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## THE USTAŠE AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF CROATIA

By Golda Retchkiman

Golda Retchkiman was born and raised in Mexico City where she received her B.A. in History from Universidad Iberoamericana. She later moved to Miami, Florida where she continued her studies receiving a Master's in Social Studies Education, a Master's in Special Education, and two Endorsements: one in Gifted Education and the other in Autism Spectrum Disorder. She is currently finishing her thesis to obtain a Master's in Holocaust and Genocide Studies from Gratz College and plans on starting her Ph.D. in the same subject.

On April 6, 1941, the Axis—German, Italian, Bulgarian and Hungarian military forces—invaded, occupied and partitioned Yugoslavia. Four days later, Slavko Kvaternik, the commander of the Ustaša forces, assumed power in Zagreb and proclaimed the New Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH). On April 10, Ante Pavelić arrived as head of the Ustaša, who was exiled in Italy under the protection of Mussolini, since he and his followers were wanted by the governments of France and Yugoslavia, accused of plotting the assassinations of the French Prime Minister Louis Barthou and King Alexander of Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> One of his first acts was to read the messages from Hitler and Mussolini recognizing the NDH.

Despite the country's claim to be independent, Germany and Italy divided Croatia into zones of influence. The new state included inner Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slavonia, and Srem lying between the rivers Drava and Sava, and a part of the Dalmatian Adriatic coast. The rest of the coast was annexed by Italy.<sup>2</sup> Pavelić, the *Poglavnik* (Leader), and his fascist organization resembled Hitler and Nazism because they were both antisemitic, anti-modern, anti-communist

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Lucena, "Holocaust Controversies: The Ustasha and the Vatican Silence- Part 1," *Holocaust Controversies* (blog) February 2, 2012, <http://holocaustcontroversies.blogspot.com/2012/02/ustasha-and-vatican-silence-part-1.html>

<sup>2</sup> Stella Alexander, *The Triple Myth: A Life of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 59.

and genocidal. But unlike Hitler, Palević was anti-Serb and pro-Catholic, since Catholicism was part of the Croat heritage.<sup>3</sup>

During the war, the Ustaša regime collaborated with the Axis in every possible way. Such collaboration extended to several fronts, including involvement in the Final Solution. The Ustaše organized their own murderous campaign, setting off a brutal reign of terror against the Serbian population, the Jews, and the Roma. The regime established concentration/death camps in Danica, Loborgrad, Jadovno, Gradiška, and Djakovo, to mention a few. The largest extermination camp was the Jasenovac complex, considered by the Serbs as the Auschwitz of Croatia. By most accounts, the Ustaša movement enjoyed the support of a significant segment of the Catholic clergy in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Many of its members were complicit in such mass murders.

Controversy and polemical debates have emerged attempting to address the position of the Vatican and the Catholic Church in the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945). While nowadays, Serbs and many others consider that Alojzije Cardinal Stepinac, who back then was the Archbishop of Zagreb, was a war criminal that supported the Ustaše, a lot of Croats consider him a saint who helped those who were persecuted at the time. Even though Stepinac has already been beatified, he has not yet been canonized. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the stance and involvement of the members of the clergy of the Croatian Catholic Church with Pavelić and the Ustaša regime.

In order to understand the importance of Catholicism within the Ustaša movement, it is necessary to learn about the legendary role of the Catholic Church in Croatia. In wartime church documents, Croatia is sometimes called ‘the Bulwark of Catholicism’ (*Antimuralis Christianitatis*), a term which emanated from a concept that was to some extent supported by history: Croatia was seen as a barrier against Orthodox Christianity and Islam. During the course of time, a myth was created, fostered, and nurtured until it became an object of religious fanaticism. If the Croatian bulwark were broken and penetrated, the Anti-Christ would defeat the supporters of the true religion. According to this almost demonic and evil view of the world, the Serbian Orthodox had associated themselves with the Communists in order to defeat Catholicism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Menachem Shela, “The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no.3 (1989): 324.

Besides this, it is also important to talk about the Croatian Catholic Movement (*Hrvatski Katolički-Pokret* HKP) which was founded in the early years of the 20th century against liberalism and secularism. It flourished thanks to the Slovene Bishop Mahnič of Krk (1850-1920) who learned Croatian and in 1903 founded *Hrvatska Straža* (Croatian Sentinel), which for many years became the ideological spokesman of the HKP. It later became the organ of *Domagoj*, the Croatian Catholic Academic Club, which was founded in 1907.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, the *Hrvatski Katolički Dječki Savjet* (Croatian Catholic Boys' Council) for secondary school boys was created and developed. *Domagoj* and the HKDS flourished and extended among workers and “seniors.” After the death of Bishop Mahnič in 1920, the movement began to split between those who wanted to keep its religious character and those who wanted to found a political party.<sup>6</sup>

Ivan Protulipac was one of the most remarkable personalities that emerged from *Domagoj*. He was one of the promoters of the *Orlovi* (Eagles), another religiously based organization, which in the 1930s was renamed *Križari* or the Crusaders and assumed great importance.<sup>7</sup> Both organizations became rivals. By the end of 1935, the *Križari* had 255 groups comprising separate branches for young men and girls. It was these organizations which Archbishop Bauer, spurred on by Stepinac—who back then was his coadjutor bishop—was resolved to absorb into an all-embracing Catholic Action.<sup>8</sup>

After the assassination of King Alexander in 1934, the political atmosphere and the police oppression were strengthened. The political situation sharpened the divisions among the people and in the University of Zagreb. Most of the students that came from poor peasant families became followers of the *Križari* and *Domagojci* and ultimately to the Ustaša, while a considerable number of Serbs of Croatia went over to the leftists. Disturbed by this trend, Stepinac issued a statement in 1936 emphasizing once again that Catholic Action had to be outside and above politics. He even asked the leaders of the *Domagoj* and *Križari* to accept coordinated cooperation and put themselves under the leadership of the hierarchy, which would undertake the necessary restructuring. Furthermore, members of both organizations would be permitted to remain in them until they turned 30 years old; afterwards they were to join the Catholic Action. Stepinac did not

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Protulipac ended up being a very charismatic and authoritarian leader. Some of his followers even took an oath of lifelong loyalty to him.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 40-41.

completely succeed in absorbing the two organizations into Catholic Action since they continued to retain a great deal of independence until the end of the war. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, the majority of the Catholic students gave their alliance to the Ustaša Independent State of Croatia. A few *Domagojci* condemned their political excesses.<sup>9</sup>

The above statement was confirmed by Paris and Perkins, who claim that the members of the Catholic Action and its various affiliated organizations, such as the academic society *Domagoj*, the Catholic student association Mahnič, the “Great Brotherhood of Crusaders,” the “Great Sisterhood of Crusaders,” and others, were in most cases members of the Ustaša and hence, supporters of its fascist ideology.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that there were no exceptions and that some of their members did oppose their policies. Besides them, the main collaborators of the Ustaša were to be found mostly among shopkeepers, artisans, bureaucrats, functionaries, students, and priests, mostly in the Franciscan and Jesuit orders.<sup>11</sup>

For Pavelić and the Ustaše, relations with the Vatican were as imperative as relations with Germany. Since being a Croat did not necessarily implied being an Ustaša, Pavelić knew that religion, most specifically Vatican recognition, was the hook he needed to win Croat popular support. In the beginning, most of the Croatian church leaders supported an alliance with the Ustaša because it was anti-communist and promised a Catholic state that may try to reconvert the 200,000 people who had switched their faith from Roman Catholic to Serbian Orthodox since the end of the Great War.<sup>12</sup>

Bishop Stepinac’s<sup>13</sup> joy that Croatia had finally become independent was intensified by the fact that this happened on the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Croatia’s first links to the Vatican. He visited

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 42-45.

<sup>10</sup> Edmon Paris and Louis Perkins, *Genocide in Satellite Croatia, 1941-1945: A Record of Racial and Religious Persecutions and Massacres* (Chicago: Illinois, The American Institute for Balkan Affairs, 1962), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>12</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> On December 7, 1937, Bauer died and Stepinac succeeded him as Archbishop of Zagreb.

Kvaternik on April 12 and Pavelić on April 16 to express his congratulations on the establishment of an independent Croatia. An article issued by *Katolički List* summarized Stepinac's feelings:

The NHD is thus a fact, established by Almighty Providence on the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Croatia's first links with the Holy See. The Catholic Church which has been the spiritual leader of the Croatian people for 1300 years [...] now accompanies the Croatian people with joy in these days of the establishment and renewal of its independent state [...] The Church is certain that there are objective and subjective conditions to fulfill God's words: "Happy is the people for whom God is Lord."<sup>14</sup>

This was the typical feeling of most Croat nationalists and many Church circles in aftermath of the proclamation of Croatian independence. The Catholic priest, Dragutin Kamber, who joined the Ustaša movement in 1941, wrote that Pavelić, "was the hero of the day ... the avenger of a martyred past."<sup>15</sup>

The reason I decided to mention these events is because when compared with other sources, there is no allusion at all of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but of Stepinac the traitor, even though Yugoslavia had already been invaded by four occupying forces:

The day after the arrival of Pavelić, His Grace Stepinac rushed to offer the congratulations of the Church to this assassin of King Alexander and Louis Barthou [...] This great man had come, the prelate explained, "to realize the greatest task of his existence".[...] On Easter Day, 1941, Archbishop Stepinac announced from the pulpit in the Cathedral of Zagreb, the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia. Thus, in the church itself, he celebrated high treason against Yugoslavia.<sup>16</sup>

Also, there are two references in pro-Serbian sources that state that Stepinac was appointed as Supreme Military Apostolic Vicar of the Ustaša Army.<sup>17</sup>

Stepinac arranged an audience in May 1941 with Pope Pius XII for Ante Pavelić. Since the Catholic Church saw Communism as the greatest threat facing Christianity, it is not surprising to comprehend why the Vatican would favor a Croatian state. In spite of this, the Holy See chose to be prudent and did not recognize *de facto* the NDH. On August 3, 1941, Pope Pius XII sent Giuseppe Ramiro Marcone (1882-1952) as a delegate or emissary of the Holy See, with the rank

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Biondich, "Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 4 (December 2006): 440.

<sup>16</sup> Paris and Perkins, *Genocide in Satellite Croatia, 1941-1945*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Lucena, "Holocaust Controversies: The Ustasha and the Vatican Silence- Part 1," and Paris and Perkins, *Genocide in Satellite Croatia, 1941-1945*, 165. Unfortunately, I could not find any other citation to rebut or not such fact.

of Visitor to Croatia. This served Pavelić's purposes since Marcone was publicly seen and photographed with him and leading Ustaše religious, political, and military leaders.<sup>18</sup>

According to Savich, when the Pope sent Marcone to Croatia, the Vatican already knew that Pavelić was a fascist dictator, a fanatical Croat ultra-nationalist and Roman Catholic, who supported and endorsed Hitler and Mussolini, since they were the ones who installed him in power. They knew about the anti-Jewish, anti-Roma, and anti-Serbian legislation, as well as Pavelić's commitment to force thousands of Orthodox Serbs to convert to Roman Catholicism. The reason the Vatican did not legally recognize this puppet state, was because they feared a potential repercussion from the Allies, particularly from the United States and Great Britain.<sup>19</sup>

The Ustaša movement was fundamentally anti-Serbian and since its creation in 1930, it spread odium against the Serbs. As the ties between the Nazis and the Ustaše grew stronger, they adopted racist anti-Jewish theories too. Thus, following the example of the Nazis, the Ustaše added to their plans for killing Serbs, even more harsh measures against the Jews and the Roma. On April 17, 1941, the day of the capitulation of Yugoslavia, the "Act for the Protection of the Croatian People and State," was passed. It declared that,

Anyone who compromises, or has compromised, in any way the honor of the Croatian people and their vital interests, or who endangers in any way the existence of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and its ruling authorities, even if such an act is merely attempted, is guilty of the crime of high treason.<sup>20</sup>

This vague law made it possible for the Ustaša to kill anybody. During the first weeks in power, thousands of Serbs were murdered. Genocide was under way in Croatia.<sup>21</sup>

A series of decrees followed. On April 25, 1941, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet was prohibited. On April 30, the Law on the Protection of Aryan Blood and the Dignity of Croatian people was issued, banning marriages between Jews or other persons of "non-Aryan" origin and persons of "Aryan" origin. Unlike Serbs, Jews could not get around this provision since even if they converted to Catholicism, it would not be admissible according to the Nazi racial laws. Individuals contracting marriages and violating these laws, would be sentenced to six months in

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<sup>18</sup> Carl Savich, "The Vatican Role in the Ustasha Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia," *Serbianna*, November 11, 2011, accessed October 12, 2019, <http://serbiana.com/analysis/archives/1182>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Esther Gitman, "Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac of Zagreb and the Rescue of Jews, 1941-45," *Catholic Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 498.

<sup>21</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 33.

jail and the loss of civil rights.<sup>22</sup> All Jews over the age of six had to wear a special badge with the letter “Ž” in the center (Židov, i.e., Jew)<sup>23</sup> and Serbians were required to wear armbands bearing the letter “P” for “Pravoslavac” (meaning Orthodox). On May 5, the Serbian Orthodox Church of the NDH was declared illegal. On June 2, all Serbian Orthodox kindergartens, primary and secondary schools were closed, and during the same month, Jews were banned for partaking in the work, organizations, and institutions of the social, youth, sports, and cultural life of Croatian people.<sup>24</sup> Also, the authorities decided that Jewish and Serbian movables and real estate properties qualified as “state-owned,” meaning that looting—done mainly by officials—was possible in the name of the state.<sup>25</sup>

In the beginning, Stepinac, who was pleased with some of these regulations, tried to work with the Ustaša government, maybe because Pavelić portrayed himself as a “good Catholic” who would enforce “Christian values” by issuing strict ordinances against prostitution, abortion, cursing, drunkenness, etc.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, just a month after Pavelić came to power, Stepinac began to distance himself from the Ustaše. On May 22, 1941, Stepinac wrote to the Interior Minister, Andrija Artuković, protesting against the Race Laws and their application to converted Jews. He also asked him—in a naive way—to make sure that the laws against Jews and Serbs were implemented in such a way that the dignity of every individual would be respected.<sup>27</sup> This shows that what Stepinac was in effect doing was condemning the means but condoning the end.

A few days earlier, on May 14, Stepinac received a letter from the parish priest of Glina, who told him about a massacre of Serb villagers by an Ustaša unit. That same day, Stepinac wrote to Pavelić:

Just now I received news that the Ustaše in Glina executed without trial and investigation 260 Serbs. I know that the Serbs committed some major crimes in our homeland in these last twenty years. But I consider it my bishop’s responsibility to raise my voice and to say that this is not permitted according to Catholic teaching, which is why I ask you to undertake the most urgent measures on the entire territory of the Independent State of Croatia, so that not a single Serb is killed unless it is shown that he

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Shela, “The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews,” 329.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Vasilik, “The Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Genocide of Serbs on the Territory of the “Independent State of Croatia,” *OrthoChristian.com*, May 22-23, 2018, <http://orthochristian.com/114594.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ivo Goldstein, “The Genocide against the Jews in the Independent State of Croatia,” *Yad Vashem*, last modified October 12, 2019, <https://www.yadvashem.org/od...soft%20Word%20-206015.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Gitman, “Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac of Zagreb and the Rescue of Jews, 1941-45,” 497.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 69.



committed a crime warranting death. Otherwise, we will not be able to count on the blessing of heaven, without which we must perished.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, by early June, Italian *carabinieri* in Split began to report that numerous Serbian and Jewish refugees were crossing into Italian territory with tales and accounts of atrocities and massacres carried out by the Ustaše.<sup>29</sup> The German and Italian officials expressed revulsion at the barbarity of Ustaše killings. Their violence was indeed uncontrolled and Stepinac's private complaints had no effect. The Ustaša regime was determined to cleanse their country, through deportation, murder, or through the forced conversion of Serbs.

In addition, the Ustaše were often incited by the local priests. When an Italian officer asked a Croatian priest for his authorization, he replied, "I have one authorization and only one: to kill the Serbs sons of bitches." Also, Cardinal Tisserant confronted Dr. Nikola Rusinović, the Croatian emissary to the Vatican, with the disgusting behavior of Croatian Franciscans who were attacking Orthodox Serbs and destroying Orthodox churches.<sup>30</sup>

On June 4, 1941, an agreement was signed between Pavelić and the Nazis regulating the deportation of Slovenes from German-occupied Slovenia to Croatia, along with a number of Serbs from Croatia to Serbia. In a speech at Gospić on June 22, Mile Budak, the minister of education, said that one-third of the Serbs in NDH would be expelled, one-third killed, and one-third would be converted to Catholicism. He also added that the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whom the NHD assumed to be of Croatian origin, were to be treated as brothers.<sup>31</sup>

These deportations began in July and were accompanied by large-scale massacres against the Serb population. Also, by the end of June, Pavelić stated in the "Emergency Legal Provision and Order" that the Jews were obstructing the distribution of supplies to the population and thus, they were collectively responsible for such crimes and would have to pay. Obviously, this was the signal for large-scale arrests and deportations to camps; women and children included. By the end of July, Varaždin was declared to be the first town cleansed of Jews. Only those who escaped or hid avoided arrest. That is why in late August Pavelić declared: "as regards the Jews, I can tell you they will be finally liquidated shortly."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Biondich, "Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945," 441.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, "The Roman Catholic Church and Genocide in Croatia, 1941-1945," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 3 (1989): 469.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Goldstein, "The Genocide against the Jews in the Independent State of Croatia,"

The Ustaša regime made distinct plans to solve the “Jewish question.” It established almost 30 transit camps from where Jews who had been arrested, were deported to concentration or death camps. The first concentration camp, Danica, was opened in April 1941. By the summer of the same year, the camps in Gospić and Jadovno on Velebit, and the camps in Metajna and Slano on the island of Pag were already functioning.<sup>33</sup> These camps were erected for Serbian, Jewish, Croatian, and Bosnian political dissident inmates. Stepinac protested to Pavelić in a letter written in September 1941:

As an Archbishop and representative of the Catholic Church, I am free to call your attention to some events that touch me painfully. I am sure hardly anyone has courage to point to them, so it is my duty to do so. I hear from many various sides about the inhumane and cruel treatment of non-Aryans...<sup>34</sup>

In reference to the conversion of Serbs to Catholicism, there is no doubt that the Catholic Church was pleased with the prospect of getting a large number of converts. Yet, the Catholic bishops’ main concern was that conversions should be voluntary and under the control of the Church. Stepinac disliked any suggestion of violence, although, as I mentioned above, his concern at the moment was directed more to the humane carrying out of the decrees than to protesting against them.<sup>35</sup>

In 1941, the initiative in converting Orthodox Serbs came from the Ustaša authorities, not the Church. On May 15, 1941, the authorities declared that in order to convert from one religion to another, all that was necessary was to make a written application and obtain a certificate. On the same day, the Zagreb archdiocesan chancery issued a leaflet to the clergy with instructions for dealing with people who wanted to convert or needed to validate their marriages. It reiterated that the only valid reason to be converted was because of sincere belief. Applicants had to receive instruction, come to mass, and share in the religious life of the church.<sup>36</sup> In reality, many Serbs converted just to be saved.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Gitman, “Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac of Zagreb and the Rescue of Jews, 1941-45,” 519.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 75.

The government ignored the Church's concerns and decided to keep the conversions in its hands. The Ustaše issued several decrees on religious conversion: Serbian-educated classes were barred from conversion; only uneducated Serbians and poorer peasants could convert to Catholicism; converts would not be permitted to join the Eastern (Uniate) Catholic faith, just the Latin one; Orthodox with Catholic spouses could convert only with prior permission of the Ministry; and baptized Jews were not exempt from the laws concerning non-Aryans. Also, they set up a list, without the permission of their bishops or superiors, of the priests, especially Franciscan missionaries, that were prepared to work with them. Forced conversions started on a large scale in September 1941.<sup>37</sup>

During that summer, Stepinac began receiving reports from some bishops who told him that many local Ustaša officials were using diverse forms of intimidation and violence against Serbs, even those Serbs who had converted were being arrested and killed. It also came to his attention that some Franciscans and priests, especially in Bosnia Herzegovina were implicated in forced conversions and possibly some killings.<sup>38</sup>

In his pastoral letter of June 30, 1941, Alois Mišić, Bishop of Mostar, reminded the clergy that, "The Holy Church neither wishes nor is able to absolve those who, contrary to the divine laws, assassinate, destroy or appropriate the possessions of his fellow men."<sup>39</sup> Four months later, in November 1941, he wrote to Stepinac:

A reign of terror has come to pass...men are captured like animals. They are slaughtered, murdered; living men are thrown off cliffs [...] From Mostar and Čapljina a train took six carloads of mothers, young girls and children ten years old to the station at Surmanci...they were led up the mountains and mothers together with their children were thrown alive off the precipices...<sup>40</sup>

Also, when J. Lončar, a priest from Zagreb, dared to attack the Ustaša and denounce their crimes in a sermon delivered August 23, 1941, on the theme of "Thou shalt not kill," Pavelić sentenced him to death. He was only saved by Marcone's prompt intervention and finally committed to hard labor for life.<sup>41</sup> This served as a sharp example and warning to other dissidents

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>38</sup> Biondich, "Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945," 443.

<sup>39</sup> Paris and Perkins, *Genocide in Satellite Croatia, 1941-1945*, 109.

<sup>40</sup> Steinberg, "The Roman Catholic Church and Genocide in Croatia, 1941-1945," 475.

<sup>41</sup> Paris and Perkins, *Genocide in Satellite Croatia, 1941-1945*, 109.

within the Catholic Church that either by fear or submission to the Church, refrained from condemning such acts.

The increasing reports of atrocities and the question of compulsory conversions finally drove Stepinac to convene the Bishops' Synod on November 17-20, 1941. Because of the difficulties to travel, the only ones that could attend were the Bishops of Split, Djakovo, Krk, Hvar, and Senj. The absentees were the Archbishops Šarić of Sarajevo, and Ujčić of Belgrade, Bishops Mišić of Mostar, Garić of Banja Luka, and the apostolic administrator of Dubrovnik.<sup>42</sup> For three days, the Church's attitude to the persecution of Jews and Serbs and the questions of conversion were discussed in the presence of the Vatican representative, Marcone. Stepinac reported the results to the Pope stating that he would send a letter to Pavelić demanding to treat Jews in a more humane manner, and putting more emphasis on the case of the Serbs who were recently baptized and the descendants of Jews that had been baptized long ago.<sup>43</sup> Then, the bishops wrote a letter to Pavelić declaring that Catholic conversions could only be done by the Church and that Catholic bishops were the only ones who could appoint missionaries for such task. Conversions could not be coerced and once accepted, no conversion could be annulled by the civil authorities.<sup>44</sup> As it can be seen, the letter to Pavelić was different from the report sent to Pius XII. The Bishops' Synod intervened only on behalf of converted Jews, and not Jews at large. In any case, Pavelić ignored them. It is estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 Serbs were converted to Catholicism.<sup>45</sup>

In February 1942, in a speech given by Pavelić to the *Sabor* (Parliament), he explained that the Serbian Orthodox Church could not be allowed to exist within the NDH because Orthodox churches were always national. Since it had been the state religion of the old Yugoslavia kingdom, it was inadmissible in Croatia.<sup>46</sup> Of the 10 Orthodox bishops who lived on the territory of NDH in 1941, Bishop Sava of Karlovac, Bishop Platon of Banja Luka and Metropolitan Bishop of Sarajevo were tortured and killed. Metropolitan Bishop Dositej of Zagreb escaped to Serbia, but died soon afterwards from his injuries. Thirty monks and 187 Orthodox priests were killed and hundreds of priests were exiled.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Shela, "The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews," 330.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 78-79.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Steinberg, "The Roman Catholic Church and Genocide in Croatia, 1941-1945," 472.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides. Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 64.

To better understand the Church's support for the Ustaša regime, it is important to remember that Stepinac, like most European Church officials and in line with the official position of the Vatican, were extremely anti-Communists and believed that Nazi Germany was the lesser evil.<sup>48</sup> In reference to the Ustaše, it is known that already in 1941, Stepinac was making private protests and interventions. There is almost no doubt that Stepinac was increasingly disenchanted with the Ustaša authorities and yet, it took him a long time until he started condemning their policies in an open way. His attitude was full of contradictions. When, in October 1941, the Ustaše destroyed the main synagogue in Zagreb, at the cathedral, Stepinac expressed that, "a House of God, of whatever religion, is a holy place. Whoever touches such a place will pay with his life. An attack on a House of God of any religion constitutes an attack on all religious communities." Similarly, in February 1942, Stepinac protested to the Minister of the Interior about the destruction of Orthodox churches.<sup>49</sup>

However, on the first anniversary of the establishment of the NDH, on April 10, 1942, a solemn *Te Deum* and Mass was celebrated and Stepinac preached a sermon, without mentioning the Ustaše's crimes:

The greatest victor is not he who grinds cities and villages into dust and ashes, nor him who scatters like chaff mighty armies, nor him before whom men tremble in fear for their earthly life, but Him who is lord of life and day, of time and eternity, of good and evil, that is Jesus Christ whom today we celebrate risen from the tomb. Whatever happens around us and however danger encircles us and threatens us, we have no reason to fear or to weep, but having unshaken faith in Him, our Redeemer, we listen to the voice of the Holy Church. This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice in him. Amen.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, when Stepinac made his second visit to Rome that same month, he presented a report to State Secretary Luigi Cardinal Maglione that mentioned some of the positive aspects of the Ustaša regime such as its campaigns against pornography, its abolition of abortion, and its fight against communism.<sup>51</sup> He also claimed that the Ustaša cruelties were being carried out without the knowledge of the authorities.<sup>52</sup> Hence, even if Stepinac felt disillusioned with the regime, he still

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<sup>48</sup> Shela, "The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews," 326.

<sup>49</sup> Ronald J. Rychlak, "The Conscience of Croatia," *New Oxford Review* (November 2009): 29.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 90.

<sup>51</sup> Biondich, "Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945," 449.

<sup>52</sup> Shela, "The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews," 331.

supported the NDH and buried his head in the sand. After returning from Rome, Stepinac gave a very outspoken sermon on May 24, 1942:

All races and nations were created in the image of God...therefore the Church criticized in the past and does so in the present all deeds of injustice or violence, perpetrated in the name of class, race, or nationality. It is forbidden to exterminate Gypsies and Jews because they are said to belong to an inferior race...<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, the Germans regarded him as *judenfreundlich* and according to some reports from Serbs in Zagreb, Stepinac was behaving well since he had interceded for them and defended them in various occasions, even if he had not always been successful.<sup>54</sup> In August 1942, when the deportation of the remaining Croatian Jews to Auschwitz began, it seemed that Stepinac advised Chief Rabbi Freiburg of Zagreb to send a personal letter to the Pope, to thank him for the help given to the Jewish community by the Croatian bishops and the Holy See and to ask him for help for the Jewish community. On August 29, near the end of the transports, the Vatican thanked Rabbi Freiburger in a “prudent and diplomatically way,” meaning that they did not have any intention to let the Chief Rabbi hope for too much. At the end of September, Marcone reported to the Vatican that,

...during recent weeks, I frequently met with the Chief Rabbi of Zagreb, Freiburger...he is full of gratitude on account of the Holy See’s activities on behalf of the Jews [...] Unfortunately we were unable to change the course of the events, [the transports] but many requests we filed for the release of Jews from expulsion were granted. All those of mixed families, Catholics and non-Catholics were saved.<sup>55</sup>

The “tactful” intervention of the Church caused anxiety among the Ustaša leadership. At the end of November, they sent Dr. Cecelja, a Catholic priest and close ally and supporter, to Stepinac in order to mediate between them. Cecelja was instructed to tell Stepinac that the Croatian government was not pleased with his attitude and criticisms towards the NDH. Stepinac responded that the Church just obeyed God’s orders and that the Croatian government would have to bear full responsibility for their unlawful actions against Orthodox Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Steinberg, “The Roman Catholic Church and Genocide in Croatia, 1941-1945,” 475.

<sup>55</sup> Shela, “The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews,” 332.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 333.

Stepinac went to Rome for the third time from May 24 to June 4, 1943. Before he set out, he sent the Vatican some documents bearing evidence to what they—the Catholic Church—had done for the Serbs, in spite of their wrong-doing during the 20 years of the Yugoslav state as well as for the Jews. Then again, he praised the achievement of the Ustaše such as mandatory religious education in school, Christian education of Ustaša soldiers, social welfare activities, repair work in churches, etc. He suddenly became an advocate of the Ustaša regime.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, his keen endorsement of the regime did not last long. In a sermon given on October 31, 1943, he said that the Catholic Church condemned racism and that any regime that executed hostages for a crime, whose perpetrator had not been caught, was an evil and pagan regime.<sup>58</sup> The government reacted immediately and rebuked Stepinac publicly.

By 1943-1944, Stepinac who was deeply embittered by the Ustaše regime, kept on giving sermons criticizing racial discrimination, violence, and mass killings. When the Allies bombed Zagreb on February 22, 1944, resulting in the deaths of 75 people (including seven priests), 160 casualties, and some churches and monasteries damaged, Stepinac published a circular condemning the bombing:

I raise my voice in bitter protest and justified condemnation against those who do not flinch from any measures...and are destroying the living organism of the Croatian people...Croats have fought over the centuries to defend the ideals of real human freedom and Christian culture...Because of which the Pope, the greatest defender of real culture and freedom of mankind, gave them the honorable title of '*Antemurale Christianitatis*'.<sup>59</sup>

In sum, Stepinac's preferred a Croatian state to Yugoslavia, in whatever form. Without doubt, for the Croatian Church and the Vatican, the establishment of an independent Croatian state held great promise. The Catholic Church of Croatia had a central position under Pavelić's regime and this was an opportunity that neither Stepinac nor the Holy See, could throw away. Majority of the Croats were Catholic and during this period, religion, nation, and self, blended and formed a dangerous mixture.<sup>60</sup>

We do not know to what extent Stepinac's own policies were guided or dictated by Pius XII, but neither Stepinac as Archbishop of Zagreb nor Pius XII, did enough to stop the genocide

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Steinberg, "The Roman Catholic Church and Genocide in Croatia, 1941-1945," 465.

that took place mainly against Serbs, Jews, and Roma. The Vatican gave preference to diplomacy since it knew all the gains that it could make. There will always be discomfort among many, as not enough was done to save the lives of thousands of people by speaking out and taking action to stop the unrestrained abuses of the Ustaše.

Besides the positions played by Stepinac and the Vatican during this period, it is important to understand that within the bishops' ranks, there was a private hostility that was never expressed clearly in public, but that was acknowledged in Ustaša government circles. For example, while Alois Mišić (Bishop of Mostar), Pavao Butorac (Bishop of Kotor), Dr. Viktor Burić (Bishop of Senj), and Klement Bonefaccić (Bishop of Split) were regarded as passively critical or anti-Ustaše, the Archbishop Šarić of Sarajevo<sup>61</sup> and Bishop Garić of Banja Luka, were loyal supporters of the Ustaše.<sup>62</sup>

Within the lower clergy, many Franciscans and Jesuits were also pro-Ustaša. The most notorious examples of clergy in the Ustaša ranks were Ivan Guberina, who used to be a leader of Catholic Action and became an active propagandist for the Ustaša regime; Mate Mugoš, a priest who wrote in a newspaper that previously the clergy had worked with prayer books but that now was the time for the revolver;<sup>63</sup> the priest Zvonko Brekalo who in 1942 was removed from his post as army chaplain for his shocking conduct;<sup>64</sup> the Franciscan Father Bojanović who was prefect of Gospić and participated in a massacre of Orthodox peasants;<sup>65</sup> the Franciscan Dionizije Juričev who was the head of the Religious Section (VO) responsible for the forced conversions; and Franciscan Radoslav Glavaš who was the head of the Religious Department of the Ministry of Justice and Religion.<sup>66</sup>

The most murderous were the Franciscan Miroslav Filipović-Majstorović, known as “the devil of Jasenovac” and “brother Satan,” who in 1942 ran the infamous Jasenovac concentration camp, where thousands of Jews, Serbs, and Roma died. He was eventually defrocked—<sup>67</sup> Božidar Bralo, who was the chief of the security police in Sarajevo and the initiator of antisemitic actions

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<sup>61</sup> In reference to the Jews, his diocesan newspaper said that “there is a limit to love. The Movement of liberation of the world from the Jews is a movement for the renewal of human dignity. Omniscient and omnipotent God stands behind this movement”. He was also accused of appropriating Jewish property for his own use. In Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Biondich, “Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945,” 450.

<sup>63</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander, *The Triple Myth*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>66</sup> Biondich, “Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945,” 446.

<sup>67</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 34



there, and Dyonisy Juričev, who wrote in a newspaper that it was not a sin to kill seven-year olds and said that all clergy should be in the Ustaša ranks, and that if it were up to him, he would persecute the bishops.<sup>68</sup>

The participation of the Catholic clergy in the Ustaša ranks was barely dictated by Church policy. In February 1942, Stepinac told Pavelić that he would maintain a ban on political activities by the Catholic clergy, even if it involved activities on behalf of the NDH. Since the ban was ignored by both the clergy and the authorities, in September 1943, Stepinac issued a circular to the clergy reminding them of the papal encyclicals (1926) and decrees previously issued by the Archbishopric (1935, 1938) prohibiting their participation in political parties. This fact shows that the Catholic Church was not a monolithic institution and that it did not share a uniform view either. Those who supported the Ustaše did it because of their own personal, nationalist, and political beliefs.<sup>69</sup>

It is estimated that the Ustaša genocide was responsible for the death of 300,000 to 400,000 people, in addition to 50,000 Jews who were murdered or turned over to the Nazis to dispose of. At the end of the war, many members of the Ustaša regime including some of its clerical supporters such as Bishop Šarić, fled the country with many of the valuables they looted from their victims.<sup>70</sup> Most of the priests who participated in murder were not even removed from the rolls of the Croatian Catholic Church, and many Ustaša war criminals were hidden by the Church, smuggled out of Yugoslavia, and assisted through Vatican connections to flee to various countries in Europe, South America, and Arab countries.<sup>71</sup>

In reference to Stepinac, Josip Broz Tito placed him on trial for war crimes. In 1946, he was accused of collaborating with the Pavelić regime and with the Nazis, allowing chaplains in the Ustaša army to act as religious activists and commit crimes, forceful conversions of Orthodox Serbs, and high treason against the Yugoslav government. He was convicted and sentenced to 17 years in prison, but in December 1951, Tito released him and sent him to house arrest in his native village of Krašić. He died of a pulmonary embolism on February 10, 1960.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., and Biondich, "Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945," 446.

<sup>69</sup> Biondich, "Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945," 446.

<sup>70</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> Shela, "The Catholic Church in Croatia, the Vatican, and the Murder of the Croatian Jews," 337.

<sup>72</sup> Rychlak, "The Conscience of Croatia," 31-32.

## Conclusion

The genocide committed by Pavelić and the Ustaša regime carries great historical weight because many Catholics were the perpetrators, and Orthodox Serbs, Jews, and Roma the victims. I consider that during the Second World War in the Independent State of Croatia, the Catholic Church failed as a whole institution. By not speaking out empathically against the brutalities committed by the Ustaša, and choosing a policy of neutrality and passivity, it stained its hands with blood in a terrible genocide that occurred there.

Whenever and whoever contributed to the genocide must be condemned. When it comes to bystanders, it is important to remember that some of them were also victims or perpetrators. Furthermore, many bystanders failed to realize that by their mere presence, they had an influence on how others behaved, and hence, a lot of people were confronted with ambivalent choices: while some became active and effective bystanders who showed empathy for those in need and attempted to help, others felt that they were incapable of stopping any form of violence.

It seems that during that period, nationalism was hardly a secular concept in Croatia. To be Croatian equated to be Catholic. With the establishment of the Ustaša Catholic regime, the Church obtained an exceptionally advantageous position, which was not going to waste. However, even though Stepinac and Pius XII were strong supporters of the Catholic State of Croatia, it is hard to believe that they also approved the killings. And at the same time, since the Ustaše declared that they were faithful Catholics, Stepinac tried to find their positive attitudes, which he continuously praised. Thus, Stepinac's position was very ambivalent; on one side he disliked the atrocities committed by the Ustaše, which most of the time were criticized privately, and on the other, he applauded their fervent Catholicism.

While Stepinac's authority was disregarded by many bishops and priests, the Vatican did not communicate with them either and even less, dare to reprimand them. When Stepinac decided to condemn the Ustaša genocide in July and October 1943, in an explicit way, the Holy See kept silent.

Stepinac seems to be a very ambiguous and polemic figure. It is difficult to know if condemning the Ustaše would have brought an end to the abuses or not, but in any case, his private objections and increasingly denounced racist policies, did not represent a systematic open denunciation of the Ustaše, who turned a deaf ear. He acted to the best of his abilities as a loyal

servant of the Roman Catholic Church, but his “half-forgiveness of violence” does not absolve him.

Finally, it is important to mention that at the local and individual level, many Church leaders acted independently in various ways. There were some priests that became bystanders stating that patriotism came first and that they did not want to be branded as traitors, others were passive opponents, but there were also many perpetrators such as the Franciscan friar Miroslav Filipović-Majstorović, who ran the Jasenovac camp, where thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and political dissidents were murdered.

In sum, the Catholic religion was used by the Ustaše and its supporters as an instrument to consolidate power, rather than a goal in itself. This means that Pavelić, the Ustaše and many of the clergy’s motivations and goals did not have anything to do with Catholic piety. If so, how are we able to understand their genocidal policy?

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