well-determined goal, militarily

31 SHD (Vincennes), files GR 16 P 191807 (Janko Draganić), GR 16 P 301136 (Sava Ilibašić), GR 16 P 382402 (Bogdan Madjarev) and GR 16 P 418862 (Stevo Mihanović).

32 SHD (Vincennes), file GR 16 P 316218 (Milan Kalafatić).

33 Letter from Colonel André Pavelet to Božidar Vitković, 17 February 1959, SHD (Vincennes), file GR 16 P 597770 (Božidar Vitković).

speaking, which we had set ourselves in July and August 1943, and which we achieved. [...] Why was it ignored? For a simple security reason, thanks to an absolutely watertight divide, the only condition for its success! We didn't publish it because we risked very serious consequences through the "vendetta" commonly practised in Yugoslavia. I felt that there were enough dead not to add others to the list of the dead of these magnificent men. There are also our families there. Believe me, despite the great success, I am not proud of having sent so many men to their deaths – although it was absolutely necessary – because I am a physician and a physician's duty is to save human lives, not to destroy them. [...] Please accept, Colonel, my deepest respects. Doctor Vitković.<sup>34</sup>

But Božidar Vitković apparently never sent his account to Colonel Pavelet.

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So in the end, what do we know about the Villefranche mutiny?

The question of the nationality of the mutineers, which was at the centre of the memorial crisis of the 1990s, is the easiest to answer. The Catholic and Muslim soldiers alike identified themselves as Croats, but the latter undoubtedly had a strong Muslim religious identity, as evidenced by Imam Malkoč's influence over them. This ambiguity allowed for their national identity to be reassessed after the event, following the formation of socialist Yugoslavia in 1945, the recognition of a Muslim nation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1968, and the independence of Croatia in 1991. It should also be noted that this kind of identity blurring allowed the ethnic German Schweiger to present himself as a Yugoslav, and thus to escape the firing squad.

While Schweiger and Malkoč's role in the failure of the mutiny is relatively clear, this is not the case with its real or supposed organisers. Ferid Džanić appears to be an ambiguous character, having moved from the ranks of the Partisans to those of the Waffen-SS, without any satisfactory explanation for his changing sides. Božo Jelenek and Božidar Vitković left their own, more or less complete, accounts of the mutiny or its preparations, but

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Božidar Vitković to Colonel André Pavelet, 25 February 1959, SHD (Vincennes), dossier GR 13 P 155 (region R 3).

their two versions of events are totally incompatible. The German documents seem to support Jelenek's view, but it is still possible that the Germans only noticed a second phase of the mutiny, after Džanić, Vuletić and the other NCOs had taken command of it.

The motivations of the mutineers and their leaders also remain mysterious. As we have seen, they were initially presented as Yugoslav anti-fascists linked to Tito's Partisans, and then as Croatian nationalists aspiring to a democratic Croatia. But apart from Rachor's report and its wild imaginings, there is nothing to tell us about the possible political convictions of Džanić, Vuletić and the others. Maybe the Italian surrender on 8 September 1943 had a role in their decision. As for the ordinary mutineers, they were probably motivated by mundane issues such as frustration at being sent far away from home, the excessive discipline imposed by their German officers, or the fear of being sent to the Eastern Front.

This brings us back to the question of whether the mutiny was spontaneous or organised, and whether it was linked to the French Resistance. The latter apparently established contacts with the SS soldiers and helped some of them desert, but without having participated in the organisation of the mutiny. The most credible hypothesis is that Yugoslav resistance fighters based in France, on their own initiative, pushed for the revolt. In this context, Božidar Vitković appears to have been the mutineers' main contact. Was he the "representative of the Yugoslav government" referred to by Jean Baudin? Or the perfectly French-speaking Yugoslav whom André Pavelet met? Whatever the case, his exact role remains mysterious: Did he promise guides to the mutiny organisers? Was it a well-meaning lie intended to push them into action, or did the precipitous change in the date of the uprising explain the absence of guides? Was he simply trying to cause the departure of the 13th SS Division, in which case his action succeeded, or did he have more ambitious plans, which did not succeed?

So many questions to which there are no answers. Perhaps the missing piece of the puzzle is stored in an archive box somewhere between Paris, Berlin, Sarajevo and Belgrade. Or perhaps it is lost forever, if it ever existed. The Villefranche-de-Rouergue mutiny remains a mystery, and its interpretation as a revolt of freedom fighters against Nazism is fragile, to say the least.

# WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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