

CHAPTER V

CETNIKS

Cetniks, the triumph of a lie. Collaborate with Axis to destroy Croatia.

Any hopes that the Croatian government and nation harbored of avoiding being enmeshed in the web of war were dashed to smithereens.

Once war ensued with Russia, the Germans began to exact from the Croats the last pound of flesh. Over 300,000 Croats went as slave labor to Germany, and when that did not satiate Germany, the Nazis instituted a man hunt. While the Croats volunteered for the Eastern front, the Germans used the Croats with total disregard for the casualties suffered by the Croats. Dissatisfaction and hatred of the Germans, once covert, now flashed into the open and was ever on the increase. The Croatian people angrily demanded the government to do something, and despite efforts to stall and fend off the Germans demands the government was completely helpless.

But what eventually proved fatal to the Croatian state was its frightful sanguinary struggle with the cetniks and partisans.

Hatred between the Croats and Serbs let loose, while Yugoslavia was in its death throes, an orgy of bloodletting whose fury has seldom been witnessed in the volcanic Balkans.

The match that touched off this smoldering conflagration of hate and revenge was the cetniks' bestiality perpetrated at Illici and Cim, villages two kilometres from Mostar where I was finishing my studies for the priesthood. Croatia had been declared free April 10, 1941, and on the 13th, 14th and 15th of the same month the terroristic cetnik bands of Draza Mihailovich began their bestial work. In the villages sur-

rounding Capljina, close by to Mostar, the cetniks murdered 25 Croat peasants; at the village of Struge by Capljina the cetniks poured four dum-dum bullets into Franciska Vego who was holding her six month old child in her arms and was surrounded by four of her younger children.



Children of Franciska Vego with their grandmother, after the murder of their mother by the cetniks.

At Illici and Cim the cetniks burned down to the ground 85 houses, and many of the inhabitants were either killed or seriously wounded. Fra. Leo Petrovich, later my Provincial but then the Vicar of Mostar, together with Don Andrija Majich, the bishop's Chancellor, were caught in Illici; their hands were bound and with a revolver pointed at their heads, accompanied by constant threats of immediate death, were marched by the cetniks into Mostar and flung into prison.

Despite frequent talks with the survivors of this cetnik barbarity, and seeing for myself the ruins of Illici and Cim, I could not, and in the light of subsequent events, bring myself to believe that the Serbs could be guilty of such barbarity; but, all doubt left me as to who were the instigators of this bloody horror when the Croatian Episcopacy in its encyclical letter of March 25, 1945 laid the blame at the doorsteps of the cetniks and Serb communists: "Innocent Croatian blood has been poured out in the space of two world conflagrations in very many cities and villages of Croatia . . . when

THE TRAGEDY OF A NATION

AN AMERICAN'S EYE-WITNESS REPORT

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