

Nazi memorial in Croatia a disgrace to Europe

By Efraim Zuroff

A service for Hitler is unthinkable.

So why is the world quiet in response to a service for Ante Pavelić?

Imagine for a minute that memorial masses were held in two major cities in Germany on the anniversary of the death of Adolf Hitler. Needless to say, such a ceremony would arouse fury, indignation, and widespread protests not only in Germany, but throughout the entire world. Last week, the local equivalent of such an event took place in Croatia, but instead of anger and demonstrations, not a single word of protest was heard from anywhere in the country.

I am referring to the December 28 memorial masses conducted in Zagreb and Split (and perhaps elsewhere as well) to mark the 51st anniversary of the death of Ante Pavelić, the head of state of the infamous Independent State of Croatia, created by the Nazis and their Italian allies in 1941. Following its establishment, rule was turned over to the local fascist movement, the Ustasha, headed by its Poglavnik (leader) Ante Pavelić.

During the entire course of its brief existence (1941- 1945), the Ustasha sought to rid the country (which consisted of the area of today's Croatia plus most of Bosnia-Herzegovina) of all its minorities, as well as their local political opponents. In order to do so, they established a network of concentration camps all over the country, the largest and most notorious of which was Jasenovac, located on the banks of the Sava River, southeast of Zagreb. There, many tens of thousands of innocent civilians were murdered in a variety of brutal ways, which earned the camp the nickname of the "Auschwitz of the Balkans."

To this day, there continue to be disputes regarding the total number of civilians murdered by the Ustasha, but the number is certainly no fewer than several hundred thousand, primarily Serbs, along with Jews, Roma and anti-fascist Croats. And while all those who participated in these atrocities bear criminal responsibility, the individual with the greatest culpability was undoubtedly Ante Pavelić, who headed the most lethal regime in Axis-dominated Europe.

THE MEMORIAL masses to honor Pavelić, who died in Spain in 1959 from wounds suffered in an assassination attempt two years earlier, mark a renewal of a tradition which began in the 1990s following the reestablishment of Croatian independence. In the wake of the conviction in Zagreb of Jasenovac commandant Dinko Sakic and in response to protests by the Wiesenthal Center, the mass was stopped and the priest responsible, Vjekoslav Lasic, left Croatia.

Unfortunately, however, Lasic returned to Zagreb a few years ago and renewed his neo-fascist activity with impunity. At the funeral of Sakic, who insisted on being buried in his Ustasha uniform although in prison for his World War II crimes, it was Lasic who administered final rites. According to the Dominican priest, although Dinko Sakic did not observe all the Ten Commandments (Thou shalt not murder?), he was a model for all Croatians, and every Croat should be proud of his name.

The question now is, how does such an event to honor the memory of one of the biggest mass murderers of World War II pass with nary a word of protest or condemnation? The obvious address for such indignation would be in Croatia itself, where many people fought with Tito's partisans against the Ustasha, and a significant sector of the population have a strong anti-fascist tradition. But the same question applies outside the country as well.

Croatia is well on its way to membership in the European Union (slated for 2013), a membership which is ostensibly contingent on the acceptance of EU values and norms. Is a memorial mass for one of Europe's worst war criminals compatible with EU membership?

The sad truth is that in this respect, the European Union has failed miserably in dealing with the resurgence of neo-fascism and the promotion of Holocaust distortion in its post-Communist

members. Once admitted to the EU (and NATO), countries like Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary and Romania have begun to take active steps to rewrite their World War II histories, minimizing or attempting to hide the highly-significant role played by their nationals in Holocaust crimes, with barely a word of protest or condemnation from Brussels.

Instead of actively combating the Prague Declaration of June 3, 2008, which promotes the canard of historical equivalency between Nazi and Communist crimes and undermines the justified status of the Holocaust as a unique case of genocide, the EU has failed to adequately respond to this dangerous challenge to the accepted Western narrative of World War II and its tragic consequences.

I wish I could conclude with the good news that Israel and the Jewish world have responded appropriately, but unfortunately that is not the case. These developments have been purposely ignored by the Israeli government, which under Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman refuses to respond to the assault on our past in those countries which have evinced no particular interest in championing the Palestinian cause.

Last week's masses in honor of Ante Pavelić are a mockery of Christian values and an insult to all the victims of the Ustasha, their relatives, friends, and people of morality and conscience the world over. The time has come for effective protests from within Croatia, as well as from the European Union, the United States and Canada, Israel and the Jewish world. That is the minimum that we owe the victims of that notorious mass murderer.

The writer is the chief Nazi-hunter of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and director of its Israel Office. His most recent book is, Operation Last Chance; One Man's Quest to Bring Nazi Criminals to Justice, (Palgrave/Macmillan).

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