

**Ирина Огнянова (Irina Ognyanova), *Католическата църква и усташкият режим в Хърватия (1941- 1945)* [Catholic Church and the Ustasha Regime in Croatia (1941- 1945)] (Sofia: Paradigma, 2014), 414 pages; text of the book in Bulgarian; summary in Croatian on pages 405 to 408; summary in English on pages 409 to 412**



### Summary

The role of the Catholic Church as a national spiritual institution and defender of Croatian national interests is enormous both before and during the Second World War. The analysis of the Catholic Church's activity in the period 1941-1945 shows that in terms of right-wing totalitarianism it distanced most from the Ustasha regime, headed by Ante Pavelić and did not discredit itself with the spread at the time ideologies of fascism and Nazism. The modern interpretation of the available sources and historiography reveals its opposition to the extreme nationalistic policy of the Ustasha organization and its positive role in Croatian history during the war.

As far as the Ustasha movement identified itself with the national goals and objectives for the creation of an independent Croatian state, a great part of the Catholic clergy supported it already in the interwar period. In April 1941 the Catholic Church acclaimed the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (ISC) because it gave the Croats a chance to liberate from the Serbian dominance in Yugoslavia and to restore their independent state development. The pursuit of national sovereignty radicalized the Catholic clergy. Some of its representatives not only sympathized with the Ustasha movement, but even became its members, ideologues, propagandists, etc. Many church leaders were "contaminated" by the widespread in the country extreme Croatian nationalism which was imposed as state ideology and policy.

The only legal authority on Croatian territory during the war was the Ustasha one, therefore the clergy had to comply with its postulates and actions. The clergy perceived the ISC as its own nation-state and its political leadership - as a legitimate representative of the state authority. For the Catholic Church there was no other alternative it could support in wartime Croatia. Political parties in the country were banned in 1941 and on its territory acted illegitimate paramilitary formations - Chetniks (who were Orthodox) and Partisans (a great majority of whom were atheists). Thus, the clergy preferred "the less evil", which for the moment was the Ustasha rule - moreover, it was Croatian along national lines, and Catholic in terms of religion.

Besides, the Catholic Church in Croatia enjoyed a privileged position and became a kind of a "state" church in the ISC. The Ustasha government did not take actions

against it, and did not directly affect its rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the blow inflicted by the Ustasas on Orthodoxy gave a greater chance to the Catholic Church to strengthen its positions in the region. The highest ecclesiastical position of the Zagreb Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac required him to maintain official relations with both the Ustasas and the occupational authorities. As an influential spiritual institution the Catholic Church gave legitimacy to the Ustasha government. That was a “marriage of convenience” because of the common national interests, but after the war particularly those common grounds would “discredit” the Church in Croatia and subject it to harsh criticism for decades.

The Catholic clergy was not uniform in its attitude towards the Ustasha government. There were examples of cooperation but also of dissent and opposition. While some members of the lower clergy and young clerics, especially those from the monastic orders of the mixed regions (as Franciscans in Herzegovina and southern Dalmatia), were among the most outspoken supporters of the Ustasha rule, the episcopate led by Archbishop Stepinac was quite reserved to it. Although in theory church and state were separated from each other and in the ISC was declared full freedom of religion and conscience, that actually never happened in practice. The authoritarian Ustasha regime intervened dramatically in the spiritual life of the country and that repelled the leadership of the Catholic Church from it. The Church and Catholicism were important for Ante Pavelić only as means to achieve the national objectives of the Ustasha movement and his own political ambitions.

Stepinac, however, clearly distinguished “regime” from “state”. He supported the idea of an independent Croatian state, where Catholicism was freely professed, but did not support the extreme nationalist policy of the Ustasha regime, and the more it moved away from the Catholic moral principles and the generally accepted norms in the society, the more he distinguished himself from it. A big part of the leading clergy members publicly denounced the policy of state terror and genocide against the non-Croatian population of the country (mainly Serbs, Jews and Gypsies). The clergy raised its voice in defense of all the people who were persecuted by Pavelić’s regime - irrespective of race, religion, nationality or political views.

The Catholic clerics advocated for an independent national state, but in the period 1941-1945 Croatia did not turn into such. Its freedom and independency were merely a fiction. The Catholic Church was the only official institution that did not reconcile with the foreign (German and Italian) occupation of the country. It did not exclude the Diocese of Dalmatia, i.e. did not recognize its secession from the Croatian state. The bishops protested publicly against the atrocities committed by the Italian authorities in this occupied Croatian territory and that happened at a time when the Ustasha censorship did not allow anyone to speak and write against “allied Italy.” The Catholic Church in ISC strongly supported the Croatian statehood and independence. And if we compare the Ustasha nationalism to that of the clergy, we will find that the latter was not only more moderate but also more honest and it enjoyed the support of the majority of the Croatian population. While the formation of Pavelić expressed the extreme Croatian nationalism and imposed it with outside help during the war, Archbishop Stepinac headed the moderate stream in it, which had a much longer

history and tradition in the Croatian society, but unfortunately did not play a decisive role in the events during the Second World War.

However, the contradictions of the leadership of the church with Pavelić regime remained hidden to the public and officially the relations between the two official institutions were not interrupted. Stepinac acted quite diplomatically during the entire wartime period - from 1941 to 1945. He understood that when an authoritarian government was carrying out a violent retribution against all forces oppositional to the regime, the church should not enter into an open confrontation with it, in order to preserve its place and influence in the society and to be able to intervene in defense of persecuted individuals or whole ethnic and religious groups in the country.

As a spiritual institution in Croatia the Catholic Church had no mechanisms to interfere directly in the government of the country. The ISC was not a clerical state and the clergy was kept away from the key government positions. Therefore, the protests of the clergy found mostly religious forms – they were expressed at private meetings, in sermons, in resolutions of the Episcopal conferences, etc. The Church did not try to provoke civil strife or civil disobedience, having in mind the difficult situation in the country – mass uncertainty, chaos, lawlessness, considerable external pressure, and even occupation. The Partisan movement in the ISC, which was led by the Yugoslav Communist Party, was also very strong - especially towards the end of the war. If the Catholic Church declared itself as a formal opposition to the Ustasha regime that would only undermine the foundations of the state and strengthen the fight of Partisans and Chetniks against it. In such a complex situation, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was clear that a nationally responsible position required the preservation of Croatian independence, no matter how incomplete it was in the period 1941-1945.

The Catholic Church in Croatia was subjected to the Vatican and followed its political line, which was also very diplomatic and careful towards the Ustasha rule. Stepinac could not take his own decision to openly oppose the regime in the ISC imposed by Hitler and Mussolini. The Croatian clergy strictly followed the guidelines and advices coming from the Roman Curia and in fact did not show self-initiative in its contacts with the ultra-nationalist Ustasha government.

Despite the reservations of the majority of church leaders to the Ustasha regime, they stood firmly on the position to preserve the Croatian statehood. The Episcopate did not accept dictatorship tendencies and pro-German sympathies of the Ustashes, but the existence of the Croatian state remained their ultimate goal. For the Catholic clergy it was clear that the greatest danger to the future of the Croatian people was the loss of independence and the restoration of Yugoslavia as a future Communist Federation. Faced with the alternative - Ustasha or Bolshevik dictatorship, the Catholic Church supported the idea of an independent Croatia.

The prestige of the Roman Catholic Church in the Croatian society was so great that with their hostile attitude towards it the Ustashes lost popularity and repelled the majority of the Croatian Catholics from their policy. The Croatian nationalists stood alone against one common, although unorganized political opposition, which was headed precisely by the Catholic Church during the war. As in the time of the Habsburg Monarchy and interwar Yugoslavia the clergymen felt obliged to become

the real force that could contribute to the national salvation of the Croatian people and the preservation of its country from destruction. The Catholic clergy could not accept Croatia's entry into the new Yugoslav federation and continued to support the struggle of its people for freedom and independence in the conditions of the new totalitarian rule imposed by the Yugoslav Communist Party.