

MARY-MAKING IN HERZEGOVINA

From Apparitions to Partitions

As noted earlier, during the Great Novena (1975–84) the Croat episcopate carried out ethnic mobilization and religious awakening of Catholic Croats under the symbolic guidance of the Virgin Mary, referred to as the “Queen of the Croats.” However, in June 1981, a rival Croatian Virgin Mary appeared, seemingly, without the church authorities’ knowledge and approval. On 24 June 1981, six children from the village of Medjugorje in western Herzegovina reported that they had encountered a Croatian-speaking Madonna.¹ They received divine messages that were announced and translated into foreign languages by the local Franciscans. Within a few weeks, columns of pilgrims from the country and abroad swamped the area and set in motion what would become the longest series of Marian apparitions in the history of the Catholic Church.² The apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Herzegovina unfolded into a massive devotional movement that resembled such sporadic occurrences elsewhere in the Catholic world.³ Almost as a rule, the histories of each of these movements show concurrent church-state or interfaith conflict and crisis in society.⁴

Before the apparitions of 1981, the toponym Medjugorje had been little known even in Yugoslavia. The region of western Herzegovina was overwhelmingly populated by Catholic Croats, with some Muslims and only a few Orthodox Serbs (a sizeable Orthodox community was decimated by the Ustašas in World War II). Natives of the area, however, were better known in western Europe. Many had spent years in the jails of Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and other countries, where, as the Croat author Ivan Raos tells in the novel *Prosjaci i sinovi* (In a free translation: “Beggars & Sons, Inc.”), they practiced their trade as professional beggars, black marketeers, and petty thieves. The local Franciscans were a mirror image of their flock. The area was a stronghold of militant Catholics, whose anger mounted during the ecclesiastical tensions in the 1930s (see chapter 1). In 1934, the Catholic

Croats of the Čitluk-Medjugorje parish erected, in honor of the 1900th anniversary of the death of Jesus, a thirty-foot-high concrete cross on the Križevac hill, less than a mile from the site of the 1981 apparitions. During World War II, Catholics from the area filled the ranks of the Croat fascist Ustaša. Many Ustaša leaders received education at the Franciscan monastery at Široki Brijeg, not very far from Medjugorje. In February 1945, Široki Brijeg was the site of a bitter battle between joint Ustaša-German forces fortified in the monastery and the communist-led Partisan brigades. After taking heavy casualties, the Partisans captured the stronghold and executed 12 clerics they found there. After 1945, 70 priests, monks, and relatives of Ustaša leaders from western Herzegovina were sentenced to death.⁵ Among the executed, 67 were Franciscan monks, the most faithful Ustaša allies. The surviving members of the Herzegovinian Franciscan Province of the Assumption of Mary, as one of them proudly reported to me in an interview, served a total of 500 years in prison in the following decades.⁶ In the midst of the persecution, several apparitions of the Virgin Mary, followed by pilgrimages and crowding at apparitions sites, were reported in 1945 and 1946. According to William Christian Jr., who carried out research on Marian apparitions in European history, four visions were said to have taken place at mass graves in the Catholic republics of Slovenia and Croatia where the communists had executed their wartime opponents.⁷

The 1981 apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Medjugorje could best be understood within the broader context of the struggle between the Roman Catholic Church and communism in the twentieth century, as well as with the context of the anticommunist backlash in Yugoslavia after the death of Tito in May 1980. In addition, the Medjugorje “miracle” occurred in the midst of a deep social and economic crisis⁸ and growing ethnic tensions in the country.

The Medjugorje “miracle” had drawn a massive following but also encountered bitter opposition. The oppositions came from the bishop of Mostar, the regime, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The bishop of Mostar, Monsignor Pave Žanić, was convinced that members of the Franciscan Province of the Assumption, who had disobeyed the episcopal authority for over a hundred years, had engineered the miracle in order to forestall the bishop’s plan for a redistribution of parishes in favor of diocesan clergy. The bishop’s initial assumption was that the child visionaries were either mentally ill or hypnotized by the Franciscans or both. After an investigation that included medical testing, no abnormalities in any of the visionaries could be found. The visionaries underwent several rounds of subsequent testing, which also included investigations of numerous healings reported by pilgrims to Medjugorje.⁹ Meanwhile, both the bishop and the friars from Medjugorje were interrogated by the local police in Mostar and brought to the headquarters of the secret police in Sarajevo. Bishop Žanić, eager to discredit the Franciscans and heal once and for all the old sore in the Church, was happy for

the opportunity to collaborate with the SDB against the friars. Žanić gave to secret police operatives in Sarajevo his findings based on the bishop's investigation as well as other useful information about the friars of Medjugorje, whom both the bishop and the communists held accountable for the engineering of the apparitions.¹⁰ Bishop Žanić was furious when the Franciscans announced through one of the Madonna's messages, allegedly entrusted to the Franciscans by the visionaries, that the Mother of God viewed the Franciscans as the righteous party in the dispute with the bishop over the distribution of parishes. The bishop urged the communist police to put the friars under arrest, while at the same time demanding that the Vatican discipline them.

According to Bishop Pave Žanić, the principal suspects of the manipulation of the child visionaries were the Herzegovinian Franciscan friars Slavko Barbarić and Tomislav Vlašić, with two friars who had been expelled from the Church.¹¹ One of the excommunicated, Ivica Vego, who went furthest in opposing the bishop while also showing propensity for fishy business and licentious behavior, was first suspended and warned to stop bothering the children.¹² Later, Bishop Žanić published and circulated a booklet report on the case. It included his interviews with the seers and interrogations of Barbarić, Vlašić, and Vego. According to the bishop, friar Slavko Barbarić, chaplain in Blagaj, had become impressed with mysticism and Catholic charismatic movements while studying pastoral psychology in Italy. Barbarić earned a master's degree in child psychology and during his studies in Rome joined the Catholic charismatic movement *Comunione e liberazione*. In Medjugorje, Barbarić trained the children together with Friar Tomislav Vlašić, then chaplain in the nearby village of Vitina, and Vego. Even the archbishop of Split, Metropolitan Franić, who would become one of most ardent supporters of the Medjugorje cult among Croatian bishops, once told me that Friar Barbarić, as a top expert in charismatic religiosity, was "coaching" the child visionaries, thus preparing them for visions and miracles. Yet in contrast to his colleague Žanić, Franić would argue that the children's experience was authentic and inspired by true faith that would result in a devotional movement of paramount importance for the Church. In Franić's view, Barbarić's work with the children was not a manipulation motivated by immoral or nonreligious goals, quite the contrary, the friar did an excellent job at what he was supposed to do.

In 1982, three Franciscans in west Herzegovina were jailed for "hostile propaganda," a criminal offense from the Federal Penal Code. One of the friars, Jozo Zovko, served in the time of the apparitions as a parish administrator in Medjugorje, while the other two issued a religious newspaper in which the regime found seditious and anti-Yugoslav content. Zovko was accused of making hostile and malicious allusions to the Yugoslav political system, which he portrayed as a prison system and a "40-year-long slavery" in which the people were exposed to "false teachings."¹³ According to the

indictment, Zovko made the speeches during his 11 July 1981 sermon at the Saint James Church and two weeks later on the occasion of Bishop Žanić's visit to Medjugorje. In the bishop's presence, Zovko sermonized about the "false teachings" of some Church authorities. The false teachings allegation, according to the state prosecutor, were interpreted as an attack on the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, Marxism, and self-management socialism. Bishop Žanić argued with Zovko after the mass and warned him that the Church teachings about Marian apparitions were to be respected.¹⁴ The friar Zovko, who would later (especially on television and interviews for the press in the United States and other Western countries) contend that he himself had seen the Virgin Mary at Medjugorje, argued that the apparitions at Medjugorje occurred as a spontaneous spiritual experience of exceptionally gifted believers, mystics, and, as he put it, "lovers of prayer" (*ljubitelji molitve*).¹⁵ Of course, there is no reason to doubt the visionaries' special talents and devotion. They grew up in a sectarian community permeated by devout Catholicism, excessive ethnicism, and memories of World War II Croatian martyrdom (the children did not know about Serb mass graves). The seers of Medjugorje were not merely someone's puppets. Christian, the scholar of Marian apparitions, observed visionaries' autonomy in other cases comparable to that of Medjugorje.¹⁶

Friar Zovko was portrayed by Western media as a martyr and hero of democratic opposition to communism. Yet the bishop of Mostar did not change his opinion. In an address to a group of young pilgrims at Medjugorje on 25 July 1987, Žanić said that in 1982 he had appointed a special commission of 15 theologians, psychologists, and psychiatrists to study the case and after three years of investigation, 2 members accepted the apparitions as genuine, 1 member abstained, and 11 declared that "there was nothing supernatural in the Medjugorje apparitions."¹⁷ Two more commissions were appointed by the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia and by the Holy See. The bishop of Mostar remained intransigent: "The Madonna has never said anything at Medjugorje . . . all that is merely a mass delusion, euphoria, and spectacle for tourists."¹⁸

In the meantime, the Herzegovinian hamlet became world famous. In 1985 some 25,000 believers with 80 foreign and native priests gathered to mark the third anniversary of the miracle.¹⁹ In 1988, according to rough estimates, almost 10 million people from all over the world made pilgrimage to Medjugorje. Most of the foreign visitors came from Italy, the United States, Canada, Australia, Spain, Austria, Germany, and France, as well as Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²⁰ The Italian Christian Democratic Party, caught up in a crisis caused by the worst corruption scandal since its foundation, urged party leaders, officials, members, and supporters to go to Medjugorje for inner purification and spiritual renewal. Flaminio Piccoli, Giulio Andreotti, and many other Christian Democrat ex-officials traveled privately to Medjugorje a number of times. Italian newspapers calculated that Italian tourist enterprises alone had harvested a total of 10 billion dollars since the

pilgrimages began, which then equaled half of the total Yugoslav foreign debt.²¹ In the United States, the Franciscan center in Steubenville, Ohio, took charge of propaganda and the coordination of the swiftly growing Medjugorje devotional movement. "Medjugorje centers" were established in Ohio, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Texas, Iowa, and elsewhere throughout the United States.

The Yugoslav regime in 1987 changed its policy toward Medjugorje, and in 1988, systematic registration and taxation of pilgrims was introduced. Domestic travel agencies took over the religious tourism business, and a new chain of hotels was completed in a rush during 1988.²² A U.S. magazine estimated in the early 1990s that "no fewer than 11 million people" had made pilgrimage to Medjugorje.²³ Meanwhile thousands of articles, books, videos, several documentaries, and a feature film on the Gospa of Medjugorje were released in Yugoslavia and abroad.²⁴ Testimonies about miraculous healings puzzled international councils of doctors. The visionaries and their Franciscan spiritual advisors toured foreign countries to be interviewed by journalists and experts, Church and security officials, doctors, the pious, and the curious. All the visionaries continued to report occasional encounters with the Virgin Mary. Four out of the six original seers claimed that the Gospa was appearing to them occasionally. Through Marija Pavlović, the divine messages to the world come routinely on the twenty-fifth of every month. The Croatian episcopate, after successfully completing the Great Novena, tacitly supported the Madonna of Medjugorje. The Vatican released a recommendation for "private" pilgrimages to Medjugorje, while keeping busy theological commissions investigating the case.²⁵ Meanwhile, Medjugorje acquired information center, hotels and golf courses. New businesses grew and residents increased their otherwise good living standard.

Beyond Mysticism: The Politics of Marian Apparitions

The cult of the Virgin Mary has been widely used for a long time as symbol of national identity and vehicle of nationalistic movements. The "Black Madonna" of Czestochowa is the national symbol of Poland. The statue harbored at the Jasna Gora shrine was a driving force of numerous nationalistic movements in the history of Poland, among them the struggle between the Church of Poland and communism, which has become a celebrated Cold War Myth. The Virgin of Guadalupe is revered as a patron saint of Mexico and as symbol of identity for Mexicans in Mexico and Mexicans in the United States. Likewise, the Virgin of Montserrat, located in a monastery near Barcelona, inspired the Catalan people's sense of national identity and fueled the long struggle for autonomy of Catalonia under various regimes. "In many ways Montserrat is to Catalonia what the Jasna Gora monastery is to Poland," wrote Hank Johnston, and went on to explain that "Montserrat

has a long Catalan nationalist tradition. And is home of Catalonia's patron saint—a black image of the Virgin Mary (the 'Virgin of Montserrat'). . . . In 1947 the monastery was the scene of the first mass demonstration of Catalanist sentiment after the Civil War. Religious Catalanism was important in the development of Catalan nationalism."²⁶ Consequently the Virgin Mary could be correctly designated the founding mother of many nation-states and a weapon for stateless nations in their quest for statehood.

In the historical perspective of the twentieth century as a century of ideological wars, the Medjugorje "miracle" fueled both Croat nationalism and anticommunist struggle. It was initiated shortly after Tito's death in the region that was a fortress of the pro-Axis domestic ethnic nationalists and anticommunist fighters during World War II. At Medjugorje, the Virgin appeared on the sixty-fourth anniversary of the Marian apparitions at Fatima, Portugal. The Fatima "miracle" of 1917 and subsequent "Fatima movement" in the Iberian peninsula and in the Church worldwide were aimed at opposing the spread of communism; they coincided with the Bolshevik revolution and rise of communism worldwide. At Fatima, in June 1917, the Virgin, as the Church would teach decades later—not immediately, of course, because church leaders as well as religious "visionaries" are ordinary people who do not really and exactly know what is happening around them in the world and in history—delivered some sort of an "early warning" to the world about the oncoming menace spreading from Russia and continued to "predict" what would follow as the consequence of the Russian October. According to the 1917 Fatima "secret messages"—revealed not by the visionaries but by Pope Pius XII (who allegedly had the knowledge of the visionaries' confessions to the priests in charge), incidentally, between 1942 and 1943, that is, before it became clear that the Soviet Union would defeat Nazi Germany—Russia "will convert" eventually, after a long struggle and suffering; this "conversion" will occur during "the 'last Madonna's apparitions on Earth,'" to be followed by a long-lasting "reign of peace" and renaissance of religion worldwide.²⁷ The Fatima myth would develop into one of most efficient forms of popular anticommunist mobilization in the twentieth century created and carried out by the Roman Catholic Church. Explaining the historical significance of Fatima apparitions on the occasion of the millennial jubilee of Christianity in 2000, one of highest ranked Vatican officials, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, said: "The vision of Fatima concerns above all the war waged by atheist systems against the Church and Christians, and it describes the immense suffering endured by the witnesses to the faith in the last century of the second millennium."²⁸

How was the myth made? The "miracle" and visionaries, as already noted, occurred initially as a local affair, a religious event in an obscure Portugese hamlet in June 1917. In the 1930s, one of the visionaries from Fatima, Lucia Dos Santos, became a Catholic nun. The Church would subsequently "reveal" some "secrets" allegedly told by the Madonna to Lucia, which Lucia confessed to the Church authorities and no one else. Thus

between 1917 and the 1940s, a great twentieth-century myth was born. Of course, Fatima was not without precedents, and Church experts in myth-making were not without experience. In the modern era, the Church utilized ever-popular Marian apparitions as weapons in the struggle against secularization, liberalism, liberal nationalism, freemasonry, socialism, and communism and against hostile regimes and rival religions. Seven apparitions in the modern era were officially “approved” by the Vatican. The first great wave of Marian apparitions in modern Europe occurred in the aftermath of the church-state struggle triggered by the French Revolution. The Commune of Paris in 1871, during which the anticlerical Communards executed the archbishop of Paris, prompted a vehement Church response through massive pilgrimages to Lourdes, Rue du Bac, and Pontmain; consecrations of the Virgin’s statues and shrines, and Marian festivals and commemorations. Apparitions were reported during the unification of Italy and Germany in the 1870s, during the Carlist Wars of the 1840s and the liberal-conservative struggles in the 1890s in Spain, and in the wake of the foundation of the Spanish Republic in 1931.

The Fatima myth and the symbol known as “Our Lady of Fatima” became the battering ram of the Catholic Church’s anticommunist crusade in the twentieth century. In 1917, the “Militia of the Immaculate Conception” was founded, and in 1921 the “Legion of Mary” enhanced the ranks of Catholic Action. The Church responded to the persecution of religion in the Soviet Union and to the struggle between the Church and the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, by revealing a first package of Fatima Prophecies.²⁹ In 1925–41, the Fatima visionary Lucia Dos Santos wrote memoirs and revealed those “secrets.” Sister Lucia lived throughout the whole century, so that she could “reveal” Madonna’s “secrets” in the 1960s, in the 1980s, and again, at the age of 93, on the threshold of the new millennium.

The Fatima myth has a special role in the history of the Cold War. William Christian Jr. found that between 1947 and 1954, 112 visions and apparitions were reported, which is on average four times as many visions per year in this period as in the rest of the years from 1930 to 1975.³⁰ Moreover, during the critical period of the Cold War, between 1948 and 1958, over 126 Marian Congresses were held in various countries and the year of 1954 was proclaimed the Marian Year by the anticommunist Pope Pius XII.³¹ According to estimates given by the leading Marian theologian Rene Laurentin, by the late 1950s nearly thousand new books on Mary were being published every year, and this includes only scholarly works, let alone thousands of devotional books and pamphlets.³² In this period a new practice was introduced—the feasts of the consecration to the Immaculate Heart. It was carried out through “voyage-missions” of the Madonna’s statue or image from parish to parish in towns and villages.³³ In Spain, the dictator Franco received and welcomed the traveling image of Our Lady at the Prado Palace in Madrid. In Italy, the Church and Christian Democratic Party (DC), came together in attendance of Marian “voyage missions” during

electoral campaigns.³⁴ The anticommunist use of Mary was conspicuous in Chile in 1973. As the Marxist Salvador Allende and his socialists were heading toward an electoral victory (they won, only to be shortly toppled in a bloody military coup led by Augusto Pinochet), the Church, the rightist groups, and the Virgin Mary's statue stepped in. The symbol of the "Our Lady of Fatima" arrived in Brazil. According to a report released by the local Catholic lay movement the Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), Brazil welcomed the "Pilgrim Statue of Our Lady of Fatima which had miraculously shed tears in New Orleans, U.S.A.," and it toured the country until "the fiasco of the Marxist 'experiment' in Chile."³⁵ The voyages of the "miraculous statue" continued throughout South America in 1974, organized by the so-called Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima in Brazil. Finally, in Poland, in the course of the Catholic Church jubilee, the Great Novena of the Millennium, in 1957–66, the replica of the Black Madonna Queen of Poland was touring the country to mobilize anticommunist forces. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) made an attempt to curb the uncontrolled use of Mary, urging the bishops to carefully scrutinize each case of mystical experiences. Yet the apparitions continued. During the historic council, millions flocked to San Damiano (in Piacenza, Italy) and Garabandal (in northern Spain), where new Marian apparitions had been reported.³⁶

To be sure, the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje did not suit quite well the official version of the Fatima myth. As noted earlier, the final triumphant Madonna's apparitions were to occur in Russia at the moment of the collapse of communism. The Medjugorje miracle, viewed from the vantage point of the Fatima "prophecies," came both prematurely and in the wrong place. The official Church tolerated but never recognized Medjugorje. Pope John Paul II consecrated Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on 13 May 1982. Apparitions of the Virgin Mary were reported at Hrushiv, in western Ukraine, in 1987, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Fatima miracle. Thus in 1987, for the second time since 1954, the Madonna visited Ukrainian Uniate communities, while in Kiev, the Russian Orthodox Church (with government support) celebrated the grand jubilee of the Millennium of Orthodoxy in Russia. Russia might have "converted" from atheistic communism, but Orthodox faith was growing stronger.

The apparitions in the Ukraine were overshadowed by the Balkan spectacle at Medjugorje. While only a few thousand people turned out at Hrushiv, millions from all around the globe had flocked to Medjugorje. The Fatima scenario was disrupted.³⁷ Incidentally, in 1987 the Madonna of Medjugorje announced through the Croatian visionaries that Medjugorje apparitions would be the last Marian apparitions on Earth.

The Apparitions in Herzegovina and the Yugoslav Crisis of the 1980s

The Catholic Church never in history fully controlled the mountainous Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the fourteenth century, Franciscans were sent to Bosnia to wipe out the so-called Bogumil heresy. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Catholicism had to retreat from advancing Islam. A few Catholic communities survived around Franciscan monasteries at Olovo, Fojnica, Kreševo, Kraljeva Sutjeska, and elsewhere, while Orthodox Serb enclaves also held out around the monasteries of Mileševo and Žitomisljić and others. Bosnian Franciscan monasteries, wrote Ivo Andrić, “throughout the centuries of Turkish rule . . . constituted a kind of storage battery of popular energy, and monks enjoyed the people’s sympathy and respect far more than did the diocesan clergy.”³⁸ In 1573, the pope appointed Fra Anton Matković the first bishop of Bosnia from Franciscan ranks. After the Austrian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878, the official Church sought to solidify episcopal authority and restore regular ecclesiastical organization. “With Bosnia’s occupation by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1878,” wrote Ivo Andrić, “and the establishment of normal social and ecclesiastical conditions, the historic mission of the Bosnian Franciscans came to an end.”³⁹ The Austrian archbishop of Sarajevo, Josef Stadler (1843–1918), installed after the Austrian occupation, attempted to reduce Franciscan influence by bringing the Jesuits to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Stadler also initiated redistribution of parishes in favor of secular clergy. The Franciscans resisted. Yet they were themselves divided over the Austro-Hungarian policies in Bosnia and emerging native nationalistic movements. The once-unified Bosnian Franciscan province, so-called Silver Bosnia, split into two parts. In 1846, a group of monks seceded from the Kreševo monastic community to establish the monastery of Široki Brijeg in western Herzegovina. In 1892, the new monastery became the main center of the new Herzegovinian Franciscan province (the Franciscan Province of the Assumption of Mary in Herzegovina). Although secular clergy and bishops labored on the redistribution of parishes, at the beginning of the 1940s, the Franciscans in Bosnia-Herzegovina (both provinces) were still unchallenged: they held 63 of the total of 79 parishes, 29 monasteries, five seminaries, a few hospitals, various business establishments, and a considerable number of landholdings.⁴⁰ Under communism, many of the Franciscans of the Silver Bosnia province sympathized with the Yugoslav civil religion of brotherhood and unity. By contrast, west Herzegovinian friars who during the war had sided with the Ustaša labored against Yugoslavism and communism and dreamed about the restoration of the Croat state. In the 1970s, the west Herzegovinian Franciscan province recovered, thanks to financial help from Herzegovinian guest workers in

West Germany and other west European countries. In the 1980s, the Herzegovinian Franciscan province had 80 monks who served 40 parishes.⁴¹

Yet, as early as the mid-1970s, some of the Franciscan parishes in western Herzegovina, notwithstanding a bitter opposition, had been taken over by the bishop of Mostar and secular clergy. In order to counter the official Church's campaign, the friars of Herzegovina established an association of priests and laypeople, called Peace and Goodness. The association developed into a local movement for church autonomy that opposed diocesan policies in Herzegovina and provided popular support for the Franciscans' self-rule. The Vatican strongly backed the local bishop. According to 1975 papal decree entitled *Romanis pontificibus*, the Franciscans were ordered to abandon most of the parishes to the bishop and withdraw into monasteries. In the years that preceded the apparitions at Medjugorje, the bishop made an effort to execute the papal decree. The friars sought support at home and abroad.⁴² Church leaders acted cautiously, trying to avoid conflict with a stubborn opponent.⁴³

In the 1980s, Catholic-Orthodox relations had worsened. In the context of the conflict of the churches, the Medjugorje movement added much fuel to the fire of the growing enmity. The Serbs and their Orthodox Church looked at the apparitions angrily. For them there was no doubt about the character of the "miracle" of Medjugorje: it could be only a relapse to Ustašism. The Ustašas left a bloody legacy and bitter memories among Orthodox Serbs in Herzegovina. During the Ustaša terror of 1941-42, the Ustašas ethnically cleansed half of the Serb population of Herzegovina. The area is full of mass graves. Natural pits (*jamias*), trenches, ravines, and underground cracks in the Herzegovinian limestone karst were burial sites of Ustaša victims but also harbored relics of the Croats—victims of the communists' and the Serbian nationalist militant Četniks' revenge. According to a map of mass graves and execution sites based on research by a Serbian author, there are 17 *jamias* and mass graves in the zone around Medjugorje, which includes the Mostar, Čapljina, and Gabela regions.⁴⁴ Four mass graves, Šurmanci, Prebilovci, Vidonje, and Bivolje Brdo lie within several miles of Medjugorje. In August 1941 the bishop of Mostar, the Franciscan Alojzije Mišić, wrote to the archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac: "those Ustaša brought six wagons full of mothers, girls and children under eight, to the station of Šurmanci, where the victims were taken out of the wagons, brought into the hills and thrown alive, mothers and children, into deep ravines."⁴⁵ The Franciscan assistance to the criminal Ustaša provided an opportunity for the bishop to discredit the disobedient friars.

In the 1980s, the bishop of Mostar and the Franciscans of Herzegovina were at odds, as always. However, as the possible breakup of Yugoslavia became possibility, especially when Slobodan Milošević came to power in Serbia, many Croat church leaders saw the Marian movement in Herzegovina as an instrument of national homogenization of the Croats from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. For example, the archbishop of Split, Frane

Franić, encouraged the new Marian cult and urged the faithful in his diocese to make pilgrimage to Medjugorje. As the pilgrims flocked to Medjugorje, the statue of Our Lady “Queen of Peace” of Fatima set out for “voyage missions” through parishes in Dalmatia. Monsignor Alojzije Bavčević, then the rector of Catholic seminary in Split, in the fall of 1983 brought several statues of the Queen of Peace from Italy to Southern Croatia and distributed them to rural parishes in the hinterland of Dalmatia. The Madonnas were packed into polished wooden altarlike boxes, with the Fatima’s messages on the “conversion of Russia” typed on a sheet of paper attached to the box. In the Marian shrine of Sinj and surrounding villages, apparitions of the Madonna were reported during the “voyage missions.” A 16-year-old girl from the village of Gala announced that she had seen the Virgin Mary. The familiar scenario of Medjugorje and other apparition sites was repeated. Thousands of pilgrims flocked to the apparition site, and many buses carrying pilgrims to Medjugorje turned from the Split-Mostar highway to take a look at the site of the newest miracle. The police surrounded the site, searched houses, arrested the visionary and the local clergy, and repeatedly dismantled wooden crosses erected on the apparition site, until the faithful built in a six-foot high concrete cross which the police finally let stand there.

The girl visionary from Gala was sentenced to two weeks in prison for “disseminating false news” and “alarming the public.”⁴⁶ Police carried out an investigation that resulted in the indictment of three Catholic priests of the Split-Makarska diocese. Alojzije Bavčević, the rector of Catholic seminary in Split, who purchased the Madonnas in Italy and imported them to Yugoslavia, with two parish priests from the Sinj area who organized the “voyage missions,” were charged with violating the federal criminal code by allegedly “insulting a foreign country” (Russia). The indictment alleged that

in the period from October 1983 to April 1984, the suspects conceived, planned, and carried out a ceremonial tour of the statue of the so-called “Our Lady of Fatima”—an icon revered by the church-going people as sacred and capable of performing miracles—throughout the parishes and villages of Trilj, Košute, and other places. . . . The statues were purchased and imported from Italy by the indicted Bavčević, who retyped and attached to the box with the Madonna’s statue a text titled “Mary’s Words from Fatima to the World,” in which a foreign country, the USSR, is ridiculed and insulted. . . . Bavčević handed out the incriminated statues to the indicted Milan Vrdoljak and Vjenceslav Kujundžić, who exposed them in parish churches and organized their circulation among believer’s families and homes.⁴⁷

The indictment never reached the court. In order to mollify the increasingly frustrated authorities, the archbishop of Split, Frane Franić, decided to discontinue the Madonna’s voyage missions and revised the text of the Fatima message so that the word “Russia” was replaced by “the world.”⁴⁸

Some members of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia, including the chief architect of the Great Novena jubilee, Metropolitan Franić, began to argue that the Medjugorje apparitions merited support as a promising instrument of mobilization for the anticommunist struggle as well as energizer of the Croatian national struggle. The Vatican seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion. According to a statement in a U.S. magazine, Castellano Cervera, a specialist in Mariology who visited Medjugorje and held consultations in the Vatican, said: "it seems clear to me that one can go to Medjugorje, just as one goes to any sanctuary, to deepen one's Christian life."⁴⁹ Finally, the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia held its regular session in Zadar on 9–11 April 1991 and released a communiqué on Medjugorje, which proclaimed: *non constat de supernaturalitate!* The bishops said that the Church would be nonetheless following the course of events and would provide special pastoral services and any other necessary assistance to the numerous pilgrims at Medjugorje.⁵⁰ Further, the Church recognized Medjugorje "as a holy place, as a shrine" and presumed that the people who come to Medjugorje do so in order to "venerate the Mother of God in a manner also in agreement with the teaching and belief of the Church so that the Church has nothing against it."⁵¹ The American Catholic priest Richard J. Beyer wrote in his book on Medjugorje that "from all accounts, and looking at the new (postcommunist) world around us, Medjugorje has ushered in a new age of peace."⁵² According to Beyer, in July 1989 the visionaries reported that the Blessed Virgin Mary had said the following: "Love your Serbian Orthodox and Muslim brothers, and even the atheists who persecute you."⁵³

In the meantime, the Medjugorje movement was closely watched by the increasingly frustrated Serbian Orthodox Church. As early as the mid-1980s, the Orthodox Church press pointed out that the Catholic Bogoroditsa had appeared amid the unmarked mass graves in which the Croatian Fascists had dumped hundreds of thousands of Serbs who refused conversion to Catholicism and even those who had been converted.⁵⁴ The Serbian scholar Milan Bulajić called the Medjugorje apparitions an introduction to another genocide against Serbs, again unfolding under the auspices of the Catholic Church like the genocide of World War II.⁵⁵ Bulajić contended that the jailed Franciscan friar Jozo Zovko had allegedly taught the children of Medjugorje the Fascist salute.⁵⁶ The Holy Bishops' Sabor of the Serbian Orthodox Church released from its session held in Belgrade on 26 June 1989 a letter on Catholic-Orthodox relations in which Serb Orthodox bishops wrote about the concentration camp of Jasenovac and "countless pits and mass graves such as that near Medjugorje."⁵⁷ In October 1990, the Serbian Church began a year-long commemoration dedicated to the Serbian victims of World War II.⁵⁸ The commemorations began at Jasenovac and moved to Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, commemorations and requiems are held in Glamoc, Šipovo, Gacko, Ljubinje, and several sites near Mostar, Čapljina, and Čitluk, all in the vicinity of Medjugorje. In the village of Prebilovci, near Čapljina, and not very far from Čitluk and Medjugorje, the Ser-

bian Orthodox Church built a chapel memorial in June 1991. The chapel, dedicated to "New Serbian Martyrs" with a memorial cemetery, was to harbor the remains of some eight hundred Ustaša victims from Prebilovci, excavated from the Šurmanci mass grave.⁵⁹

The central commemoration in western Herzegovina was held on 2–3 February 1991 at the Žitomislić monastery in the Mostar area and in the village of Prebilovci near Čapljina, 10 miles from Medjugorje. For the occasion, the Serbian Orthodox Church organized excavations of the remains of the massacred from the pits and ravines at Šurmanci 2 miles from Medjugorje and Bivolje Brdo near Čapljina and 6 miles from Medjugorje. Standing in front of the skulls and bones of some 1,500 victims, to be reburied under the memorial chapel at the Prebilovci cemetery, preachers recalled August 1941, when "Catholic Croats massacred all Serb villagers, allegedly 54 families, and leveled to the ground Prebilovci and other Orthodox villages in the area, then sung the jubilant slogan: Serbs have perished. . . . Their (Orthodox Church) candles will never flame again!"⁶⁰

After the funeral liturgy at Žitomislić, on Sunday, 3 February 1991, the patriarch spoke before a crowd of 20,000, which included Radovan Karadžić, the nationalist leader of Bosnian Serbs. The patriarch of Serbia, Paul I, invoked the names of eight Serbian Orthodox clerics who had been tortured and murdered along with several thousand Orthodox peasants. The patriarch stressed that the murderers and torturers were Roman Catholic Croats and that the victims lost their lives "in concentration camps, ravines and pits, only because they were 'guilty' of having been born in the religion and nationality different from that of their executioners."⁶¹ Concluding the sermon, the patriarch urged the faithful to remember and commemorate, but not to retaliate, particularly not against unarmed opponents.⁶² In a similar vein, Bishop Metropolitan Vladislav recalled "the time of madness in the summer of 1941, when Roman Catholic Croats massacred the monks from Žitomislić monastery and the Orthodox population from surrounding villages."⁶³ At the end of the convention, the nationalist leader Radovan Karadžić called the Serbs to gather around the Church and the Orthodox faith.⁶⁴

Marian apparitions in Herzegovina reignited Catholic-Orthodox tensions (the case of the Ukraine was mentioned earlier). The Serbian Orthodox Church viewed the spectacle around the mass graves of Medjugorje as a slap in the face of the Serbian Church and people. Nonetheless, the Vatican found the movement in Herzegovina serviceable to the Church. The bishop of Mostar, Pave Žanić, remained isolated. In Žanić's words, many religious apparitions in history eventually proved hallucinations or frauds, and some visionaries subsequently denied their experiences and confessed mistakes.⁶⁵ The pope sent Žanić into retirement in 1992. After the electoral victory in 1990, the nationalist regime in Croatia exploited the global popularity of the Medjugorje cult. In 1995, a Croatian-American joint production generated the feature film *Gospa* (Madonna), directed by the native western Herzegovinian and Croatian regime's official propagandist, Jakov Sedlar. The

movie, starring Martin Sheen as Father Jozo Zovko, Michael York as Zovko's lawyer Milan Vuković, Morgan Fairchild as Sister Fafijana Zovko, and Frank Finlay as the Bishop Žanić, was shown with modest success in the United States, western Europe, and elsewhere. In the movie, the Croats are portrayed as pious and peaceful Catholics eager to join the Western democratic world but prevented from that and oppressed by Orthodox Serbs and communists. Herzegovinian Franciscans were featured as good shepherds admired by their flocks so that the local bishop (a negative character in the movie) envies them. The Madonna, and the whole of Medjugorje, were, paradoxically, presented as forces of peace and freedom. In the meantime, the Madonna of Medjugorje had clearly affected Catholic-Orthodox relations negatively and disrupted stability in the vulnerable multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Medjugorje apparitions of the 1980s were not a "peace and prayer movement," as the Western media stubbornly reiterate, but a prelude to partition, war, and genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina.