

## Between State and Church: memory culture and revisionism in Croatia. The role and rehabilitation of Alojzije Stepinac, archbishop of Zagreb

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*The fundamental character of the Balkans in the 20th century is reflected in contemporary conflicts and influences the relationship between history, religion and memory. The memory culture of archbishop Alojzije Stepinac of Zagreb is particularly illustrative: in Croatia, he is perceived as a victim of the communist dictatorship and a Catholic martyr, whereas in Serbia, he is presented as a war criminal, condemned in 1946 for collaboration with the Ustasha regime and nazi Germany. The Catholic Church plays a major role in the promotion of Stepinac, emphasizing his acts of heroism while putting patriotism and faith on the same level. Politicians, starting with president Franjo Tuđman in the 1990s, fan the flames in ardent speeches and sometimes even rehabilitate parts of the Ustasha regime, while constantly victimizing the Croatian nation under Tito. The 20th century becomes a tool of nationalism and revisionism, reinforcing discord and conflicts in the Balkans.*

**Keywords:** Independent State of Croatia, Fascism, Catholic Church, Alojzije Stepinac, Nationalism.

**Parole chiave:** Stato autonomo di Croazia, Fascismo, Chiesa cattolica, Alojzije Stepinac, Nazionalismo.

### *An overview: the person and his time*

«My conscience is clear, and the judgment of history will be in my favour»<sup>1</sup>: these were the words proclaimed by Alojzije Stepinac, archbishop of Zagreb, when he appeared in court on 3 October 1946.

Alojzije Viktor Stepinac was born on 8 May 1898 into a Croatian peasant family in Brezarić, a small village between Zagreb and Karlovac. He attended the archiepiscopal high school, with the aim of studying theology and becoming a priest. The kingdom of Croatia and Slavonia still belonging to the Habsburg monarchy, he joined the 96<sup>th</sup> regiment of the Austro-Hungarian army and volunteered for the Yugoslav Legion after the end of world war I. In 1924, he returned to the seminary of the Pontificum Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum in Rome and studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Ordained to the priesthood in 1930 and returning to Croatia, he quickly made a career in Zagreb: he was appointed coadjutor to archbishop Antun Bauer in 1934, and by 1937, he became the youngest archbishop of his time. Four years later, Yugoslavia was destroyed by the German Wehrmacht

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Š. Čorić, *Kardinal Alojzije Stepinac. Osnovne činjenice o osobi i djelu*, Hrvatski Informativni Centar, Zagreb 1998, p. 45.

and Hitler and Mussolini established the so-called Independent State of Croatia, *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* (NDH), governed by the fascist Ustasha regime<sup>2</sup>.

Several periods need to be considered in order to understand the political and social life surrounding archbishop Stepinac: firstly, king Alexander's royal Yugoslavia (1918-1941), in which Stepinac's career began. The Habsburg territories of Yugoslavia had united with the kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro on 1 December 1918 to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which, after 1929, was officially named the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. King Alexander I of Yugoslavia established the king's dictatorship, which, unlike other dictatorships, was not supported by any political party or organization, but by the king himself, who was directly in charge of the people. Parties and public associations were dissolved, and the press was strictly controlled. In October 1929, the old countries were abolished by decree and replaced by nine "banovine", i.e. provinces headed by a "ban", a local ruler. In the 1930s, «le problème croate domina tout»<sup>3</sup>. The political gap between Serbs and Croats was constantly widening, not least because the leader of the powerful Croatian Peasant Party, Vladko Maček, was once again imprisoned for having called for Croatia's autonomy in his manifesto, but especially because of the assassination of several members of the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), among them Stjepan Radić, in the National Assembly in Belgrade in 1928. In 1929, the Ustasha movement was created by Ante Pavelić, with the aim of overthrowing the monarchy and combating the Serbian predominance. It had been rather insignificant prior to world war II but cooperated for example with the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (Vmro), in particular in the assassination of king Alexander in 1934. Five years later, on the eve of the war, an agreement was signed between Prince Paul and Maček, providing a large "banovina" of Croatia, uniting the territories of Croatia and Dalmatia, i.e. 4,4 million inhabitants. Considered a great victory by some, this agreement was not enough for others who wanted total independence for Croatia, not simply the status of a banovina. When the Tripartite Pact was rejected, Hitler, seeing this «as a personal insult»<sup>4</sup> responded immediately with a declaration of war on 6 April 1941, and eliminated all resistance from the royal army.

In Croatia, it was through the issue of the country's independence that fascism could pave its way. When Joachim von Ribbentrop proposed independence to Maček and the latter refused, the Germans called on the Ustasha. On 10 April 1941, a few hours after the Wehrmacht entered Zagreb, the general Slavko Kvaternik proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia and Ante Pavelić as the new *Poglavnik* – head of state, Führer. Hitler and Mussolini linked Dalmatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to Croatia, forming a state of 6,5 million inhabitants, of whom 3,4 million were Croats, 1,9 million Serbs, 700.000 Bosnian Muslims and 18.000 Jews. The historian Stanley G. Payne clarifies that «[t]he Independent State of Croatia's unique place in history was that of being the only new fascist state placed directly

<sup>2</sup> For a complete biography see C. Stahl, *Alojzije Stepinac. Die Biografie*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn 2017.

<sup>3</sup> G. Castellán, *Histoire des Balkans, XIV<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Fayard, Paris 1991, p. 414.

<sup>4</sup> E. von Weizsäcker, *Erinnerungen*, List, München 1950, p. 312.

in power by Hitler with the opportunity to enjoy extensive autonomy and to develop its own system»<sup>5</sup>. The Ustasha movement started as a stateless, radical nationalist and terrorist organization which was, in the course of time, increasingly influenced by fascist ideas due to its close contacts with nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The Ukrainian historian Oleksandr Zaitsev demonstrates that «integral nationalist organizations of stateless peoples like the OUN (Organization of the Ukrainian Nationalists), Ustaša, and others constitute a separate genus of political movements and respective ideologies, different both from fascism and from the democratic trend in national liberation movements»<sup>6</sup>. Compared to other fascist movements, «the Ustaša movement exhibited less theoretical sophistication and elaboration»<sup>7</sup>, meaning that there has not been elaborated a peculiar and distinctive ideology, as it has been the case in Germany, Italy or Hungary. At the same time, it was characterized by «extreme ethnic nationalism, the aim of the creation of an independent, nationalist, authoritarian state, anti-liberalism and anti-communism, the military structure of the movement, individual terror as the main method of the struggle, the exaltation of youth, emphasizing the conflict of generations, the tendency toward an authoritarian, charismatic, personal style of command, and their orientation toward the Axis powers»<sup>8</sup>. This is what Payne calls a subscription «to nearly all the basic points that would compose a “fascist minimum”»<sup>9</sup>. The historian Madeline Vadkerty points out the interweaving themes and strategies applied by the Ustasha to build their nation based on Catholic «Croatism»<sup>10</sup>: the emphasis was laid on the suffering of the Croatian people because of their long-denied nationhood, asserting the long-awaited end of victimization and the construction of a new society based on racial purity and cultural superiority. Those who would have a place in this new social order were exactly defined, which reinforced the development of an «us versus them» attitude as well as a national identification with Catholicism and its

<sup>5</sup> S.G. Payne, *The NDH State in Comparative Perspective*, in «Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions», n. 4, 2006, pp. 409-415, here p. 409.

<sup>6</sup> O. Zaitsev, *Fascism or ustashism? Ukrainian integral nationalism of the 1920s-1930s in comparative perspective*, in «Communist and Post-Communist Studies», n. 48, 2015, pp. 183-193, here p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> S.G. Payne, *The NDH State in Comparative Perspective*, in «Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions», n. 4, 2006, cit., p. 410.

<sup>8</sup> O. Zaitsev, *Fascism or ustashism?*, in «Communist and Post-Communist Studies», n. 48, 2015, cit., p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> S.G. Payne, *The NDH State in Comparative Perspective*, in «Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions», n. 4, 2006, cit., p. 410.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of “croatism”, including the motto “God and the Croats” (“Bog i Hrvati”) was developed by Ante Starčević (1823-1896), co-founder of the Croatian Party of Rights which was fighting against the Austro-Hungarian supremacy and for the independence of Croatia. Starčević cultivated the idea of a “Greater Croatia” including most of the South Slavs, supposedly “Croats” and living on “Croatian soil” since the Middle Ages. This ideology was largely taken up by the Ustasha, especially the thesis of «the right of Croats to a state that must perpetuate the state continuity of the Croatian kingdom, advocating the independence of Croatia on a territory encompassing all of Bosnia-Herzegovina», being part of the «Croatian historical lands». See S. Šipić, *L'idéologie du mouvement Oustachi de 1930 à 1941*, in «Cahiers balkaniques», n. 38-39, 2011, p. 3, <https://journals.openedition.org/ceb/745> [accessed 15 May 2024].

traditional values<sup>11</sup>. Ante Pavelić took up these ideas and added the importance of uniting «tout le peuple croate dans un seul mouvement, qui sera capable non seulement d’obtenir la liberté, mais aussi de faire renaître le peuple [...]. [C’est] par la révolution, le sang et les armes [que] la tyrannie étrangère doit être détruite pour aboutir à la création d’un État croate indépendant»<sup>12</sup>.

The history of the young country is complicated to grasp, as historiography can often be subject to nationalism, revisionism and exaltation. As Holm Sundhaussen points out when referring to the analysis of the Croatian Ustasha regime and the system of concentration camps in the Independent State of Croatia, «with the current state of research, we cannot find an answer, a definitive conclusion to every question and problem»<sup>13</sup>. The main dilemma with the work on archbishop Stepinac, and on the Independent State of Croatia in general, is its lack of historiographic accuracy along with apologetic elements. As long as socialist Yugoslavia existed, critical, scholarly investigations into the period of the Independent State of Croatia and the role of the Catholic Church were difficult to be carried out – not least because there was no willingness for self-criticism on the part of the Church. Up to the early two-thousands, publications about Stepinac in the Balkans can be divided into two parts: one set of studies was published during the time of the communist government in Yugoslavia, while the other came from Croatian emigrant circles in Western Europe and the USA, as well as from historians in the service of the Church. Reading and comparing these works, it can be noticed that they are written based on ideological viewpoints, not scientific findings. In the works published in Yugoslavia, the emphasis is mainly laid on the collective responsibility of the Catholic clergy in Croatia, whereas in the writings of Croatian emigrants or clergymen, an apologetic position is adopted with no further examination or criticism. This difference is most evident in the discussion surrounding archbishop Stepinac. Yugoslav historiography accuses him of having maintained close relations with the Ustasha government, of having been its supporter and of having participated in the genocide, while the other side believes that he had always turned away from the Ustasha and had helped the victims. The works of Marco Aurelio Rivelli and Branimir Stanojević, which attribute direct responsibility for the genocide in Croatia to Stepinac and clearly condemn his behaviour, stand in stark contrast to the works of Ernest Bauer or Mathilde Landercy, pseudonym of Croatian priest Vladimir Horvat, praising the archbishop and his courageous work without any further historical criticism.

Since the early two-thousands, several scholars, such as Mark Biondich and Michael Phayer, have examined the genocide in the Independent State of Croatia and the role of the Catholic clergy. Phayer has also carried out an extensive study of

<sup>11</sup> M. Vadkerty, *Anti-Jewish Propaganda in the NDH and the Slovak State*, in «Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe», n. 2, 2020, pp. 120-144, here p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> S. Šipić, *L'idéologie du mouvement Oustachi*, cit., pp. 5 ff.

<sup>13</sup> H. Sundhaussen, *Das Konzentrationslager Jasenovac (1941-1945). Konstruktion und Dekonstruktion eines Kriegsverbrechens und Weltkriegsmythos*, in *Kriegsverbrechen im 20. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. G. Ueberschär, W. Wette, Primus, Darmstadt 2001, p. 372.

the role of the pope in *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War*<sup>14</sup>. In the German-speaking world, it is above all Alexander Korb who, in his book *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941-1945*<sup>15</sup> analyses in a well-conducted study the mass violence committed by the Ustasha, but focuses less on the role of the Church. In 2017, German judge Claudia Stahl published a major biography of archbishop Stepinac<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, the Croatian-speaking world still lacks a well-founded analysis and reappraisal of Alojzije Stepinac's role in the Independent State of Croatia.

### *Archbishop in the capital of the Independent State of Croatia*

This article can by no means provide a complete analysis of Alojzije Stepinac's life and work but sets out to expose a few revealing elements about his position and actions during the Ustasha regime, which might help to explain the ambiguous culture of his remembrance and rehabilitation in Croatia. It is mostly based on sources from the Croatian State Archives (HR HDA) and the Archiepiscopal Archives of Zagreb (NAZ): official documents, i.e. laws, decrees and archives of the Ustasha administration, documents used during the trials conducted in 1945 and 1946 (arrest protocols, interrogation transcripts, accuser and defence evidence), newspapers, brochures, sermons, pastoral letters and correspondence.

The case of Alojzije Stepinac was, and still is, highly controversial and a source of hatred between Croatia and Serbia. Especially since the XIX century, Churches in the Balkans, and in East-Central Europe in general, were involved in state affairs and therefore inevitably caught up in political developments. The role of the Croatian Catholic Church during the second world war was increasingly complex, active and emotionally charged. The situation and behaviour of the various religious institutions and communities, and of the political authorities towards them, varied considerably from region to region, from nation to nation, from national minority to national minority, and from period to period. What was the role of Alojzije Stepinac, archbishop of Zagreb, during the existence of the Independent State of Croatia, and how can it be assessed? How can the 1946 trial be evaluated, and how is it connected to contemporary debates in the Balkans? To be able to respond to these questions, the relationship between Stepinac, the Catholic Church and the Ustasha between 1941 and 1945 will be examined in the following part, including the position of religious minorities in the NDH, Stepinac's view on communism as well as his arrest and trial. The next sections deal with immediate and subsequent reactions inside and outside the country, testimonies and Stepinac's controversial image to this day, including the connection between the "Stepinac case" and revisionism in Croatia today.

<sup>14</sup> M. Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust and the Cold War*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2008.

<sup>15</sup> A. Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941-1945*, Hamburger Institut für Socialforschung, Hamburg 2013.

<sup>16</sup> C. Stahl, *Alojzije Stepinac. Die Biografie*, cit.

Even before the proclamation of the NDH, thus in king Alexander's Yugoslavia, Alojzije Stepinac took a very critical view of Serbia and the Yugoslav idea, seeing both as a great danger to the Catholic Church in Croatia and to the Croatian nation. Jozo Tomasevich quotes Stepinac's diary of 27 March 1941: «All in all, Croats and Serbs are two worlds, the north and south poles, which will never become close except by a miracle of God. The schism is the greatest curse of Europe, almost greater than Protestantism. In it there is no morality, no principle, no truth, no justice, no honesty»<sup>17</sup>. The archbishop saw communism as the greatest and most dangerous enemy of the Croatian people, claiming as follows:

The truth is that there can be no cooperation with the communists until they give up their teaching and their crimes and thus cease to be what they are. [...] The Lord will never forget his Church, especially after some of its representatives have become victims in the defence of justice and truth against the communist criminals. And therefore, we are not afraid of them at all. And, therefore, we will not cease to work or cease to tell our people the truth, because we do not want them to spit on their honourable, heroic, Christian, and Catholic past of 1300 years and become a nation of killers and robbers, debauchees, and thieves<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, the archbishop was bitterly opposed to freemasonry, calling its members, in his diary of 30 May 1934, shortly after his nomination as coadjutor archbishop, a «hellish society [...], the sworn enemy of the Catholic Church and therefore also of the Croatian nation»<sup>19</sup> – clearly linking Church to nationhood. Stepinac's views on the “traditional enemies” of the Catholic Church were fully shared by the Croatian Catholic hierarchy, just like the enthusiasm at the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia on 10 April 1941. Already two days later, the archbishop visited Slavko Kvaternik, Pavelić's representative, and «greeted him warmly, assuring him of cooperation between the ustasha movement and the highest representative of the Roman Catholic Church in the Croatian state»<sup>20</sup>. On 16 April, Stepinac visited Ante Pavelić, also affirming his loyalty to the regime. The following week, in a circular to the clergy of his archdiocese, he wrote that this was «the most important event in the life of the Croatian people [...] and a long-awaited [davno iščekivan] ideal»<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, by this time, discriminatory laws legalizing all violence and political terror against Jews and Serbs had been enacted, and, for instance, the synagogue of Osijek was destroyed on 14 April that year. Instead of realizing or reacting to these cruelties, the archbishop was rather fascinated by the creation of this Croatian

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945. Occupation and Collaboration*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2001, p. 553.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Hrvatski Državni Arhiv (HR HDA), fond 416 (Dossier of Prosecutor Ivo Politeo: Case of A. Stepinac), b. 10.2, f. 7, Archbishop Stepinac visits Slavko Kvaternik, 12-4-1941.

<sup>21</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.2, f. 27, Circular from Archbishop Stepinac to the clergy of Zagreb, 22-4-1941.

state, convinced that it had to be supported to all intents and purposes. The «Katolički List» (Catholic Newspaper) of 13 April 1941, Easter Sunday, announced the rebirth of the Independent State of Croatia, comparing it to the resurrection of Christ: alongside several photographs of Ante Pavelić, whom the newspaper called «Čovjek Providnosti» (the man of Providence), it read: «The holy year – it is the year of the resurrection of freedom, the year of the resurrection of the Independent State of Croatia»<sup>22</sup>. In his circular two weeks later, Stepinac picks up this idea:

What our nation has long dreamed of, the ideal so strongly desired, has happened. It is no longer language, but blood that defines this bond to the land in which we have seen the light of God. [...] So be ready for your new vocation, for your new work to protect and advance the Croatian state. Show it, my brothers, and fulfil your duties to the young Independent State of Croatia. [...] We believe and expect that, in this Independent State of Croatia, the Catholic Church will be able to manifest itself in complete freedom and express the eternal principles of Truth and Justice<sup>23</sup>.

The following day, he expressed his joy once again in a sermon at the Kaptol, the archiepiscopal palace in Zagreb, pointing out that «love for one's nation is engraved in human minds by the hand of God» and stating that «we can clearly see God's hand at work»<sup>24</sup>. On 30 June, Alojzije Stepinac sent the first official letter concerning the establishment of the new state to Pavelić, promising him «honest and loyal collaboration on our part for a better future of our homeland»<sup>25</sup>. Putting patriotism and even nationalism on the same level as faith and love for God, archbishop Stepinac expresses his full support and approval for the Independent State of Croatia, which he sees as a nation willed by God. On 6 July 1941, the *Poglavnik* had an audience with the Catholic episcopate of Zagreb, presided by Alojzije Stepinac, during which Pavelić emphasized the important role of the Catholic clergy in the past and future of the Croatian nation and its state. Paul Mojzes analyses the important role of clerics in the Independent State of Croatia as follows: «Often, when Croat Catholic priests in the past (and even in the present) spoke or wrote, it was not clear whether he was more a Croat to whom Catholicism seemed a useful instrument to assert Croatian interests, or whether he was a Catholic Croat who so desired the victory of Catholicism over Orthodoxy and Judaism»<sup>26</sup>. Until now, clergymen have tended to see themselves as shepherds or pastors of their flock, but also as agents or messengers of God. They interpreted God as the guarantor of their own nation, asserting God would protect and bless

<sup>22</sup> Historijski Arhiv Sarajevo (HAS), Zbirka Štampata (Press), «Katolički List», Sarajevo, n. 15, 13-4-1941.

<sup>23</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.2, f. 33, Circular from Archbishop Stepinac to the priests and bishops of Zagreb, 28-4-1941.

<sup>24</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.2, f. 37, Sermon in the Kaptol Church (cathedral), 29-4-1941.

<sup>25</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.2, f. 56, Letter from Archbishop Stepinac to Ante Pavelić concerning the establishment of the new state, 30-6-1941.

<sup>26</sup> P. Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides. Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, Rowman&Littlefield, Plymouth 2011, p. 63.

their State. The Christian values of justice, truth, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace, were neglected.

Nevertheless, archbishop Stepinac would show more courage and astuteness than other clergymen in the NDH. Already on May 14, 1941, he wrote a letter to Pavelić in which he blamed arbitrary violence against Serbs:

Poglavnik, I have just heard the news that the Ustasha have shot 260 Serbs in Glina without legal evidence. I know that the Serbs have committed very serious crimes against our homeland over the past twenty years. But I still think that, as an archbishop, my moral responsibility makes me raise my voice to say that this is forbidden according to Catholic morality, and I therefore beg you to take measures on the entire Croatian territory so that not a single Serb is killed if he cannot be accused of a crime that deserves to be punished by death. Otherwise, we cannot count on heavenly blessing, without which we will collapse. I hope you won't hold these frank words against me<sup>27</sup>.

A week later, Stepinac wrote a letter to Andrija Artuković, Interior Minister of the NDH, requesting non-Aryans who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism to be exempted from the new regulations, for example from wearing the yellow star. In addition, he put forward three other requests, which he calls «in the interests of the Catholic Church», including the schooling of non-Aryan children of parents who have converted to Catholicism, the distinction of non-Aryans who have converted to Catholicism from non-Aryans of the Jewish faith, as well as a more circumspect behaviour towards Catholic non-Aryans who have invested themselves for Croatia<sup>28</sup>. It becomes clear that Stepinac was not condemning the system as such. He only demanded that people should not be killed arbitrarily, so that the murderers might not be deprived of God's blessing, or that Catholic converts of Jewish origin would be exempted from wearing armbands, to prevent creating disorder during mass. Subsequently, and often contradictorily, he indirectly justified racial laws, while intervening with the government to ensure that they were applied in a limited and mitigated way: «The fact that members of other nations and races are deprived of any possibility of existence, and are stigmatized, is a question of humanity and morality. The laws of morality are in force not only in the life of each individual, but also in state regulation»<sup>29</sup>. He protested against «the inhuman and atrocious treatment of non-Aryans» and called for «more humane» deportations, without explicitly questioning them<sup>30</sup>. In particular, he called for five things: time for physical and mental preparation for deportees and their families, less crowded and unlocked transport, enough food for prisoners, medical care, and permission for food depots and correspondence with relatives.

<sup>27</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.3, f. 14, Letter from Archbishop Stepinac to Ante Pavelić, 14-5-1941.

<sup>28</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.3, f. 18, Letter from Archbishop Stepinac to Andrija Artuković, 22-5-1941.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.3, f. 25, Letter from Archbishop Stepinac to Ante Pavelić, 21-7-1941.

Stepinac was cautious and rather indirect in his criticism, expressing the following in November 1941 on the question of Orthodox conversions to Catholicism: «We do not accuse the government of the Independent State of Croatia of these errors, nor do we want to see a system in them, but we do see in them the individual acts of people who were not aware of their great responsibility and its consequences»<sup>31</sup>. All throughout its existence, the archbishop of Zagreb attended the festivities for the regime's anniversaries and celebrated masses attended by Pavelić and the entire government.

Alojzije Stepinac delivered his most famous sermon against racism on 30 October 1943:

What do earthly races and nations mean before God? It is necessary to ask this question too, today, when theories of class, race and nation preoccupy people the most. [...] Nations are different, of course, but they all descend from God. However, their difference should not be a reason for destruction and killing. Every race and nation have the right to lead a dignified life. Every human being, without distinction, whether they belong to the gypsy race, whether they are black or decent Europeans, hated Jews or proud Aryans [...]. The Church has always condemned all injustice and violence committed in the name of class, race or nation. You cannot extirpate Gypsies or Jews just because you consider them inferior races. If race theories continue to develop, no one will ever be safe. [...] No human being has the right to kill members of other races and nations with his or her hand<sup>32</sup>.

Even if he insisted on the equality of human beings before God and the Church and supported charitable actions that included the rescue of several hundred orphaned Serbian and Jewish children, the archbishop had been deluded himself for far too long that Ustasha violence was the act of individuals and the excesses of a few irresponsible men. He did not realize – or did not want to realize – that these acts were the consequences of a totalitarian ideology and a carefully thought-out, organized state policy. Alojzije Stepinac has never condemned the Ustasha ideology or the regime in a direct and comprehensive sense: firstly, because he included the State, declared as being a Catholic one, in his parish; secondly, and above all, because the main enemy of Croatian Catholicism, according to the archbishop, was communism. Ivo Goldstein sums up that, in Stepinac's eyes, it would have been possible to improve the Independent State of Croatia, but never communism<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, Hans Helm, German police attaché in Zagreb, sent a telegram to Berlin in which he reported that «Archbishop Doctor Stepinac's harsh criticism of the Ustasha regime in his sermon of 30 October 1943 had created a gulf between

<sup>31</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.4, f. 42, Archbishop Stepinac about the conversions to Catholicism, 17-11-1941.

<sup>32</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.6, f. 43, Archbishop Stepinac's sermon in the Zagreb cathedral, 30-10-1943.

<sup>33</sup> I. Goldstein, *Judengenozid im Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien*, in «Fantom slobode/Phantom der Freiheit», n. 1-2, 2008, pp. 367-389, here p. 374.

the interests of the State and the interests of the Church in Croatia»<sup>34</sup>. In a time of violence and forced conversions, the archbishop of Zagreb certainly did not always find the right words or solutions, but he did make open and direct criticisms of the political authorities. Alojzije Stepinac's statements during the war can be divided into three categories: those relating to the individuals and groups appealing for his help, those referring to the principles of religion and human rights, and those dealing with the Church's policy towards minorities. Although his sermons became increasingly critical from 1942 onwards, he never threatened to withdraw his personal or the Church's approval of the Ustasha government.

*Archbishop in the new communist regime: the trial and its aftermath*

Several times in 1945, Stepinac repeated that he would not fear anything and stay with his people, no matter what would happen<sup>35</sup>. In the early spring of 1945, the Wehrmacht withdrew its troops from Croatia, leaving the Ustasha and Yugoslav partisans to face each other. «For many radical Catholics, however, once the marriage between their movement and Ustaše had been consummated in 1941, there was little serious thought of a divorce»<sup>36</sup>. For the Croatian clergy, a time of anxiety began. Josip Broz Tito and the new communist regime introduced a series of important changes in Church-State relations that marked a new era. First of all, the separation of Church and State, which deprived the Church of a number of administrative and educational functions, and abolished for example compulsory baptism, compulsory religious marriage, religion classes in schools, and so on. State subsidies to churches were eliminated at the same time. In addition, all political and non-religious involvement on the part of the Church was prohibited, except for charity. The state also introduced compulsory civil marriage and, in the agrarian reform adopted on 23 August 1945, took agricultural land and forests from churches and monasteries, which were often of historical importance to the church or monastery in question. As far as some of the elements are concerned, the Yugoslav leadership seems to have been inspired by the Soviet Decree on Separation of Church and State (1918), but Yugoslavia was still a peculiar case, not only because it was a multi-ethnic formation, but also because it incorporated three major religions, i.e., Roman Catholicism, Eastern Christian Orthodoxy and Islam. It can rather be defined as a “civil religion”, combining several peculiarities: the contextualisation and myth of its origin at the end of world war II, the providential idea of Tito's “chosen people”, as well as the cult of Tito based on charismatic

<sup>34</sup> HR HDA, fond 1521 (Archive of Hans Helm), b. 29, f. 4, Report from Hans Helm to Berlin, 2-11-1943.

<sup>35</sup> C. Stahl, *Alojzije Stepinac*, cit., pp. 310 ff.

<sup>36</sup> M. Biondich, *Radical Catholicism and Fascism in Croatia, 1918-1945*, in «Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions», n. 2, 2007, pp. 383-399, here p. 396.

leadership which depicted him as a hero and saviour<sup>37</sup>. Stepinac's criticism and contempt for the new regime became increasingly direct, explicit and public, as evidenced by the pastoral letter of 20 September 1945. As a rallying point not only for militant Catholic circles, but also for all nationalist forces in Croatia, Stepinac became a powerful adversary of the new Yugoslav state, with which many Croats were dissatisfied.

As noted above, Stepinac had already been a passionate opponent of communism even before the proclamation of the NDH. He reminded the clergy of the newly Independent State of Croatia on several occasions to protect it and its future, notably in April and May 1941. In the following year, he transmitted the papal encyclical «The Church against Communism!» to the Croatian clergy and wrote in the note he added to it: «We are living in a period when the whole world finds itself in a struggle against the danger of communism, which has not only threatened Christianity in recent years, but all the positive values of humanity. [...] This is not a physical battle against those contaminated with communism [zaraženih komunizmom], but against the evil doctrines of communism, against its irreligious ideology»<sup>38</sup>.

After the collapse of the Ustasha state, Alojzije Stepinac became – unintentionally – one of the leading voices of Croatian nationalists. The Yugoslav government, aware of the archbishop's anti-communism, carefully observed his statements and activities. Stepinac, as well as, for example, cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary were among the most determined and outspoken Catholic dignitaries in Eastern Europe to strongly oppose the newly installed communist regimes. Relations between Stepinac and the new authorities were further complicated in July 1946. Not supporting the government and continuing to criticize it severely, the archbishop of Zagreb was arrested for the second time on 18 September 1946 and brought before the Supreme Court of Yugoslavia<sup>39</sup>.

On 11 October 1946, archbishop Stepinac was sentenced by the People's Court to house arrest, sixteen years of forced labour and the loss of civil and political rights for five years – for crimes against the people and the state. The court found Stepinac guilty on all counts, naming him a responsible for the ustasha crimes, a collaborator of the occupying forces, and accused him of betraying the interests of the Croatian people by seducing them with his ideas. The ulterior motive for the verdict was an act of political defence of the young Yugoslav state and clearly a political move. The communist government wanted to show the depravity of the Catholic Church and, at the same time, the moral superiority of communism. In the mid-to-late 1940s, the Church was the only functioning opposition to Tito's regime.

<sup>37</sup> See T.W. Luke, *Civil religion and secularization: ideological revitalization in postrevolutionary communist systems*, in «Sociological Forum», n. 1, 1987, pp. 108-134, and M. Kerševan, *Religija in slovenska kultura. Ljudska religioznost, civilna religija in ateizem v Sloveniji*, Partizanska knjiga, Ljubljana 1989.

<sup>38</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.7, f. 12, Archbishop Stepinac on communism, 14-1-1942.

<sup>39</sup> He was arrested by the Yugoslav government for the first time in May 1945, but was released in early June due to protests within the population. In his first interrogations, he was referred to as «His Excellency the Archbishop of Zagreb, Dr. Alojzije Stepinac», whereas in September 1946, he was named the «Suspect A. Stepinac». See HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.9.

Nevertheless, this trial must be also seen an examination and analysis of war crimes and massacres – but in this case, the reality of war crimes that others were responsible for, was turned against Stepinac. According to Jozo Tomasevich, the Yugoslav government hoped to achieve three objectives in condemning archbishop Stepinac. Firstly, it wanted to show Croatian nationalist forces that the government forbade the Catholic Church from serving as a base or shield for political activity against the new regime. Secondly, it wanted to point out that the government was not allowing the Catholic Church to play the same public role it had played historically. Thirdly, it wanted to give some satisfaction to the Serbian population and the Serbian Orthodox Church for their losses and suffering during the war. As a result, «lacking Pavelić, the regime had to find a leading Croat to try and punish, and Stepinac was the logical choice»<sup>40</sup>.

Alojzije Stepinac saw the loyalty to the Independent State of Croatia as a religious and patriotic duty. He regarded the new independence as a divine gift that the nation had earned. Fear and hatred of communism, love for the homeland and a fervent wish for freedom and independence for Catholic Croatia were the clergy's shared ideals in the NDH and before. During his trial, Stepinac said: «The Croatian people held a plebiscite on the Croatian state, and I would have been a scoundrel if I had not felt the pulse of the Croatian people who were enslaved in Yugoslavia»<sup>41</sup>. In contrast to many others, the archbishop of Zagreb did not leave his country after the collapse of the Independent State of Croatia<sup>42</sup>. The fact that he remained next to the Croatian people makes him, in the eyes of many Catholics, a hero until today.

During and right after this trial, the ambiguous representations started: In the Yugoslav media, Stepinac was portrayed as an active supporter of the Ustasha regime, as a liar who wanted to divert attention from his crimes by claiming that the trial was aimed at the Catholic Church. Years after the verdict, newspapers such as «Vjesnik» (Messenger) often reported on Stepinac's role in forced conversions and held him personally responsible for the genocide in the Independent State of Croatia. A multitude of caricatures appeared, notably in the Yugoslav newspaper «Kerempuh» from September 1946 onwards, denoting him as a «clerofascist»<sup>43</sup>. In several international newspapers, he was depicted as a collaborator and a traitor<sup>44</sup>, in the French newspaper «La Défense» even as «le hitlérien Stepinac»<sup>45</sup>. On the other hand, «L'Osservatore romano», the Vatican's official news organ, and the Catholic

<sup>40</sup> J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, cit., p. 562.

<sup>41</sup> HR HDA, fond 416, b. 10.9, f. 198, Testimonies, 21-9-1946.

<sup>42</sup> Many of the leaders of Pavelić's government went into exile, as did many Catholic priests and seminarians from Croatia, Slovenia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as archbishop Ivan Šarić of Vrhbosna/Sarajevo. They fled to Austria, Spain or South America. Stepinac was one of the few members of Catholic hierarchy who was actually brought to trial.

<sup>43</sup> Especially the editions from 22 and 29 September 1946.

<sup>44</sup> Especially in «Ce soir – Grand quotidien d'information indépendant» (13 and 14 October 1946) and «Regards» (1 November 1946).

<sup>45</sup> «La Défense», n. 100, 25 October 1946, p. 3.

newspaper «La Croix» pleaded for the liberation of the «Bon Pasteur»<sup>46</sup>. In January 1953, pope Pius XII initiated the appointment of 24 new cardinals to the Catholic Church, including Alojzije Stepinac. Yugoslavia reacted with a countermeasure, breaking off all diplomatic relations with the Roman Curia.

In February 1960, Stepinac died of a pulmonary embolism. The press response to his death was tremendous. While Eastern European journalists in Yugoslavia kept quiet about the event, Western foreign correspondents reported extensively, essentially depicting his death as a martyrdom: according to Claudia Stahl, 129 news items, reports and articles about Stepinac appeared in the week following his death, especially in «Die Welt», «Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung», «Le Figaro» and «Le Monde», in the English «Times» and «The Guardian», in the American «The New York Times» and «Los Angeles Herald»<sup>47</sup>.

During the years of the “Croatian Spring”, a Croatian national movement starting in the late Sixties and early Seventies which expanded into politics, economy, culture and education, the Catholic Church played a significant role. The bishops were not directly involved in politics, but religious life was active: catechism and worship services, but also sermons and masses attracted vast audiences<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, the Church promoted the cult of the Virgin Mary as the key symbol of Catholic Croatia. On 10 February 1970, Franjo Kuharić, the archbishop of Zagreb, presided over the first public commemoration dedicated to Alojzije Stepinac; several months later, the first “native Croat” Nikola Tavelić, was canonized: «The Croats finally have a saint of their own blood [...]; thus, us Croats have kept the Catholic faith as well as the Croatian national consciousness alive for thirteen centuries, without a single saint of Croatian background»<sup>49</sup>. In the early Seventies, church-state relations deteriorated as Croatian nationalists were arrested, the Church was attacked by the state press and even some clergymen were persecuted. The archbishop of Zagreb, Franjo Kuharić, spoke out against the repression, delivering strong messages to the communists through protest sermons and homilies. Two of them were entitled *Let us Not Capitulate before Evil* and *Our People Needs Its Church*<sup>50</sup>. A few weeks later, the theologian Tomislav Janko Šagi-Bunić published an essay in the archepiscopal newspaper «Glas Koncila», emphasising the crucial role of the Catholic Church in the formation of the Croatian nation:

The Church and the Croatian nation are inseparable, and nothing can sever that connection. Catholicism cannot be deleted from the people’s collective memory or the Croatian national identity, either by theoretical persuasion and propaganda or by a revolutionary act. The Catholic Church in our country has done nothing bad or

<sup>46</sup> «La Croix», n. 20135, 12 May 1949, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> C. Stahl, *Alojzije Stepinac*, cit., pp. 547 ff.

<sup>48</sup> V. Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, Oxford University Press, New York 2002, pp. 57-63.

<sup>49</sup> Ć. Petešić, *Što se događa u Katoličkoj crkvi u Hrvatskoj?*, Stvarnost, Zagreb 1972, pp. 58-59.

<sup>50</sup> «Glas koncila», 6 February 1972. Quoted and translated in V. Perica, *Balkan Idols*, cit., p. 61.

harmful in recent years, no moves or gestures that could have possibly hampered the development of the Croatian people or that have been at the expense of any other nationality in Yugoslavia<sup>51</sup>.

The Croatian historian Vjekoslav Perica sums up this episode as follows: «The spiritual impact was definitely weaker than the political. Fighting modernization, secularization, communism, the Yugoslav multinational state, and the rival faiths, the Church worshiped itself and consecrated new ethnic and ecclesiastical histories as part of the making of the new Croatian nation»<sup>52</sup>.

*The Echo of the “Stepinac Case” after Tito’s Death (1980) and the Danger of Revisionism*

In Yugoslavia, the Catholic Church provided fertile ground for the development of nationalist sentiments. As the only institution that Croats perceived to be legitimate to represent their people, the Catholic Church became the centre for Croatian nationalists. As it had already been the case during the Croatian Spring, it was once again the high clergy who stirred up those feelings, for instance archbishop Kuharić of Zagreb in 1983: «If there is anyone who can speak of the history of the Croatian people, it is the Church that lives among them, and has been present throughout the centuries of this often difficult and painful history, to such an extent that this Church quite simply becomes the soul of this history»<sup>53</sup>. Unable to distinguish between its religious and its national role, the Croatian Catholic Church continued to promote a history of victimization, and at the same time, once again, of Croatia being God’s chosen people. Because the Church is a factor of real power and influence, «it is particularly evident that nation and religion have formed an unhealthy alliance»<sup>54</sup>, until today.

In honour of Alojzije Stepinac’s one-hundredth birthday, the recently appointed archbishop of Zagreb Josip Bozanić sent a circular to all the bishops of Europe, writing:

He becomes a sign of the times. He is the saving signpost and lighthouse for the Church among the Croatian people. It is the bulwark of our faithfulness to God and the Catholic Church with the Holy Father as its head. He is an example and encouragement for right patriotism and faithful love for our homeland. He is an inspiration for the right love for his people and for consistent respect for the dignity of every

<sup>51</sup> «Glas koncila», 19 March 1972. Quoted and translated in id., *Balkan Idols*, cit., p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 73.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in M. Brkljačić, *Croatian Catholic Church Imagines the Nation. ‘Glas koncila’ and the Croatian National Question. 1985-1990*, in «Balkanologie», n. 1-2, 2001, p. 7, <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/668> [accessed 16 May 2024].

<sup>54</sup> T. Bremer, *Nationalismus und Konfessionalität in den Kriegen auf dem Balkan*, in *Südosteuropa. Von vormoderer Vielfalt und nationalstaatlicher Vereinheitlichung*, hrsg. K. Clewing, O.J. Schmitt, R. Oldenbourg, München 2005, p. 473.

human being. The spiritual renewal of the Archdiocese of Zagreb, but also of the entire Catholic Church in Croatia, is a renewal that our servant of God desired and for which he worked and suffered. It remains our old and ever new task today<sup>55</sup>.

A few months later, in October 1998, pope John Paul II beatified cardinal Stepinac in Marija Bistrica, advancing that «Blessed Alojzije Stepinac took the Good Shepherd as his sole Teacher, following his example to the end and offering his life for the flock entrusted to him at a particularly difficult period of history»<sup>56</sup>, and reinforcing the fact that Croatia saw and presented itself above all as a victim. Moreover, honouring Stepinac as a “martyr of communism” risks making Croatia’s long way to remembrance even more difficult<sup>57</sup>.

At the same time, the role of the Church has frequently been used by Croatia’s first president, Franjo Tuđman, in the nineteen-nineties, closely connected to historical revisionism. In several speeches, Tuđman claimed that the Croatian Ustasha state was the expression of the historic aspirations of the Croatian people to establish their own state, obscuring the anti-fascist legacy of Tito’s partisans and instead rehabilitating and normalizing, if not whitewashing, the legacy of the Ustasha: «the declaration of an independent and free Croatian state initially meant the realization of a “secular dream” dreamed by national revolutionaries»<sup>58</sup>. In adopting this position, Tuđman had conceptualized Croatian history as a thousand-year teleological struggle for statehood, already promoted by the Ustasha: Tuđman ended up appropriating the narrative of national identity construction very similar to that forged by the Catholic Church in Croatia, depicting the nation within the framework of Croatia’s millennia-long belonging to Western Catholic civilization<sup>59</sup>. The Croatian president condemned the entire historical legacy of Croatian Yugoslavism and contrasted it with the vision of building a distinct Croatian national identity, overlooking the atrocities committed by the Ustasha and denying for example the nature of NDH death camp Jasenovac<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> J. Božanić, *Die leuchtendste Gestalt der katholischen Kirche Kroatiens. Hirtenbrief zum hundertsten Jahrestag der Geburt des Gottesdieners Kardinal Alojzije Stepinac*, Glas Koncila, Zagreb 1998, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> John Paul II, *Homily of the Holy Father at Marija Bistrica for the Beatification of the Venerable Servant of God Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac*, 3 October 1998, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19981003\\_croatia-beatification.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19981003_croatia-beatification.html) [accessed 30 April 2024].

<sup>57</sup> H. Despić-Popović, *Croatie: Mgr Stepinac, martyr et collabo. Polémique sur la béatification de l'ex-primat de l'Église catholique croate*, in «Libération», 2 October 1998, [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/1998/10/02/croatie-mgr-stepinac-martyr-et-collabo-polemique-sur-la-beatification-de-l-ex-primat-de-l-eglise-cat\\_249762/](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/1998/10/02/croatie-mgr-stepinac-martyr-et-collabo-polemique-sur-la-beatification-de-l-ex-primat-de-l-eglise-cat_249762/) [accessed 30 April 2024].

<sup>58</sup> F. Tuđman, *Horrors of War. Historical Reality and Philosophy*, M. Evans, New York 1996, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> S. Đurašković, *National identity-building and the 'Ustaša-nostalgia' in Croatia: the past that will not pass*, in «Nationalities Papers», n. 5, 2016, pp. 772-788, here p. 776.

<sup>60</sup> Jasenovac was the largest forced labour and extermination camp of the NDH, existing between spring 1941 and spring 1945. Today, at least 83,145 victims, mainly Serbs, Roma and Jews, are known by name. See <https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=5020> [accessed 24 June 2024].

In the rehabilitation of Stepinac, his role was used for nationalist purposes, especially his beatification in 1998. In a speech in the Croatian Parliament on 7 December 1998, Tuđman said, referring to the pope's visit to Croatia:

What does the beatification of the martyr of the communist regime, Cardinal Stepinac, mean for the Croatian Church and the Croatian people? [...] This is an event in which the Holy Father, the Vatican, based on its two thousand years of experience, took the side of the Croatian Church, the Croatian people, against those endeavours to continue to blame the Croatian people for genocide, fascism, and so on. [...] This historic event of Cardinal Stepinac's beatification, the Holy Father's visit and all the messages he conveyed to us during his stay are a contribution to the truth about the Croatian people and not only the truth about the Croatian people during the Second World War, but also the truth about today's democratic Croatia, in which the full agreement of Croatian politics, the majority party HDZ [Croatian Democratic Union] and the Catholic Church has been achieved<sup>61</sup>.

National and religious affiliations are, as the theologian Thomas Bremer describes them, «normal, everyday» phenomena, but can, when identified with each other and when this identification gets exclusive and instrumentalized – especially in wartime – become extremely dangerous factors<sup>62</sup>. Several national myths play important roles: during the periods of the Croatian national movement, the “Antemurales Christianitatis” myth underwent significant modifications in order to adapt to new political circumstances and ideological needs<sup>63</sup>. Its ideological content was modernized: already after Tito's death in 1980, but especially at the end of the “second Yugoslavia”<sup>64</sup> and the Balkan Wars, the young, independent Republic of Croatia was once again presented as the bulwark of Western Christianity, civilization and democracy, but this time against the military threat from Belgrade and Eastern Orthodoxy.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in V. Lončarević, *Povijesna uloga Crkve u govorima prvoga hrvatskog predsjednika Franje Tuđmana*, in «Obnovljeni Život», n. 1, 2015, pp. 69-83, here p. 77.

<sup>62</sup> T. Bremer, *Nationalismus und Konfessionalität*, cit., p. 464.

<sup>63</sup> In the XIX century, the representatives of Croatism saw their country as «Antemurales Christianitatis», a bastion against Islamic expansion, a bulwark of Christianity. The painting *Predziđe kršćanstva*, realised by Ferdinand von Quiquerez in 1892, depicts the allegory of Croatia as a fighter and protector of “Western culture and faith” against the invading Ottomans. The expression «Antemurales Christianitatis» refers to the late XV century and to a term that pope Leo X attributed the victorious army in 1519. In later centuries, when a political group invoked this term, they aimed at legitimising their power and at justifying their political, military and financial demands, by assigning themselves the special task of defending Western Christendom against all real and supposed dangers from outside.

<sup>64</sup> The “second Yugoslavia” describes the period from 1945 to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, whereas the “first Yugoslavia” refers to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918-1929) and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929-1941).

## Croatia in the European Union

Croatia entered the European Union in 2013. Nevertheless, victimology and nationalist narratives persist among rulers who constantly rely on religion. Franjo Tuđman, and, more recently, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, Croatian president between 2015 and 2020, have frequently used the religious factor in their speeches<sup>65</sup>. Nationalist rhetoric often deploys religious language, images and symbolisms; at the same time, religion can accommodate the claims of the nation-state, and religious movements can deploy a nationalist language<sup>66</sup>. Terms such as the “millennial dream of independence”, the “divine Providence”, and Croatia’s role as “Antemurale Christianitatis” are regularly used. Moreover, wars are glorified, the nation is sacralised – also and above all by the Catholic Church, which saw its privileged role in an independent Croatia. Nevertheless, «[l]e retour du religieux ne correspond pas à un retour de la foi, mais à celui de mécanismes religieux sur la scène politique»<sup>67</sup>. Religious discourse dealing with the nation is closely linked to collective memory and the European context, presenting the nation as an entity that has always existed and will continue to exist in the future. As we have seen above, the construction of a common past is built around foundation myths, in the Croatian case around the “millennial dream” since the medieval kings<sup>68</sup>. At the same time, the Croatian national mythology has been creating a «sense of uniqueness and distinctness of Croats from their South Slavic neighbours and a deeply rooted desire for sovereign statehood. [...] The further away Croatia is from the Balkan dungeon, the closer it is to Europe. [...] Europe was everything the Balkans were not: liberal, democratic, capitalist, progressive, and Catholic. It is this Europe that Croatia wanted to join»<sup>69</sup>.

Since 2010, a new problematic is the canonisation process of archbishop Stepinac. During his pastoral visit to Croatia in June 2011, pope Benedict XVI spoke of Cardinal Stepinac’s «heroic» life, describing him as a «martyr» under the communist regime and even as an opponent of totalitarianism:

This evening, we gather for a devoted and prayerful remembrance of Blessed Alojzije Stepinac, a fearless Pastor and an example of apostolic zeal and Christian fortitude, whose heroic life continues today to illuminate the faithful of the Dioceses of Croatia,

<sup>65</sup> For example, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović’s speech in Knin, 5 August 2017, <http://framnat.eu/knin-transkripti/> [accessed 29 April 2024].

<sup>66</sup> R. Brubaker, *Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches*, in «Nations and Nationalism», n. 18, 2012, pp. 2-20, here p. 16.

<sup>67</sup> A.Ç. Akgüngör, S.U. Bayraktar, *Sécularisation, Démocratisation et Monde musulman: Processus de changement*, in «Cahiers d’études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien», n. 35, 2003, p. 7, <https://journals.openedition.org/cemoti/772> [accessed 15 May 2024].

<sup>68</sup> For example, the speech of Croatia’s Prime Minister Zoran Milanović in Knin, 5 August 2014, <http://framnat.eu/knin-transkripti/> [accessed 23 November 2023].

<sup>69</sup> J. Subotić, *Europe is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans*, in «International Studies Quarterly», n. 55, 2011, pp. 309-330, here p. 316.

sustaining the faith and life of the Church in this land. The merits of this unforgettable Bishop are derived essentially from his faith: in his life, he always had his gaze fixed on Jesus, to whom he was always conformed, to the point of becoming a living image of Christ, and of Christ suffering. Precisely because of his strong Christian conscience, he knew how to resist every form of totalitarianism, becoming, in a time of nazi and fascist dictatorship, a defender of the Jews, the Orthodox and of all the persecuted, and then, in the age of communism, an advocate for his own faithful, especially for the many persecuted and murdered priests. Yes, he became an advocate for God on this earth, since he tenaciously defended the truth and man's right to live with God<sup>70</sup>.

The Croatian bishops have consistently called for the cardinal's canonization, but pope Francis was more cautious than his predecessor: in 2015, he set up a joint Catholic-Orthodox commission to clarify certain historical questions surrounding the figure of Alojzije Stepinac<sup>71</sup>. The matter remains unresolved: a consensus does not seem to be found, and the decision is still on hold.

The historian Marie-Janine Calic criticized the proposed canonization, stating that the cardinal was neither a fascist, nor a staunch supporter of the Ustaša regime, but that there was no evidence that he had raised his voice against the planned extermination of Jews, Serbs and other ethnic groups. As it has been shown above: while he protested to the government against the conditions of deportation or the situation in the concentration and extermination camps, he did not speak out against persecution, deportation and execution per se. It is established that he had never publicly distanced himself from the Ustaša regime and that he had «maintained a particularly grave silence»<sup>72</sup> especially in view of the forced conversions: «He was aware of all this, but he completely shirked his responsibility»<sup>73</sup>: Calic warns of new conflicts between Croatian Catholics and Serbian Orthodox, knowing that Stepinac represents a hate figure for the latter. According to the German historian, the canonization would provoke fear and frustration among the Serbian people, who might feel they had to defend themselves against the Croatian danger. Social conflict resolution would therefore be a long way off. Moreover, the desire for the archbishop's canonization came from nationalist circles – behind the religious curtain lie clear political intentions. Stepinac is «the symbol of nationalist Croatia and is also seen as a resolute opponent of communism»<sup>74</sup>. Because Church in Croatia has never analysed its past, nor apologized for its mistakes and shortcomings, it continues to cultivate «dangerous links with the far right and

<sup>70</sup> Benedict XVI, *Celebration of Vespers with Bishops, Priests, Religious and Seminarians and Prayer at the Tomb of Blessed Alojzije Viktor Stepinac*, 5 June 2011, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/june/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110605\\_vespri-croazia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110605_vespri-croazia.html) [accessed 30 April 2024].

<sup>71</sup> C. Stahl, *Alojzije Stepinac*, cit., pp. 550 ff.

<sup>72</sup> M.-J. Calic, *Hassfigur: Historikerin warnt vor Heiligsprechung Kardinal Stepinacs. Interview mit Joachim Heinz*, in «Katholische Nachrichtenagentur», 8 December 2020, <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/27878-hassfigur-historikerin-warnt-vor-heiligsprechung-kardinal-stepinacs> [accessed 29 April 2024].

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

nationalism. [The Church] campaigned, for example, for the Croatian military to adopt the slogan “Za dom spremni!” [Ready for the homeland!] which was the Ustasha motto»<sup>75</sup>. Archbishop of Zagreb Franjo Šeper, Stepinac’s successor, said in an interview conducted by Jozo Tomasevich in 1967: «If the Catholic Church in Croatia were again faced with the same problems as during the second world war, it would again act in the same way»<sup>76</sup>.

Even if the case of archbishop Stepinac is peculiar, it is essential to recall the fact that the Croatian or Balkanic case is not a unicum: the notable relationship between nation and religion is a broader phenomenon in east-central Europe. The example of Croatia can rather be seen as a paradigmatic case of the embrace between nationalism and the Churches – in this case the Catholic Church – which characterizes the entire area. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, scholars like Stanley G. Payne or Oleksandr Zaitsev adopt a comparative perspective, not only to define the place of the NDH within fascist Europe, but also in order to present the Ustasha as a paradigmatic case, a concept that Zaitsev calls “ustashism”: «In this understanding, ustashism can be defined as revolutionary integral nationalism developing under conditions of perceived foreign oppression and using violence for the purpose of national liberation and the creation of an independent authoritarian state»<sup>77</sup>. Combining ultra-nationalism, hierarchy, leadership, and militarism, the Independent State of Croatia can function as a «model of what a Ukrainian state under the aegis of the Third Reich might have been like had the nazis agreed to its creation»<sup>78</sup>. The example of the Ustasha movement redraws the development from “ustashism” into an independent state and proto-fascism, if “favourable” conditions are given, and can thus function as «a paradigmatic case for the revolutionary integral nationalism of stateless peoples»<sup>79</sup>.

## Conclusion

After exactly 70 years, in 2016, the verdict that had been handed down by the Yugoslav court in 1946, was officially overturned by a court in Zagreb. At the same time, the proceedings pushed a genuine examination of the role of the Church in Croatia during the second world war into the background. Under the name of “Stepinčevo”, an unofficial Croatian national holiday, Croatian Catholics and all Croatian parishes abroad commemorate 10 February, the day of the archbishop’s death, with solemn masses and processions. Serbia was shocked by the annulment of Stepinac’s conviction in 2016: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia sent a

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, cit., p. 565.

<sup>77</sup> O. Zaitsev, *Fascism or ustashism?*, in «Communist and Post-Communist Studies», n. 48, 2015, cit., p. 184.

<sup>78</sup> Ivi, p. 191.

<sup>79</sup> Ivi, p. 190.

note of protest to the Ambassador of Croatia in Belgrade, considering this decision to be a rehabilitation of fascism and the Ustasha regime<sup>80</sup>.

The fundamental character of the Balkans in the XX century is reflected in contemporary conflicts and influences the relationship between history, religion and memory. Whether for independence in 1941 or 1991, the Croatian clergy, enthusiastic about the fall of Yugoslavia, guaranteed its support. The fight for independence was synonymous with religious nationalism, as the foundation of national identity is rooted in the country's religious faith. Political leaders were well aware of this: religion and faith were used by those who led and promoted the wars. As Bernard Voutat points out, the nation is a socio-historical construct, a product of history, emotions and human desires<sup>81</sup>. This explanation is particularly true for the paradigmatic case of Croatia, a land that has been characterized by ardent Catholicism and a strong wish for independence – Paul Garde even speaks of «l'obsession de la nation»<sup>82</sup>, referring to nationhood and independence as having been, and being, the highest and omnipresent objective of Croatia.

The example of the years 1941 to 1945 shows the inextricability between religion and politics, between Catholic Church and State, between clericalism and ideology in Croatia, in a complex and emotionally charged history. The Croatian Catholic Church, as a guardian of Croatian national identity, linked “historic” Croatia, as promoted by Starčević and the Ustasha, to Croatian settlements in Bosnia, such as Herzegovina. Especially in this region, Croats were seeking points of distinction from Orthodox or Muslim Bosnians, and the Catholic Church represented the only vector of national identity among them. The Church was also useful for projecting their identity onto the West, through victimology and the great nationalist narratives. Religions are often valued as cultural dimensions of the nation in the Balkans: individuals are linked to a cultural heritage formed by nation and religion. The process of creating an independent Croatian state, both in 1941 and in 1991, had strong religious, even millenarian overtones, giving the feeling that Croatia was fulfilling a religious, as well as a national mission<sup>83</sup>.

The memory culture of archbishop Stepinac is particularly illustrative: in Croatia, he is seen as a victim of the communist dictatorship and a Catholic martyr who was beatified by John Paul II in 1998, whereas in Serbia, he is presented as a war criminal condemned by a Yugoslav court in 1946 for collaboration with the Ustasha regime and the German occupiers. The Catholic Church plays a major role in the promotion of Stepinac, emphasizing his acts of heroism while putting patriotism and faith on the same level. Politicians, starting with president Franjo Tuđman in the 1990s, fan the flames: in ardent speeches, they rehabilitate parts of the Ustasha regime and constantly victimize the Croatian nation under Tito. The XX century

<sup>80</sup> *Srbija uputila protestnu notu Hrvatskoj zbog Stepinca*, in «Radio Slobodna Evropa», 26 July 2016, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/27882802.html> [accessed 29 April 2024].

<sup>81</sup> B. Voutat, *Espace national et identité collective*, Institut de science politique, Lausanne 1992, p. 131.

<sup>82</sup> P. Garde, *Les Balkans. Héritages et évolutions*, Flammarion, Paris 2010, p. 107.

<sup>83</sup> See E. Claverie, *Les guerres de la Vierge. Une anthropologie des apparitions*, Gallimard, Paris 2003, pp. 255 ff.

becomes a tool of nationalism and revisionism, reinforcing discord and conflicts in the Balkans.

The nationalist discourse based on revisionist arguments and the use of heroic figures creates new national history, which might lead to the glorification of violence and totalitarian regimes. Religion often serves as a means to an end, supposedly helping to define what “Croatian” and “Western” actually means. Croatian historians, supported by the state, embarked on massive efforts throughout the 1990s to construct and develop a narrative of Croats as a single people, with no links to other South Slavs, and in particular to Serbs. Thus, official memory policies have been promoted by the institutions, i.e. the Church and the State.

The modern history of Croatia is difficult to be written in the context that has been described above. Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, in his preface to *Les Voisins* by Jan T. Gross, refers to the «verrouillage de la recherche historique», «mauvaises querelles révisionnistes» and the presence of a «loi de falsification»<sup>84</sup>. Croatia is a young country, proud of its independence, proud of its Catholic faith, and, in the case of some people, even proud of its Ustasha past. In order to oppose historical and political oblivion and falsification, it is essential to analyse, understand and come to terms with the period of the Independent State of Croatia, in which the Catholic Church and Alojzije Stepinac played a crucial role.

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<sup>84</sup> J.T. Gross, *Les Voisins-10 juillet 1941. Un massacre de Juifs en Pologne*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2019, pp. 19-20.