



Jovan Lj. Janjić^[1]
Institute for Political Studies
Belgrade (Serbia)

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Suffering of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Independent State of Croatia

Abstract: The Church is a spiritual institution in which people of faith exercise their spiritual needs and accordingly build their spiritual being. The Church consists of the clergy and people of faith. Without people of faith, there would be no Church. Hence, all things pertaining to the Church are of relevance to people of faith; and vice versa, all things concerning people of faith are of relevance to the Church.

In the area controlled by the clericalist-fascist Independent State of Croatia (ISC), both people and the Church were exposed to persecution, terror, and killings. The Serbs were killed not only because they belonged to a different nation and because of their national being, but also because of a different religion, because of their spiritual being. They were killed because they were Serbian and Orthodox.

The Ustasha movement manifesto is indicative of this, having been publicly declared in the words of leaders of the Ustasha state. The genocide Ustasha manifesto, in the sections regarding the Serbs - which suggested that one third of the Serbs should be killed, one third should be banished and one third converted to Catholicism - is a clear indication of planned activities the result of which was supposed to be the spiritual and physical demise of the Serbs. If man's religion is subject to attack, if the desired outcome is for man to be lead or forced into giving up his religion in order to be converted to someone else's religion, it is then the spiritual murder - killing man as he was until that point. Specifically, this was the objective of forced conversion of the Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism in the ISC.

This task was carried out in accordance with the formally declared Ustasha agenda. And for the purpose of achieving the highest results possible, the Serbian Orthodox Church was particularly exposed to attacks.

Keywords: Independent State of Croatia (ISC), Roman Catholic Church, genocide, Serbian people, Serbian Orthodox Church

Introduction

During the occupation by the clericalist-fascist Independent State of Croatia, this state aspired to use World War II to accomplish its priority, its

genocide objective: destruction of the Serbian nation and the Orthodox faith in the broad region of former Yugoslavia, where, with the approval of Nazi Germany, a puppet regime was established. The Serbs, as the strongest ethnos in that region,

[1] mjovanradj@gmail.com

were treated as the arch enemy - which, among other things, will be confirmed by activities exercised by Croatia in terms of spiritual and physical destruction of this nation, as well as by the number of Serbian victims. As a result of racial and Nazi motivation of the Ustasha authorities, the victims of genocide in the ISC, apart from the Serbs, were Jews and the Roma.

The origin of the planned crime is confirmed by the timeline of events itself: Germany attacked Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941, while only four days later, on 10 April, the ISC was established. From the very first day of its establishment, the ISC showed its main objective - to do away with the Serbs and the Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox faith is at the very core of the Serbian national identity and this is the reason why in the strong action undertaken against the Serbs, their spiritual being and the Serbian Orthodox Church are assaulted.

Devised genocide

It was only one day after the ISC was declared on 11 April 1941, that Radio Zagreb made an announcement to the residents of Zagreb that they should give a warm welcome to the German army and decorate the windows with flowers. Besides this, the residents were invited to wait for further orders and announcements to be delivered via the radio. People residing outside Zagreb were instructed to immediately refer to the parish offices, where they “will be given by the priests instructions for further activities to be conducted.” A clear conclusion can be drawn that even before the ISC was

established, the parish offices, namely the priests, had been given Ustasha instructions on what the planned activities were and on what was to follow. In this respect, renowned history professor Viktor Novak, PhD, who quite meticulously demonstrated and substantiated actions of the Croatian Ustasha state and the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, notes: “This is the most apparent sign that the entire institution of the Church in Croatia put itself at the service of the high treason movement and of the newly-formed circumstances, in which church institutions, primarily parish offices, became an instrument in the hands of the Ustasha system and the Ustasha ISC, and that obviously they had been prepared beforehand for such a course of events. Namely, who would have dared advise citizens to refer citizens to institutions for all, even classified announcements, if they had not been positive that such important orders would be followed and carried out during the initial time of taking over the power? Those could have been only the most trusted ones” (Novak, 1986, p. 542).

The instruction and encouragement to the Roman Catholic clergy and future (wartime) activities were given by the leading person of the Church in Croatia - the Archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac. It was on the first day after the establishment of the ISC - 11 April 1941, Good Friday - that he visited his friends and acquaintances, who had taken ministerial positions in the first provisional government, prior to Ante Pavelić's arrival in Zagreb. One of the people (“bloody terrorists”), who was to become “famous” for his activities in Croatia's “bloodiest regime”, was Milovan Žanić, PhD, who was were given competences over the Minis-

try of Interior in those days. Archbishop Stepinac paid him a visit, welcoming him on his behalf and on behalf of the Church of Croats, had a lengthy conversation with him, as was joyfully published in the Ustasha press.

The next day, on Good Saturday, the then Deputy Supreme Leader Slavko Kvaternik, the self-proclaimed “army leader”, and subsequently marshal, visited the Supreme Head of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, Archbishop Stepinac. The archbishop paid him a return visit on the same day. In a story about this visit, the *Catholic Paper* reports that the Archbishop expressed the Ustasha dignitary “not only his congratulations on the establishment of the ISC” but at the same time “his condolences” for the death of his brother Petar Kvaternik, an Ustasha outlaw who died in combat with the regular troops of the Yugoslav Army in Crikvenica, at the exact time when the establishment of the ISC as well as its secession from Yugoslavia were announced in this place (*Ibid*, p. 543).

The early days of the ISC, from Good Thursday (when it was created) to Easter Sunday, showed that the Ustasha state and the Roman Catholic Church shared the same orientation and that they acted together towards it. The same was noted enthusiastically by the Ustasha press. Thus, *The Croatian News*, in its Easter edition, underscores the importance of mutual visits between Ustasha leaders and Archbishop Stepinac and, accordingly, the paper reports on the first cordial meeting between Kvaternik and Stepinac, as well as the fact that the Archbishop of Zagreb welcomed the Deputy Supreme Leader, in the following manner: “This was to mark

that a close collaboration was established between the Ustasha movement and the highest representative of the Roman Catholic Church authorities in the State of Croatia” (*Ibid.*, pp. 543–544).

What the Ustasha press emphasized as particularly important was visit of Archbishop Stepinac to the Ustasha Supreme Leader Ante Pavelić on the 16 April. Following this, what resounded even more strongly was the news, also broadcast on the radio, that the archbishop organized a banquet for Ustasha emigration army officers in his residence, which was extensively illustrated with many photos in the press.

“All of these activities of Archbishop Stepinac, which were duly followed by the Zagreb press and then by the press in all other towns, were also broadcast via the radio in order for the clergy throughout the country to be aware of the position of their spiritual leader in Croatia, according to the new situation”, Professor Viktor Novak reasonably concludes.

To support this, Professor Novak gives the following example: “A large number of eyewitnesses and reliable persons have reported that in the Franciscan Convent Split, which is located by the sea, a microphone was mounted, and news was announced all day long, including the smallest details about the Archbishop of Zagreb! It was clear to everyone, and the same was believed and noted, as was subsequently yet to be seen, that Archbishop Stepinac wholeheartedly supported the new situation” (*ibid.*, p. 544).

At Easter, as was customary, Stepinac gave a sermon in the Zagreb Cathedral, and on that occasion, he announced to the parishioners the glorious day of the establishment of the ISC. In this man-

ner, he identified himself with the creators of this clericalist-fascist formation.

In his sermon, the archbishop stated that all things would be better once the name of God was observed and respected, the day of God, Father, and Mother and “lawful heads and provisions of the Holy Church...”; it is only then, he notes, that the days of peace might be expected. Then he prayed to the resurrected Jesus for Croatian people that were “about to enter a new period of their lives” (*Ibid.*, p. 545).

What ensued was a hate campaign (based on lies) against the Serbs; invitations were sent demanding that they be exterminated and then, upon such thorough preparation, persecution, arrests, and killings and, wherever possible, mass killings followed, mainly of the Serbian Orthodox people. Various bestial atrocities were committed, and all this for the ultimate goal - genocide against this people, and then against others who were not to the liking of the Ustasha authorities.

Historiography, which is based on relevant facts, speaks for a reason of genocide against the Serbs in the ISC. Additionally, scrutinising more thoroughly this pogrom against one nation, it will be seen that mass killings of the Serbs were perpetrated not only because they were Serbs, on the basis of their national identity, but also because they were the bearers of the Orthodox faith, because of their sense of spiritual belonging. What was aimed at was spiritual and physical annihilation of the Orthodox Serbian people.

This was confirmed in the early days of the Ustasha regime, when the first reforms of the police measures resulted in activities aimed at labelling and discriminating against people of the Orthodox faith.

The Orthodox Serbs in Zagreb, as well as in other towns, were ordered to wear around their arms a blue band with the Cyrillic letter P (for *pravoslavac*, or Orthodox/), thereby indicating that in the Ustasha ISC they were outlawed. Thus, this letter P, used to mark Orthodox persons, became the sign of a Pariah.

The statements issued by the Ustasha leaders unequivocally confirmed that they were inconvenienced by the Serbian nation and the Orthodox faith. Their activities were put at the service of the Roman Catholic Church, and so they assumed an ostensibly “holy duty” to eradicate the Orthodox faith or to integrate it into the Roman Catholic faith. They were rather open about their intentions, and they expressed them freely at rallies, while the Ustasha press enthusiastically reported about it. In this manner, they carried out mass mobilisation for further action, aimed at achieving their declared intentions.

Therefore, after his visit to the Vatican, high Ustasha dignitary Mile Budak held a large Ustasha rally in Križevci on 6 June 1941. He invited the participants to gather after the Mass, which had to be attended by all the people who were convoked. Afterwards, this became common practice. Not infrequently the Mass was held outdoors, and then the altar was used as a pulpit from which the Ustasha harangued the attendees. At the 6 June rally, Budak interpreted religious relations in the ISC saying, among other things, the following about the Serbs: “They joined religion with ethnicity, and they said: ‘Our churches and our monasteries are our cornerstones.’ That is why they erected them in Celje, Maribor, Sušak, and Split. However, God willing, this cornerstone of theirs will vanish from

Croatia because you cannot set cornerstones on someone else's farmland..." (*Ibid.*, p. 603).

Budak as the Ustasha ideologist emphasises that ideology and actions undertaken by the Ustasha state are based on religion - the Roman Catholic faith. What underlies this, as is still later to be seen and ever more vociferously and clearly heard as the main theme, is the demand to do away with the bearers of the Orthodox faith. At a major Ustasha rally held in Karlovac on 13 July 1941, Budak, among other things, says the following: "Brothers and sisters! The entire Ustasha movement is based on faith. First and foremost, this is our strong faith in the just cause, our strong faith in God Almighty, who never abandons the righteous ones. It is on our loyalty to the Church and the Catholic faith that we base our entire operation because history has taught us that, if we were not Catholics here, we would have perished long ago... I am convinced that if we were not Roman Catholics, we would otherwise perish. We do know this and in the past twenty years [since Yugoslavia was created – *the author's note, J.J.*], irrespective of the fact that not all of our clergymen always behaved the way they should have behaved. Still, Belgrade could not climb over this strong bastion. Belgrade prohibited everything but this faith, which is professed by all of the Croatian people, but Belgrade could not prohibit this faith, and this was our strength. This is why the Ustasha movement encourages this sense of faith, because it is an important ingredient of our soul and foundation of the Ustasha movement. [...] So, brothers and sisters, it was these sacred things, the Church, faith, and family, that our biggest enemies attacked with the greatest force. And our biggest enemies are

the Serbs and Bolsheviks. The calculating enemy always seeks the most vulnerable spot, and this is where they try to strike. But it is exactly there that the enemy encountered the strongest resistance because the ideology of the Ustasha movement is based on these foundations (*Ibid.*, pp. 604–605).

What can be read in Croatian papers of the time, which was so meticulously reported by Professor Viktor Novak in his monumental work *Magnum Crimen*, almost all speeches delivered by the Ustasha leaders resonate with more or less overt invitation for a pogrom against and persecution of the Serbs, especially of Orthodox believers. Namely, at a rally in Vukovar on 8 July of the same year, the already mentioned Mile Budak said: "They are united solely with the Orthodox faith, and we have still not succeeded in assimilating them. However, they should know that our motto is: *you either bow down or you will be exterminated!*" Masses of Ustasha supporters at the rally applauded these insinuations.

Then at a rally in Pakrac, held on 20 July 1941, Budak mad a fiery speech to the masses, urging them to hate and do away with the Serbs. He said: "You know all too well the saying: 'Put one Serb at the table and serve him a meal; tie the other one, put him in a sack and sit on him. The one sitting at the table thinks the same as the one lying under the table! So, also remember this: When with a Serb, just eat one half of the bowl and what remains of the bowl, hit him on the head with it and kill him, otherwise he will kill you...'"

And finally, in Gospić, at a great rally, Mile Budak quite clearly announced the Ustasha plans for complete eradication of the Serbs: "We will kill a portion of the Serbs, others will be displaced while

the rest will be converted to the Catholic faith and thus, they will become Croats” (*Ibid.*, p. 605).

Plan of the genocide. Plan for the eradication of one nation.

Other Ustasha leaders spoke along the same lines. At an Ustasha rally held in Nova Gradiška, Milovan Žanić, PhD, the above-mentioned Minister, pointed out the impossibility of cohabitation between Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers within the boundaries of one state, as required by the authorities of this state. This is what he said: “Fellow Ustashes! Let it be known. I am speaking openly. This state, this motherland of ours, must belong to the Croats and no one else. So, those who have come here are those who should leave. Events over the centuries, especially during the 1920s, show that any type of compromise is out of the question. *This will be the land of the Croats and no one else, so there is no method that us Ustashes will not utilise to make this land truly Croatian and to cleanse it from the Serbs, who have been a threat to us for hundreds of years and who would do the same at the first opportunity. We are not hiding this, it is the policy of this state and once we have completed this, we will have completed what is written in the Ustasha principles.* Let it not be forgotten that outside our borders, in America alone, there are approximately 800,000 Croats, and we will not forget those poor people who went to America to earn a living, because they had no bread in their own country; we will not forget those people. These people should come back here and resettle at the hearths which will be previously cleansed by us.”

At a rally held in Križevci on 6 July 1941, Ustasha Minister of Justice Mirko Puk, PhD, called the

Serbs looters, scum and trash of the Balkans. In his view, it was not possible to have two nations living together in the same state, and it was especially impossible for both nations to rule. He repeated Budak’s threat to the Serbs that they should either move or bow down, which was welcomed with loud cheering of bloodthirsty Ustashes. So, he elaborated on this further: “You either move out of our motherland of your own free will or we will expel you forcibly” (*Ibid.*, p. 606).

At an Ustasha rally held in Donji Miholjac on 27 July 1941, senior Ustasha dignitary Mladen Lorković, PhD, who was later to become Minister of Foreign Affairs, openly stated that from the Croatian people “must be removed all those elements who are a misfortune to that people, those elements who are alien and strange to them and who destroy the sound forces of these people, those elements that have over decades and centuries pushed from one adversity to another”. To be more precise, he added: “These are our Serbs and Jews” (*Ibid.*, pp. 607–608).

A contemporary of the abhorrent events of the time, Professor Viktor Novak, PhD, summarised such statements by saying: “And so is said by almost all Ustasha dignitaries, laymen and clergymen alike.”

The minions, Croatian people and all those who follow ideology and the Ustasha state authorities were mobilised in order to engage in exterminating the Serbs and the Orthodox faith. This was openly advocated in particular by the Supreme Leader’s great supporter and Banjaluka commander Viktor Gutić, PhD; on his journey through Krajina, in Bosnia, he promoted hatred of the Serbs, inviting

the Ustasha movement followers to persecute the Orthodox population, thus disseminating horror and terror. Wherever he went, the Roman Catholic clergymen met and welcomed him as alleged saviour of the whole region. In his speech in Sanski Most, he declared persecution and full extermination of the Serbs. He said: "There is no longer Serbian Army! There is no longer Serbia! There are no longer Serbian rednecks, those who suck on our blood, there is no more the Gypsy House of Karadorđević, and soon enough, our roads will want Serbs on them, but there will be no Serbs any longer. I have issued drastic orders for their complete economic annihilation and there will be new instructions for their compete extermination. Don't have a soft spot for any of them. You must always keep in mind that they were the diggers of our graves, so destroy them wherever you may see them, and you will not lack the blessing of our Supreme Leader. All those who stand up for them will consequently become the enemy of Croatian freedom... The Serbs should have no hopes, and the best thing for them to do is to move away, to disappear from our lands" (*Ibid.*, p. 608).

These threats, based on lies and hatred were, as a matter of fact, an agenda for the eradication of the Serbian Orthodox population. The ensuing events confirmed this. What ensued was the pogrom – arrests, collecting people and taking them to camps, mass killings with bestial atrocities, persecution, conversion to Catholicism etc.

The suffering of the Orthodox Serbs in the territory of the clericalist-fascist ISC had such a large scale that the then high official of the Third Reich, German Minister of Foreign Affairs and spe-

cial envoy for the Balkans (1940-1945), Hermann Neubacher, wrote in his memoirs that the events in Croatia "were among the most atrocious mass killings in world history" (Neubacher, 2007, p. 85).

Assimilation and killings of the Serbs in Croatia

From the very outset of the war, news of the suffering of Serbian population and the Serbian Church in the occupied territories of Yugoslavia, especially in the ISC, started pouring into the Serbian Patriarchate. The refugees coming to Serbia brought the news of atrocities the Serbian people were exposed to in these territories. Many of them were eyewitnesses who could credibly testify about horrendous blood thirst and violence suffered by the Serbs (Report of the Holy Synod, 1991, p. 99). Office of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church was assigned the task to obtain reports on the events survived by each priest, a refugee from Croatia, and the description of circumstances under which they escaped. This was the only way for the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian society to be informed about circumstances and events in the regions outside Serbia (*Ibid.*, p. 100).

In this manner, volumes of documentation were compiled, and the documentation was so extensive that the Synod offices could not handle all of it or properly process it in order for the public to become aware of the suffering. This is the reason why in 1941 the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church established a special committee – *the Committee for Collecting Data on the Suffering of the Serbian People under Occupation* - whose task

was to collect materials on the suffering of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian people in the regions of Yugoslavia that remained outside the territories of Central Serbia and Banat. The Committee was chaired by priest and renowned historian Radoslav Grujić, Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. According to a set of instructions issued by the Committee itself, the Committee collected 4,504 reports. Based on those reports, data was collected, compared, and chronicled, and subsequently summary reports and memoranda were written. It was by the end of 1942 that three memoranda of the Serbian Orthodox Church on crimes against the Serbs in the ISC were compiled. In the third *Memorandum*, in the chronological order, its compilers wrote the following words on the first pages: “This *Memorandum* takes into account solely a shorter period of time, mainly between April 1942 until mid-1942, apparently. [...] This is the first part of the material which we hereby make available for the purpose of the provision of interim information. [...] According to testimonies of refugees and accounts we have heard from the other side, an approximate number of killed Serbs - men, women, and children - in the “Independent State of Croatia” until the beginning of 1943 is 700,000. It is impossible to determine the exact number today” (Jevtić, 1990, p. 21).

The *Memorandum* initially speaks of “first persecutions and tortures of the Serbs” and “demolition and destruction of their homes, churches and settlements” in the ISC, and among other things, the following is specified: “In a rabid fit of demolition and extermination of Serbian people, thousands

of Serbs’ houses were burnt down, entire villages destroyed, entire municipalities alike, so not a single living soul stayed there. In particular the Serbian churches and monasteries were demolished...” (*Ibid.*, pp. 21–22).

A report by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was prepared for its first post-war session (held on 27/14 March 1947) states the following: “The pivotal point of the political programme of the newly created state (the ISC) was integral elimination from its territory of all Orthodox and Serbian elements, which in these territories represented a substantial minority of 2,403,998 inhabitants, as compared to the total number of the Serbian population of approximately 7,000,000” (Report of the Holy Synod, 1991, p. 97).

The “Church Government” goes on to state the following in its report: “Mass killings were preceded by all kinds of unprecedented barbaric torture, which the Serbs had never suffered in their history, not even at the hand of the cruellest enemy. The number of human victims, gender and age indiscriminately, included all social strata and all categories of professions. The previous assessment was approximately 800,000 victims (*Ibid.*, pp. 97–98).

The report of the Synod of the Serbian Church then reads as follows: “In this general persecution of the Orthodox Serbian population, Catholic parish priests and monks and nuns (mainly Franciscan) had a prominent role in certain towns, be it as organisers or as direct executors of the most vicious atrocities.”

The Synod acknowledges that the “main strike” of the ISC authorities “which relied on the Roman Catholic Church” against the Serbs was “aimed at

the very Serbian Orthodox Church and its organisation”, and the same conclusion is also drawn from a large number of murdered priests (in excess of 170) and banished and refugee priests, excluding monks. Then, the material demolition is also presented: “From the killing of clergymen, demolishing and looting cathedrals, town churches, monasteries, village places of worship and episcopal residences, buildings from which eparchy church institutions operated, parish halls, church municipality buildings, monastery lodgings, church treasuries, archives and libraries, even the gravest acts of sacrilege of our holy temples, the obvious aim was to prevent any form of existence and functioning of eparchy and local church authorities in the territory of the newly established Croatian state, while allowing for extensive exercise of converting Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism and the Greek Catholic faith” (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church then notes: “This exercise, which was thoroughly planned and systematically carried out against the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian people, was based on a prior agreement with the Roman Curia, which unequivocally follows form a document called Congregation for the Eastern Orthodox Church, dated 17 July 1941, the recipient of which was the Archbishop of Zagreb, as Chair of the Croatian Bishops’ Conference. Namely, this document contains certain paragraphs, which are very suggestive of the Vatican’s position, e.g., that Rome expects major success “in the field of conversion of the non-included (i.e., Orthodox Serbs in Croatia), thus submitting them to the Pope”. It expresses gratitude to the

Archbishop of Zagreb for the success achieved until then in his exercise of conversion of the Serbs to Catholicism and, at the same time, it encourages him and territorially competent bishops to proceed with their work in the direction they were heading, so as to ensure proper growth of Catholicism, “since now there is such a high hope for the conversion of the non-included” (*Ibid.*, pp. 98–99).

The Serbian Church Patriarchate notes that this document was compiled in Rome following the visit of Ante Pavelić (the Supreme Leader of the Croatian state) to the Pope, at the time when the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church were outlawed, which “without a shred of doubt resulted as a logical consequence of this visit, during which the Pope was given an exhaustive report on internal circumstances in the Croatian state, as well as on the guidelines of Croatian internal policies for the present and the future”.

After this visit and the Congregation document whose issuance ensued, a more intensive exercise of conversion of the Serbs to Catholicism followed. At the *Bishop’s Printing Shop* in Đakovo, a pamphlet was printed, and then distributed among the Orthodox Serbs in Slavonia and Srem, inviting them to join the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, the Serbs were warned that this was the only way that would allow them to “be able to stay at their homes”, that “they will not be further persecuted and killed” and that, seemingly, in this manner they will ensure that “their souls are saved”. The result of this exercise was such that approximately 240,000 Orthodox Serbs converted to the Roman Catholic faith (*Ibid.*, p. 99).

Non-canonical establishment of the Croatian Orthodox Church

The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church notes that the illegal Croatian government was not satisfied with what had been done since “completing the task, according to their agenda, to kill one third of the Serbs”, it did not quite accomplish the other objective, i.e., that one third of the Serbs are forced out across the Drina River; nor was the third objective accomplished to a sufficient extent, to convert one third of the Serbs to Catholicism or Greek Catholicism. Hence, another task was undertaken: “to gradually deprive the rest of the Orthodox Serbs of their national feature by forming a new Orthodox autocephalous church which will be of purely Croatian nature (*Ibid.*, p. 99).

It was on 3rd May 1941, only a month after the establishment of the ISC, that its Supreme Leader Ante Pavelić issued the *Decree on the Conversion from One Religion to Another (Narodne novine, No. 19, dated 5 May 1941, pursuant to which the process of conversion was simplified (Janjić, 2018a, p. 692).* During the first year of the war, there was mention of the Roman Catholic priests competing who would convert more Serbs to Roman Catholicism. One of the reasons for conversion to Catholicism was to artificially increase the number Croats by a million or more inhabitants (Prodić, 2020, pp. 33–34). In this manner, on the one hand, the Croatian (Roman Catholic) factor was strengthened while, on the other hand, the Serbian (Orthodox) factor was weakened.

Although there was mass conversion from the Orthodox faith to Roman Catholicism, in early 1942

the Ustasha authorities realised that their religion-related policies had failed to entirely deliver the desired results. Namely, it was noted that many Serbs were not sincere about their conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, but converted out of fear for their lives and the lives of their families, out of fear of Ustasha terror (Janjić, 2018a, p. 693). This is why they made a turn in their plan of assimilation and extermination of the Serbs and degradation of the organisation of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the ISC territories. On 3rd April 1942, Supreme Leader Ante Pavelić issued the *Decree on the Establishment of the Autocephalous Croatian Orthodox Church* and then, based on this, a *Constitution of the Croatian Orthodox Church* was declared on 5 June of the same year.

Having learned about this, the Holy Synod declared the process of establishing the would-be “church” as being “illegal and in breach of the canons” at its session held on 30/17 April 1942 (*Ibid.*, pp. 693–694).

The Ustasha authorities persevered in this direction. They made attempts at finding a reputed Serbian Orthodox monk who would be installed as the head of the “Autocephalous Croatian Orthodox Church”. To this end, young hierodeacon Varnava (Nastić) was brought from Sarajevo to Zagreb, in an attempt of the authorities to appoint him the head of this quasi-church organisation since he enjoyed a good reputation among the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. However, he openly and resolutely declined this (Janjić, 2018, pp. 19–21).

Then the Ustasha authorities coerced the Russian immigrant bishop Germogen, the former archbishop of Ekaterinoslavskiy and New Moscow, and

installed him as the head of the so-called Croatian Orthodox Church, with duties of the Metropolitan of Zagreb. He was enthroned in Zagreb on 7 June 1942. Following this, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia excommunicated Gergemon from its ranks, denounced his actions and imposed a ban on him officiating the holy liturgy. However, he paid no heed to this. Two years later, on 15 August 1944, Germogen and the envoy of the Patriarch of Romania, Metropolitan Visarion Puiu, ordained Spiridon Mifka, whom the Ustasha Supreme Leader Ante Pavelić appointed the Bishop of Sarajevo, in the Orthodox Cathedral of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Zagreb (Janjić 2018a, p. 694).

The Serbian Orthodox population knew and felt that this quasi-church organisation had no foundation in the canons and that they could not save their souls in it, hence this organisation, with only a handful of problematic priests, could not play a more significant role nor could it protect the Orthodox population from their suffering. Crimes against the Serbs were still committed, the Orthodox were converted to the Catholic faith, and there was still the *Office for Demolishing Orthodox Churches* in force (Kašić, 1971, p. 203).

Proof of mass atrocities

It was in the early days of the war that the Serbian Orthodox Church in the ISC territory was decimated. Out of the eight eparchies, only one (the Zvornik-Tuzla Eparchy), had an actively serving bishop during the war. Three Eparchy (Arch) Bishops - Petar, the Metropolitan of Dabar-Bosnia, Sava, the Bishop of Gornji Karlovac, and Platon, the

Bishop of Banjaluka - were brutally killed in 1941, in the early days of the war. Dositej, the Metropolitan of Zagreb, was arrested together with his deacon on the same day the clericalist-fascist state of ISC was declared; he was badly beaten up, tortured and abused in the Zagreb prison. After such savage torture, on 8 May 1941, he was transported to the railway station and put on the train to Belgrade; he died of consequences of his Zagreb torture in Belgrade, on 13 January 1945. Nikolaj, the Bishop of Zahumlje and Herzegovina, was beaten up and banished to Serbia. He died in Sokobanja on 26 March 1943. Irinej, the Bishop of Dalmatia, based on Croatian accusations of him being an English agent, was arrested by the Italians (since his episcopal see was in Šibenik, in the Italian occupation zone) on 8 November 1941. He was later taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy. Valerijan, the Vicar Bishop of Srem, was undergoing medical treatment in Split when the war broke out. He passed away immediately after that (Janjić, 2018a, pp. 23–24).

Further activities aimed at the destruction of the entire body of the Serbian Orthodox Church continued.

Upon the end of the war, on 10 July 1945, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent Arsenije, previously the Vicar Bishop of Moravica, to Zagreb. He was given authority as the administrator of as many as four eparchies – those of Zagreb, Gornji Karlovac, Pakrac, and Dalmatia.

After becoming familiar with the situation in the field, Bishop Arsenije reported to the Synod as follows: “The Eparchies of Zagreb and of Pakrac are severely ravaged: many churches are demolished, while the remaining ones were looted. There are

126 | areas without a single church left. In some towns, between 50% and 80% of the Serbs were exterminated. Priests, if there are any who survived, returned to their parishes and have started the revival of church life with great difficulty: arch hierarch heads have been appointed in district administrative units. They are converting back to the Orthodox faith those who were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism; they are renewing certain church municipalities and appointing interim administration; where possible, they are restoring conditions for officiating the holy liturgy, however with substantial difficulty (Report of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120).

In its Report on activities performed during the period 1941–1946, which was submitted to the Holy Assembly at its first post-war ordinary session (held in May 1947), the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church described the wartime suffering in the Eparchy of Gornji Karlovac as follows:

“Before the war, there were 220 churches and chapels in the Eparchy of Gornji Karlovac. Out of this number, Ustashas, punitive expeditions and war operations led to the demolition of burning down of 188 of them. Only 23 churches and 9 chapels have remained in the entire eparchy. However, they are also damaged, and in particular, the interior was damaged in almost all of them. Liturgical objects and church records have been preserved only in Srpske Moravice and Karlovac.

Gomirje, the only monastery in this eparchy, was demolished and burnt down. The monastery land and entire property were confiscated by Ustashas in 1941. The forest was cut down. All the monastic buildings were burnt down and demolished.

The monastery now has no land, no forest. [...]

Before the war, there were 157 priests in the Eparchy of Gornji Karlovac. Of them, 70 priests were killed, while 86 survived. Out of the 86 priests, only 17 returned to the eparchy in 1945, of whom 16 were regular priests and 1 hieromonk and one regular priest from the Eparchy of Dalmatia, who was temporarily appointed.

Lika, Kordun and Banija look extremely demolished. In the counties of Otočac, Brinje, Ogulin, Glina, Kostajnica, Dvor and Bos. More than 50% of Serbian houses were torn down in Krupa, with more than 70% in the Gračac county. In the counties of Lapac, Udbina, Korenica, Gospić, Perušić, Slunj, Vojnić, Vrgin Most, Bihać and Cazin, in excess of 90% of Serbian houses were torn down and burnt down.

The church municipalities are the owners of their land only formally in land registries. Money deposit booklets of some church municipalities were forcibly taken by Ustashas, who withdrew the funds. The remaining money deposit booklets must be amortised, pursuant to the new legislation, so the amount of the funds will be very small.

The Eparchy of Gornji Karlovac had a population of 449,000 Orthodox inhabitants in late 1940. Many of them were killed, died of typhoid and other diseases, or lost their lives in combat. A number of the inhabitants moved away to Srem, Banat and Bačka. By the end of November 1945, approximately 60,000 people emigrated. If emigration had been stopped, there would be approximately 240,000 people in the Eparchy now. So, this would account for one half of the number of people in 1940. There is not a single parish in which Ustashas did not kill at least 200 persons, mainly adult men. However,

there are many towns and villages in which they killed 1,000-1,300 people (Crkveni Bok, Dubica, Bos, Dobro Selo), 1,500 (Čemernica, Divoselo) and as many as 2,000 people (Plaški). Once all data has been collected, the situation in the Eparchy will be found to be even more horrendous and excruciating.

There are only 20 parishes in which interim administrative offices have been formed. Additionally, the General People's Defence organisation appointed a commissariat of two persons in the church municipality of Karlovac, of whom one person is a woman. In other church municipalities, there are no priests or any form of church municipal administration" (*Ibid.*, pp. 120–121).

The Synod reports on the situation found in the Eparchy of Tuzla and Zvornik in the following manner:

"The people of the Eparchy of Tuzla and Zvornik, especially in its eastern parts, suffered enormous atrocities. The villages were burnt down, the houses were demolished; you can travel for hours on end without seeing or meeting anyone on the roads. The number of clergymen in this eparchy reduced dramatically: Ustashas killed 27 priests, Germans 2, Chetniks 1, partisans 10; 2 priests died in the prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, 9 of them died during the war, 2 were sentenced to a term in prison, 3 of them are currently in prison. This totals 56, which means that the number of clergymen was halved.

Three churches were completely demolished, while many were damaged and desecrated; ceremonial robes, liturgical objects and books were destroyed; some parish halls were burnt down, some demolished and some were damaged. The monas-

tery lodgings were either burnt down or so severely damaged that without extensive renovation, it will be impossible to provide accommodation in them. The monastery-owned forests were cut down and depleted, the furniture in monasteries was taken away or destroyed beyond repair, livestock was either driven away or slaughtered.

Upon the end of the war, the Holy Synod describes the situation in the Eparchy of Dabar-Bosnia in the following manner:

"When Germans and Ustashas were thrown out of Bosnia, His Eminence Bishop of Zvornik and Tuzla, Nektarije, administrator of the Eparchy of Dabar-Bosnia, visited Sarajevo for the first time (from 27 June to 5 July). On Saint Vitus Day, in the Sarajevo Cathedral, he officiated the Holy Liturgy and memorial service for all those who had been killed for holy faith and the motherland. Before the liturgy, the ceremony of small consecration of the cathedral was held because no liturgies had been held there since the war broke out, with the exception of the period when Spiridon Mifka served in Sarajevo.

Compared to other eparchies, the situation in the Eparchy of Dabar Bosnia was satisfactory. The archives of the Church court and the Metropolitan were completely preserved, as well as the library, furniture, even dishes and tableware in the Eparchy itself.

But, the people of this eparchy, especially in East Bosnia and Sandžak, suffered immensely. A large number of priests were killed. Ustashas killed 14 priests, Italians 2, partisans 7; 4 priests are currently imprisoned, while 8 priests died during the war" (*Ibid.*, p. 121).

When presenting the situation found in the Eparchy of Zahumlje and Herzegovina, the Synod reported to the Assembly that in the episcopate building “there was nothing left: furniture, archives, library - everything was looted and destroyed”, while the Department for People’s Protection - counter-intelligence service (OZNA in Serbian - moved in after the war was over. The report continues as follows:

“The Serbian population in Herzegovina suffered immensely and they were left destitute, especially in towns. [...] The once well-off church municipality of Mostar is no longer able to pay the sexton and the bellringer. The situation is not much better in other church municipalities in this eparchy.

The number of clergymen in this eparchy was substantially reduced. Out of 67 priests from both orders that the Eparchy once had, in the month of June 1945, there were only 9 of them, of whom three were so old and ailing that they needed assistance, while one of the priests became minister in the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The monasteries were entirely destroyed or burnt down, while the furniture was stolen” (*Ibid.*, p. 122).

The Synod goes on in the following manner about the situation in the Eparchy of Banjaluka after the end of the war:

“Religious life of the Orthodox population in the Eparchy of Banjaluka, as well as for the most part of the ISC, during the occupation and Ustasha terror was in its external manifestation entirely paralysed because the clergymen were banished. In rare cases of priests in the ranks of the People’s Liberation Army (NOV - partisans) or Chetnik units, people were guarded about them because they had their doubts about such persons being true priests, so the people were reluctant to them officiating the liturgy and did not even ask them to do so. Nevertheless, although because of Ustasha terror it was not possible for the Serbs to express their religious sentiment, the Orthodox population never ceased to be deeply pious and devoted to its Church. Their inner religious being re-emerged only upon the appearance of their priests who started returning from exile. The people cried when they met their priest again, kissing both his hand and his robe.

Thanks to the clergymen having been driven away to Caprag in time^[2] and subsequently transferred to Serbia, only 5 killed priests were killed in the Eparchy of Banjaluka (4 by the Ustashas and 1 by the Germans). Additionally, 13 parish priests died as refugees in exile. There are 107 parish priests in the Eparchy. 58 parish priests returned during 1945, while 8 of them stayed in Serbia. Furthermore, location has not been established for 8 priests, whereas 1 priest never returned from captivity... The people

[2] The Caprag camp, i.e., Ustasha concentration camp in the vicinity of Sisak, was the place where at the beginning of World War II the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church were mainly deported, together with the members of their families. Other Serbs were later brought to this concentration camp before being deported to Serbia. This concentration camp was operational until September 1941. Instead of the banished Orthodox priests, Roman Catholic priests were brought and appointed.

being so happy about seeing their priest in their local communities again is something that was the basic reason for parish priests to feel morally strong. Truth be told, this was not the case everywhere; in the administrative regions of Bosanska Dubica, Bosanski Novi and Jajce, where there was continuous battleground, the people were less committed to the Church, especially the youth. [...]

A total of 20 churches were completely torn down. Eleven churches were partly demolished, to the extent that they were no longer suitable for the liturgy. The antimins, liturgical objects, ceremonial robes and books were for the most part destroyed, and it is difficult to find anything that is necessary for the church.

Many parish halls were demolished or burnt down, while the majority of them is entirely unusable without extensive repairs. Both churches in Banjaluka were demolished and the holy liturgy is held in a large room within the Metropolitanate building, which had been turned into a chapel and consecrated on 16 December 1945. The Metropolitanate itself suffered extensive damage but once the (communist) County People's Committee moved in, it was repaired. The archives, library and store-room of liturgical books issued in Sarajevo were also destroyed.

Before the war, there were 416,000 Orthodox believers in the Eparchy. According to still unconfirmed data, approximately 100,000 people were killed in the Eparchy, i.e., one quarter of the total population..." (Report of the Holy Synod, 1991, pp. 122–123).

The clericalist-fascist ISC occupied Srem in the territory of Serbia, which, according to church

administrative organisation, was within the competence of the Archiepiscopate of Belgrade and Karlovac. This is how the Synod reported to the highest Church body on the situation there:

"In Srem, we have found 28 demolished, and 62 damaged churches, not including the monasteries. 23 parish halls were torn down while 56 of them were damaged. The buildings and the lodgings were demolished in the monasteries of Kuveždin, Grgeteg, Hopovo, Bešenovo, Jazak and Rakovac. The temples within the monastery of Mala Remeta and the lodgings in the monastery of Fenek were also torn down. The temples and lodgings in the monasteries of Šišatovac, Velika Remeta and Privina Glava were partially demolished. Minor damage was caused to the monasteries of Vrdnik, Krušedol and Beočin. [...]

The parish land is not managed by the church administration, nor is the monastic land managed by the monastery administration because both types of land were almost arbitrarily taken away and divided by the local people, even before the adoption of the Agrarian Reform Law. Only in two or three cases was it possible for the Church bodies to lease the land and receive the rent in money or in kind.

In the monasteries of Beočin, Jazak, Privina Glava, Kuveždin, Mala Remeta, and Fenek, there are one or two monks who have started managing the monasteries to a certain extent. They reside in one room of the monastery lodgings because other rooms are occupied by local civil authorities. However, it is impossible for these monks to go anywhere near the monasteries of Šišatovac, Krušedol, Velika Remeta, Grgeteg, Hopovo, Vrdnik,

Rakovac, and Bešenovo. Instead, they live in the villages surrounding the monasteries where they serve as parish priests.

In spiritual terms, the circumstances encountered in Srem were more than desperate. In some towns and villages, people have become completely disinterested in faith and the Church. With huge efforts of the clergymen who returned, circumstances later changed for the better..." (*Ibid.*, p. 118).

Bishop Arsenije, as already noted, was entrusted with administration of the Eparchy of Dalmatia. According to his report dated 9 October 1945, "circumstances of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian people in Dalmatia are better than in Lika, Kordun and Banija". The reason for this is that Dalmatia was under Italian occupation.

The bishop reports to the Church authorities in Belgrade as follows: "The Italians inflicted immense harm to the Serbian population. In fact, the Ustasas could not perform fully to their satisfaction there, and that is why no mass carnage of the Serbs took place, as was the case in the territories run solely by the Croats. Unfortunately, a large number of Dalmatian Serbs died in mutual conflicts. It is estimated that approximately 10 percent of the Serbian population was either killed or died in combat in Dalmatia.

Before the war, there were 50 priests in the Eparchy of Dalmatia; 20 priests were killed, 10 emigrated abroad, while 20 of them stayed in the Eparchy, which means that each priest is in charge of two or three parishes.

The Orthodox Cathedral in Šibenik was severely damaged in the bombing, so the liturgy is held in the cemetery church. In Split, the liturgy is

still held in a hall because the cathedral remained unfinished. The chapel adjoining the church in Zadar was hit by a bomb but thanks to one Roman Catholic clergyman, almost all liturgical objects and valuables were preserved. The church in Knin was demolished in the bombing. The church in the village of Bribir was burnt down. Other churches in villages remained unscathed.

The Krka monastery is completely preserved. This monastery did a lot of good to the people, especially during the times of famine. The other two monasteries, Krupa and Dragović, were damaged and until His Eminence Bishop Arsenije arrived, there was no one there. The prior of the Krupa monastery was killed, whereas the prior of the Dragović monastery was sentenced to 10 years of forced labour. His Eminence appointed a monk to serve as administrator for the parish near the Dragović monastery, and another monk near the Krupa monastery, so that they could take care of these monasteries at the same time..." (*Ibid.*, pp. 126–127).

After World War II was over, communist Yugoslav authorities, attempted to impose the policy of "brotherhood and unity", which entailed concealing facts pertinent to the tragic past, concealing the truth, the avoidance to reveal the extent of wartime suffering that was caused by "fratricide", as well as the number of destroyed or damaged Orthodox churches and other buildings belonging to the Church. In a State Religion Committee document, dated 25 November 1963, which was labelled as *classified* since it was for internal use only, it is mentioned that during the war, the total number of completely destroyed or severely damaged Church buildings was 774 (665 churches, 37 monasteries

and 72 chapels). Of this total number, only in the territory of the then Socialist Republic of Croatia (excluding Bosnia and Herzegovina and other territories occupied by Ustashes), 341 churches were torn down... (Perić, 1991, p. 7).

An especially striking story about suffering of the Serbian Orthodox people is connected with the Church of the Nativity of the Holy Mother of God in Glina. This is where on two occasions, in late July and early August 1941, according to the researchers' estimates, approximately 1,700 Serbs were killed, of whom slightly over one thousand, together with their families, were invited by the Ustasha authorities to be supposedly converted to Catholicism.

After one month, Ustashes demolished the church (built in 1826) in which they committed mass atrocities. When the war was over, officials of the new communist state initiated the exercise of removing the remains of the demolished church, allegedly for the sake of building an adequate memorial site. Once the area was cleared of the remains, the authorities started stalling the construction of the memorial site to the victims killed in the Glina church. In 1972, a memorial centre was built on the former church site. It was used as the community centre, and accordingly hosted various cultural and entertaining events. In the late 1980s, the issue of building the memorial was revisited and there were initiatives to do it. The memorial site to those killed in the Glina church was supposed to have the names of all the victims engraved in it. It was not completed until late July 1995 and it was only several days later, in early August, that a new pogrom against the

Serbian people was carried out, so what had just been built was then demolished. Afterwards, the memorial site was renamed to the Croatian House! (Čalija, 2021, p. 7).

Conclusion

The Independent State of Croatia (ISC) - in the words of its leaders, which was also apparent in their actions - based its Ustasha movement on the Roman Catholic faith. From the very establishment of the ISC, it was noticeable that it and the Roman Catholic Church acted jointly in this region. Concordance between them could be seen both in words and in actions (actually done or failed ones) of the Head of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, the Archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac.

The Ustasha plan and agenda for the killings, persecution and conversion of the Serbs also involved actions by the Roman Catholic Church, because "conversion to the Catholic faith" could be performed only by someone who was in its service. Through their publicly declared motto, that was meant to be heard by the Serbian people in the ISC - *you either bow down or you will be exterminated*. What was demanded of the Serbs was their spiritual submission, or their physical extermination. Submission, which in its very nature also entails spiritual "stooping" and "breaking", was initially attempted to be performed through conversion to Catholicism. And when this exercise of proselytism failed to produce the desired results, they attempted to achieve them with non-canonical means, by creating, contrary to the canon law, the "Croatian Orthodox Church".

It is specifically for this reason that enormous effort was put in dismantling the organisation of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the territory of the ISC but also in destroying and killing, i.e., removal

of the Serbian Orthodox Church from this region.

Consequently, during World War II, the Serbian Orthodox Church suffered the worst atrocities in the territory of the clerical-fascist ISC.

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