

OPINION

# Israel's perplexing recognition of Croatia

Shlomo Tadmor

ALL nations celebrate their victories. Serbs and Jews also prominently commemorate their defeats.

The Jewish calendar assigns four dates on which to remember the destruction of the Temple; the Serbs commemorate their defeat by the Turks at Kosovo in 1389. Each event was a national disaster which throughout the ages has sustained and hardened the nation's will to survive.

On June 28, 1914, the Austrian Empire insensitively held a big parade in Sarajevo on the Battle of Kosovo's anniversary, and Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Serbian patriots from Bosnia. The well-armed powers then got their pretext for opening hostilities. At the end of World War I, and as a result of it, Yugoslavia came into being.

But Yugoslavia's history doesn't start there. It starts in 1804, with the Serbian insurrection against the Turks, leading to autonomy and eventually, in 1878, to independence. That year, too, a time bomb was planted in the Balkans: Austria was given then-Turkish Bosnia and Herzegovina as a mandate, but annexed them in 1908, leaving a legacy of hate which came home to roost in 1914.

In WWI, Serbia fought with the Allies. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later named Yugoslavia, i.e. Southern Slavia, was established in 1918.

It is ironic that Croatia, whose intellectuals and poets played such

a prominent part in the creation and promotion of the idea of Yugoslavia, broke it up twice: in 1941 by defecting to the Nazis, proclaiming itself the "Independent State of Croatia," and in 1991 by bolting the southern Slav federation.

It is as well to remember what the so-called "Independent State of Croatia," 1941-1945, perpetrated. The Serbs within its boundaries (three quarters of a million) were systematically and barbari-

last summer bombs went off in the Jewish cemetery of Zagreb. Its Jewish community center was also bombed - and not by Serbian planes from above!

THIS, then, is the state which Israel just recognized. A state in which the church of yesterday, which eagerly cooperated with thugs and cutthroats, is the church of today. A state whose president dabbles in antisemitic and anti-Israel writings and calls

lost a third of its land." But that third wasn't Croatian until 1945. It is at best contested land.

Croatian propaganda uses "Chetniks" as a pejorative. But Chetniks were Serbian guerrillas who fought in two Balkan wars (1912-13) and in the last war, against the Germans. True, so did the communists ("partisans"). But the Chetniks, not the partisans; were the first to raise the standard of rebellion. It was their bad luck to be royalists, eventually to be abandoned when Churchill threw his backing to Tito. But from there to being compared to the Ustashi is a far cry. The Ustashi were the Croatian SS and Einsatzgruppen combined. The Chetniks were neither.

Later on, in Tito's Yugoslavia, the Serbs were robbed of chunks of their land, of their historical credit, their honor, their memories, and of the right to mourn their dead. Mentioning and commemorating the mutilated martyrs who floated down the Sava were strictly forbidden. Could you imagine Jews being forbidden to remember and commemorate the Holocaust?

Current events must be understood in the light of those traumas that have been bottled up for 46 years. Moreover, the Serbs do not want to be a minority ever again. Surely we of all people should feel sympathetic to this sentiment! Serbs are not seeking a "greater Serbia." They want to stay what they are, keeping their heritage, culture and Pravoslav religion - unmolested and together.

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cally slaughtered.

The Jews, too, were soon in Jasenovac and in other concentration camps - raped, tortured and killed. In areas of mixed population, i.e. Serbian and Croatian, it was invariably Serbians who hid and sometimes managed to save Jews.

It is remarkable that of the 12,500 to 15,000 Yugoslav Jews and their descendants living in Israel today, many raise their voices on behalf of Serbia, but not a single one has a good word to say about Croatia.

Why this deep hostility to and suspicion of the new state of Croatia? The answer lies not only in the terrible past but also in the short present of the new state. The new Croatia is using the symbols, paraphernalia and trappings of its Nazi precursor. Other more ominous signs have already appeared:

Jasenovac, where 50,000 Jews and half a million Serbs perished, "a myth."

Why did Israel recognize a state like that? To spite Belgrade for having dragged its feet in re-establishing relations with us? Expediency? Perhaps *raison d'etat* - such as placating the EC, that conglomerate of consistently anti-Israel arms merchants, who want to elbow their way into the Middle East disarmament negotiations?

Or is it putative self-interest, such as pleasing Germany so that it will provide the loan guarantees that the US refused to supply? Croatia has everything to gain by being recognized by Israel. What do we stand to gain?

We owe nothing to the Croats. Uninformed news reports and semantics play a great part in blurring the facts. A Reuter dispatch of January 7, 1992, states: "Croatia has