

Postal censorship of Bosnian public health institutions during the Second World War: The Independent State of Croatia versus Dr. Stanko Sielski

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This study aims to present evidence of censorship during World War II by the Independent State of Croatia of one of its public health officials, Dr. Stanko Sielski who was a physician trained in epidemiology and public health. During World War II, he directed the Institute for Combating Endemic Syphilis in the Bosnian town Banja Luka. The staff under his direction consisted solely of Jewish physicians. We analyzed two groups of envelopes either sent by or to Dr. Stanko Sielski during the War and found evidence of censorship only in communications with a Jewish physician dated towards the end of the War. Dr. Stanko Sielski would be posthumously recognized for his efforts to shield his Jewish colleagues. **Conclusion.** The newly available, but still limited data, which we present indicates efforts to censor Dr. Stanko Sielski's postal communications towards the War's end. The censors targeted specifically Dr. Stanko Sielski's correspondences with the Jewish physicians he was protecting. This material highlights the many challenges his public health service experienced during the time of armed conflict.

Introduction

The Independent State of Croatia (ISC) was founded on April 10th, 1941, after the invasion of Yugoslavia by the Axis powers and dissolved after the military defeat of Germany in May 1945. It consisted of most of modern-day Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), together with some parts of modern-day Serbia (1). The modern public health infrastructure developed in BH during the Austro-Hungarian occupation in the later part of the 19th century (2) and continued after the first World War. By the outbreak of World War II in 1941, the ISC had established the Institute for Combating Endemic Syphilis (ICES) in the Bosnian town

Banja Luka. At that time, all of the physicians working there were Jewish. The ICES was founded in order to eradicate the disease in rural Bosnian villages (3). Dr. Stanko Sielski, a talented and dynamic BH native physician and important ethnographer, served as the head of the ICES from 1941 to 1944 (4). Dr. Stanko Sielski was born and educated in BH, and spent his entire professional career there principally helping the impoverished and sickly rural populations whose misfortunes were compounded by both World Wars (4). Recent and ongoing scholarship has characterized another population assisted by Dr. Stanko Sielski; Jewish physicians practicing in BH (4). Both the Allies and the

Axis practiced the censorship of mail during the Second World War. Civil, military and prisoner populations were all monitored to various degrees (5). Censorship of public health institutes throughout Europe at that time is less certain.

This study presents evidence that the ISC censored the communications of Dr. Stanko Sielski, the director of a State public health institute. The timing of the censorship and the persons it is directed against suggest the ISC had begun to suspect the institute of subversion.

The description of State censorship of Dr. Stanko Sielski's communications

Were the authorities of the ISC suspicious of Dr. Stanko Sielski's motives to shield Jewish doctors from the Holocaust? We would like to present a small piece of evidence which can help to address this question. Currently, there are at least two collections of Dr. Stanko Sielski's envelopes existent from the period of the Second World War. One group

(six envelopes, all addressed to Dr. Stanko Sielski) (6) contains one envelope that bears the postal censor's ("CENZURA", Croatian) mark (Figure 1). The others in this group were not marked (Figure 2).

The second group of ten envelopes is archived in the Section of History of Medicine in the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb; the collection includes seven letters that Dr. Stanko Sielski sent to Dr. Vladimir Čepulić, the head of the Croatian Medical Association, and three in return (7). No letter from the Zagreb collection bares the mark of censorship.

The censored letter was postmarked 1944, which is later than any of the other letters Dr. Stanko Sielski received. Furthermore, the censored letter was sent from Dr. Emil Reich (Figure 1 inset lower right-hand corner), a Jewish physician who worked under Dr. Stanko Sielski at the Institute (8). While this cannot be considered proof, it does indicate that the State had become suspicious of Dr. Stanko Sielski, specifically in his communications with the Jewish doctors



Figure 1 Letter (cover) addressed to Dr. Stanko Sielski with "Censura 117" stamp postmarked 1944. Inset lower right hand corner: Reverse of envelope showing Dr. Emil Reich, Vrapče, Zagreb.



Figure 2 Composite image of 4 uncensored letters addressed to Dr. Stanko Sielski with dates ranging from 1942 (upper left), 1943 (upper right), 1943 (bottom right) and 1943 (bottom left).

whom he directed. Unfortunately, we lack the envelopes contents but speculate that it may have been related to Dr. Emil Reich's recent hospitalization (9).

The censor's suspicion about Dr. Stanko Sielski most likely was related to his efforts to help his Jewish colleagues. Due to Dr. Husref Tahirović's (an author) advocacy, Dr. Stanko Sielski's efforts were recognized posthumously by the State of Israel who awarded him the Righteous Among Nations. This award is given to non-Jewish peoples whose efforts contributed to saving Jewish lives. Dr. Stanko Sielski is one of only a few physicians to receive the honor (10).

Conclusion

Dr. Stanko Sielski was a dynamic Bosnian doctor whose interest in rural public health put him in a unique, but dangerous situation

during World War II. He not only fulfilled his duty in helping impoverished rural War stricken Bosnians, but he also used his position as Director of the Institute for Combating Endemic Syphilis to shield Jewish physicians working under him. From the envelope covers extant, we show that some of Dr. Stanko Sielski's correspondences with Jewish physicians were being monitored, and that this activity may have begun during the later War years. We hope this paper can add to the understanding of European public health institute censorship during World War II. More scholarship in this area is needed and more on the dynamic figure of Dr. Stanko Sielski is forthcoming.

What is already known on this topic

Civil and military institutions are targets of censorship during times of war. There is less known about censorship of public health institutions during times of armed conflict. Data on

postal censorship of European public health institutes during the Second World War are insufficient.

What this study adds

This paper adds to the understanding of European public health institute censorship during World War II. While the data is limited, it suggests that censorship of these institutes may have occurred later in the war, and as a result, certain institutes were used to shield Jewish physicians from the Holocaust.

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