

Thoughts from the partisans

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Commentary



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SINCE writing about Yugoslavia two weeks ago, I have received two fascinating letters, one from a Croat, one from a Serb. A Dr Andrija Ilic, states that the murder of King Alexander was acceptable, that the Pavelic Ustasha regime was not collaboration with Nazism, that the Croats "possess European civilisation" and that the sufferings of Croatia may be compared with those of the Jews in the holocaust. My Serbian correspondent whose name is withheld because he fears retribution against family in Yugo-

slavia, describes flight from murder at the hands of Croatian militias.

Let me quote Dr Ilic: "In 1929 the Serbian King Alexander Karadjordjevic, who was never crowned King of Croatia, introduced a military dictatorship . . . and with a stroke of his pen invented until [*sic*] then a completely unknown people ie the Yugoslav people, and gave his state the name of Yugoslavia. This decree of the Serbian King-Dictator Alexander Karadjordjevic meant the death sentence for the Croatian people . . . Therefore it is no wonder that one day after the dictatorial decree of King Alexander, the national representative for Zagreb, Dr Ante Pavelic, founded the revolutionary Ustasha (meaning insurgent) Movement, with the final aim to destroy Yugoslavia and proclaim a free and independent state of Croatia."

Dr Ilic proceeds to justify the murder of King Alexander as "a logical outcome of the cruel and vicious war forced upon the Croatian people and the Macedonian Bulgarians by the dictatorial decrees of Alexander Karadjordjevic which really meant a final solution of the Croatian question and a complete political, cultural, linguistic and biological genocide of the Croatian people."

As to events in 1941, Dr Ilic is

illuminating: "On April 10th 1941 they proclaimed their own independent state of Croatia. It is not true that this state was created by Hitler and Mussolini, it was created by the sovereign will of the Croatian people."

"The terrorist Serbian Cetnik organisation under the command of Draza Mihailovic started a guerilla action destroying Croatian property and murdering the innocent Croatian population, including old people, women and children and especially the Catholic priests, nuns, and the Muslim representatives."

Against this we have the words of my Serbian correspondent: "My parents were Serbian peasants from the area of Croatia that Serbs now call Krajin. My mother spent months at a time living in a dense forest to escape the Ustashe Croats, and my father joined a Cetnik corps to fight the enemy which at various times was a combination of Germans, Italians, Croat Ustashe and Tito's Communist partisans."

He also describes the role of a large Cetnik detachment with which his uncle served in a Croatian area: "The local Croat civilians were extremely frightened to suddenly find a division of 15,000 heavily armed Serbian Cetniks in their midst, but my uncle and his fellow fighters made a point of not harming one hair of any Croat civilian despite the atrocities committed against their own families by these peoples' brothers and families. To me this exemplifies the difference between the Croat and Serbian psyche. We are proud and even chauvinistic, but not genocidal in character."

These are two partisan and committed statements. But the second view reflects the account given by Sir Fitzroy Maclean in Divided Barricade and Milovan Djilas in Wartime. Sir Fitzroy speaks of Croat acts

against Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia: "The massacres began in earnest at the end of June [1941] and continued through the summer, growing in scope and intensity until in August the terror reached its height. The whole of Bosnia ran with blood. Bands of Ustashe roamed the countryside with knives, bludgeons and machine guns, slaughtering Serbian men, women and children, desecrating Serbian churches, murdering Serbian priests, laying waste Serbian villages torturing, raping, burning, drowning. Killing became a cult, an obsession. The Ustashe vied to outdo each other, boasting of the numbers of their victims and of their own particular methods of dispatching them . . ."

There were even murders of those who had submitted to the Ustasha's gunpoint Roman Catholic evangelism. The Bishop of Mostar spoke a grim inadvertent hilarity: "While the new converts are in church attending mass, they [Ustashe] seize them, young and old, men and women, drag them outside and send them to eternity in droves. That sort of thing does no good to the holy cause of Catholicism nor to that of Croatia. In a few years everyone will condemn these thoughtless actions." Thoughtless indeed and so counter-productive!

Contemporary Croats use the term "Cetnik" abusively against the Serbs, but though the Serbian Cetniks were not without blemishes, they are not remotely to be compared with the Ustashe. They were created by the same kind of Serbian officers who overthrew the Regent Prince Paul and his Prime Minister Cvetkovic for submitting to Hitler's ultimatum in March 1941. That act of defiance, very Serbian, crazily gallant and unrealistic but incontestably magnificent, cost Belgrade the murderous attentions of German air assault but

cost Hitler six crucial weeks of spring warfare in the Russian offensive.

The Cetniks and the Ustashe must never be equated. There was no systematic Cetnik reign of terror and massacre. The bands, taking their name from the *Ceti*, Serb guerrillas against the Turks in the 18th century, would in due course lose British support and the patience of Winston Churchill by their unwillingness to kill enough people. The pattern of reprisals (100 local lives for one German), was too ferocious to be gaily visited upon the civilian population.

Draza Mihailovic, the Cetnik leader, an attractive figure of great personal courage, would much later make a series of deals, especially with the more civilised Italians. He did so for two sound reasons, fear that the Communists might inherit the country at the end of a war, which by this later date was already lost to the axis, and a human unwillingness to provoke vast Nazi and Ustasha reprisals. The Communists, seizing the chances thrown up by the West's unconditional surrender mentality, did just that. Yet the essence of Serbian and Croatian response to Nazism can be summed up as respectively resistance and embrace.

One looks at contemporary Yugoslavia and finds two old Communists, Tadjman and Milosevich, a two-man double catastrophe, both playing the nationalist card. Ironically, the Communists have made themselves respectable in Serbia by chauvinism, while the Tadjman people with their Tudorbethan costumes, straight-arm salutes, triumphalist media and failure to disown the Ustasha past, give off a very distinct whiff of fascism. Given Croatia's track record in its last interval of independence, mere Fascism would be a marked improvement.