

## **The Ustashi - when the Catholic Church tried to forcibly convert Orthodox and Muslims by Loraine Boetter in his book Roman Catholicism**

In Yugoslavia there occurred during the Second World War one of the most cruel episodes in history—the massacre of Eastern Orthodox Serbs by Roman Catholic Croats, in an effort to make the province of Croatia solidly Roman Catholic. So hideous were the massacres that they surpass even those of the Duke of Alva in the Netherlands and those of St. Bartholomew's day in France. Most astonishing was the manner in which those crimes were ignored or hushed up at the time by almost all news services, although similar massacres of Jews in Germany were given the widest publicity—another demonstration of how subtly and efficiently Roman clericalism exerts its influence over the press and radio. But now a French author, Edmond Paris, who was born a Roman Catholic, has told the story in his fully-documented books. *The Vatican Against Europe* (1959' translated into English, 1961) and *Genocide in Satellite Croatia* (1959, translated into English, 1960). Another French author, Herve Lauriere, also a Roman Catholic by birth, has recorded the same events in his *Assassins in the Name of God*. Both Paris and Lauriere put the responsibility squarely on the priests of the Church of Rome.

Briefly, the story is as follows: After the First World War the Roman Catholic states of Croatia and Slovenia were united with the Eastern Orthodox state of Serbia to form the nation of Yugoslavia. Croatia had approximately 5,000,000 Roman Catholics and 3,000,000 who belonged to the Eastern Orthodox Church. At once the Croats began to intrigue against the Serbs. Terrorist Ustashi bands were organized. They received support from Mussolini, who financed them. When king Alexander I of Yugoslavia visited France in 1934, he was assassinated at Marseilles. The leader of the gang was Ante Pavelitch, who escaped to Italy, where Mussolini gave him protection and refused to surrender him to the Yugoslav government, although he was convicted of the crime in both French and Yugoslav courts.

When in 1941 the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia, the Croats, with Pavelitch as their leader, joined them. As a reward Hitler made Pavelitch the puppet head of the new Independent State of Croatia.' His minister of religion was Andrija Artukovitch, another Roman Catholic. Then began a war of suppression or extermination of all Serbs and Jews. Nearly 70,000 of the 80,000 Jews in the new state were killed or forced to flee, their property being confiscated. Official records and photographs show that Pavelitch and archbishop Stepinac were closely associated in governmental, social, and ecclesiastical affairs. Stepinac was appointed supreme military apostolic vicar of the Ustashi army led by Pavelitch. He was, therefore, in a position to know of the atrocities that were constantly taking place.

In May, 1941, after innumerable massacres had been committed Pavelitch went to Rome and was received by pope Pius XII, and on the same occasion signed a treaty with Mussolini. In June of that year more than 100,000 Orthodox Serbian men, women, and children were killed by the Ustashi. In all some 250 Orthodox churches were destroyed or turned over to Roman Catholic parishes and convents. Documents requesting and authorizing such transfers are now in the state prosecutor's office at Zagreb and Sarajevo, bearing the signature of archbishop Stepinac. In February, 1942, a *Te Deum* was sung in Stepinac's church in Zagreb, the then capital of Croatia, with special honours paid to Pavelitch. In a pastoral letter Stepinac declared that in spite of complexities, what they were seeing in Croatia was 'the Lord's work,' and called on his priests to support Pavelitch. Stepinac twice visited pope Pius XII, in Rome, in 1942. He reported that 244,000 Serbs had accepted (forced) conversion to Roman Catholicism. So the pope, too, was well informed as to what was going on in Serbia and Croatia. Edmond Paris places the total number of men, women and children killed by the Ustashi during the four years of the occupation at more than 500,000 (*The Vatican Against Europe*, p. 224).

When it became necessary for the Nazis to retreat from Yugoslavia, Pavelitch, Artukovitch, and almost all of the Roman priests went with them. After the war ended Yugoslav courts sentenced Stepinac to sixteen years imprisonment for his Nazi-Fascist collaboration. After serving five years he was released, but was kept under house arrest. The pope, however, rewarded his services by naming him a cardinal. Until his death in 1960, he was played up in Roman Catholic circles, particularly in the United States, as a 'martyr' even to the extent that cardinal Spellman, in New York, named a parochial high school after him.

Pavelitch again fled to Italy, where for some time he lived in disguise as a monk in a monastery, and later escaped to Argentina. Artukovitch too avoided capture, and eventually entered the United States under a false name and with a forged certificate of identity from Southern Ireland, and settled in California. Both Pavelitch and Artukovitch successfully resisted all efforts of the Yugoslav government to extradite them as war criminals. Pavelitch eventually returned to Spain, where he died in 1960. Los Angeles newspapers reported that through two court trials the principal efforts put forward to prevent the extradition of Artukovitch came from the Roman Catholic Church, of which he had been a lifelong member.

So reads another chapter of church-state intrigue as dark as any played out during the Middle Ages. Let it also be noted that both Hitler and Mussolini were Roman Catholics, but that despite their crimes against humanity neither was ever

excommunicated, nor even severely censured, by the Roman Church.