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THE CROATIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE LONG ROAD TO JASENOVAC

Abstract

In Croatia, the relationship of the Catholic Church to the wartime Fascist Ustaša regime has been a bitterly divisive issue. The ecclesiastical leadership does not send official representatives to the main commemoration of the victims of the Ustaša terror, held in April each year at Jasenovac concentration camp, thereby giving the impression that the Church has something to be ashamed of. Indeed, the Church has been accused of complicity in the Ustaša crimes. After considerable vacillation, the Church in September 2009 decided to organize a large priestly pilgrimage to Jasenovac at another date, an event that made big headlines in Croatia. This article chronicles the tortuous road traversed by the Croatian Catholic Church before finally confronting ‘the Jasenovac issue’ head on. The central questions asked are ‘why did it take the Church so long? And what does this tell us about the role of the Catholic Church in Croatian society?’¹

Keywords: Catholic Church; World War Two; Croatia; Ustaša; commemorations

The relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Nazi regime during World War Two has been a moot topic for many years (see e.g. Falconi 1970; Cornwell 1999; Phayer 2008). A parallel dispute has unfolded concerning the attitude of the Croatian Catholic Church towards the quisling regime – the Ustaša – in the Croatian puppet state during the 1941–45 period. This local Balkan variety of the controversy over the Catholic–Fascist nexus has been largely limited to Croatian and Serbian publications and has attracted less attention outside the region (it is, however, integrated in Falconi 1970). In 2008 the dispute again made the headlines in Croatia when, at the annual commemoration of the Ustaša victims at Jasenovac concentration camp, charges were made that ‘a substantial part of the Catholic clergy’ was complicit in the Ustaša crimes.

The leadership of the Croatian Church has so far refused to send official representatives to the Jasenovac commemorations that take place on 22 April or the closest Sunday each year. Located on the Sava River in Western Slavonia, Jasenovac was the largest concentration camp run by the ‘Independent State of Croatia’ (NDH) and has become a byword for Ustaša atrocities. Titoist historians and Serbian nationalists have claimed that as many as 700,000, even one million, were killed there, figures that serious scholarship has reduced to between 70,000 and 80,000 (Kolstø forthcoming). The camp nevertheless remains the most notorious place of bestial killings committed

by Hitler's Croatian collaborators. The inmates were Serbs, Jews, Roma, as well as some Croatian anti-Fascists. While Croats were brought to Jasenovac for political reasons, members of the other groups had committed no other 'crime' than belonging to an undesired nationality. In the 1960s, a museum and a huge memorial in the shape of a stone flower were built on the site of the former camp, which the Ustaša had completely demolished before abandoning. Under the Flower Monument, the human remains of some victims, exhumed from nearby mass graves, are kept in a crypt.

As long as the Croatian Church kept silent and stayed away from Jasenovac, the impression was that there was indeed something to be ashamed of. Then in 2007, the Church decided to arrange a local episcopal visit to the camp, and a large pilgrimage of priests two years later. In September 2009, Josip Cardinal Bozanić, Archbishop of Zagreb, was accompanied by an impressive entourage of bishops and priests, some 300 divines in all. In a way, the pilgrimage was reminiscent of the visits to Auschwitz by Pope John Paul II (June 1979) and Pope Benedict XVI (May 2006). In important respects, however, the differences between the Croatian pilgrimage and the papal visits were marked more than the similarities.

While it is still too early to assess the long-term effects of this move, it seems clear that it did not contribute much to a better mutual understanding between the Church and its critics in the Croatian public. Church leaders evidently felt that attack was the best defence and, despite protestations to the contrary, they engaged more in polemics than in self-criticism in the statements made during the pilgrimage.

This article chronicles the tortuous road traversed by the Croatian Catholic Church before finally deciding to confront 'the Jasenovac issue' by sending a top-level delegation to the camp and expressing in explicit terms its assessment of this dark page in history. Why did it take the Church so long to do so? And what does this tell us about the role of the Catholic Church in Croatian society? Part of the answer I find in the fact that the Jasenovac commemorations had become virtually monopolized by the Croatian Left, the 'anti-Fascists', who saw the Church as complicit in the Ustaša crimes. Their politicization of the Jasenovac legacy continued the tradition of the Tito period when the regime used its control of history writing and the media to present the victors' version of World War Two and its aftermath.

In order to assess the claims about the Croatian Church's wartime culpability I start with a brief historiographical survey of its wartime record. Much of the literature on this issue written by ostensibly academic historians is so polemical and one-sided that it cannot be taken seriously. This is true of most of what was published in Yugoslavia between 1945 and Tito's death in 1980, but also of some post-Tito Serbian historians mentioned below. I present them not primarily to elucidate what the Church did or did not do during the war, but to document the kinds of accusations the Church has been and continues to be confronted with.

At the same time it is clear not only that some leading members of the Croatian Church *did* sympathize with the Ustaša regime and abetted its heinous crimes, but also that some contemporary Croatian historians sympathetic to the Church gloss over this fact. For instance, Jure Krišto in his massive work on religion in the NDH passes over in complete silence that one of the top prelates, Archbishop Šarić of Sarajevo, had been

an Ustaša member since 1934 and during the war continued to praise these Fascists (Krišto 2001).

Also Western historiography has been polarized, albeit not to the same degree. The leading American-Croatian authority on Yugoslavia in World War Two, the late Jozo Tomasevich, does not beat around the bush in his criticism of the Church, while another highly respected American historian and political scientist, Sabrina Ramet at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, is more prone to find exonerating circumstances explaining the (in)actions of the Church.

The disagreements and feuds among historians are echoed in the political divisions in Croatian media. While each journalist and commentator speaks with his or her own voice, the tendency of their articles normally reflects the political profile of the newspaper in question. Among the media sources quoted below, the Istria-based *Novi list*, is neo-liberal and perhaps the most serious newspaper in the country. *Večernji list* is moderately conservative while *Jutarnji list* is liberal and slightly on the left side of the political spectrum. It has published articles that are highly critical to the Church but also some that are very sympathetic. The official mouthpiece of the Church, the weekly *Glas koncila* is of course apologetic, but is still generally regarded as a serious and influential paper, while the small-circulation monthly *Narod* and the weeklies *Hrvatsko slovo* and *Hrvatski list* are defiantly reactionary and nationalistic. The Split-based *Slobodna Dalmacija* has since independence become increasingly ‘yellowish’ and sensationalist.

I have written this article as an outsider in the sense that I am not a Croat, but as an insider in the sense of being a practising Catholic. My interest in the topic was kindled during the year I spent in Croatia (2006/07) when in the church I frequented I found, as described below, material exonerating the Ustaša regime. Some Croats will find my account overly critical of the Church, while others who have seen this manuscript think I treat it too kindly.

The Croatian Church during World War Two

As noted, historians have offered highly differing assessments of the role of the Catholic Church under the Ustaša regime. Clearly, several ecclesiastical dignitaries expressed explicit and enthusiastic avowals of support for the NDH state, and some Croatian clergy participated actively in Ustaša government structures. On the other hand, some bishops and priests expressed protest and criticism of the regime, and made behind-the-scenes efforts to help Serbs and Jews escape from persecution. Moreover, the attitudes of Croatian Church leaders evolved over time. Sympathy with the new state was widespread in the early days, when the bloody nature of the Ustaša regime had not been fully revealed, but waned when massacres of non-Croats began and the genocidal nature of the regime outraged many.

Even if some Croatian priests collaborated with the Ustaša, the entire clergy cannot be tarred with the same brush. At least three different subgroups can be distinguished. A few supported the Partisans – some out of conviction, others choosing the lesser of

two evils. According to one source, around 70 priests belonged to this group (Tomasevich 2001: 549, 571). More common, however, were priests with Fascist sympathies. Pavelić himself believed that while the higher grades of the hierarchy were quite reserved towards the Ustaša regime – and some openly hostile – the lower ranks of the Catholic clergy ‘maintain a very favourable attitude’ (quoted in Alexander 1987: 82). Ivo Guberina, a priest and doctor of theology, worked as a captain in Pavelić’s bodyguard and wrote articles to justify the murder of Serbs (see Dedijer 1992: 137; Falconi 1970: 300; Shelah 1989: 327). Among the active sympathizers were also some high-ranking prelates (Falconi 1970: 294; Singleton 1976: 197; Dedijer 1992: 97–100).

In particular among Franciscans in Herzegovina and Dalmatia the Ustaša found willing executioners. Most notorious was Fra Miroslav Filipović, a camp commandant in Jasenovac for one year, who acquired the sobriquet ‘Majstorović’ – the Master – for his expert killing. The number of active Ustaša among the clerics, however, was small, and they did not enjoy the support of their spiritual superiors. At the time when he worked in Jasenovac, Majstorović had been defrocked, precisely as punishment for his transgressions against the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ (Ramet 2006: 122). Serbian claims that an affinity between ‘Catholic ethics’ and Ustaša ideology enabled Majstorović to participate in the Jasenovac horror, therefore, bend the truth considerably (Kljakić 1991: 15).

The vast majority of Croatian clergy occupied a middle ground. They were repelled by the Partisans’ atheism and materialism, and for that reason they were initially sympathetic towards a movement like the Ustaša that was avowedly Catholic, anti-Orthodox, and anti-Communist. They welcomed Ustaša efforts to introduce ‘Christian principles’ in Croatian society, such as a ban against abortion, pornography, and even cursing (Shelah 1989: 325; Ramet 2006: 127). However, they strongly rejected the Ustaša view that persecution and killing of non-Catholics could promote the cause of God and the Church.

The ambivalence and vacillations of this ‘centrist’ group are epitomized by the head of the Croatian Church, Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac of Zagreb. When *poglavnik* Pavelić arrived in Zagreb in April 1941, Stepinac immediately paid him a courtesy visit and also issued a circular letter, urging the clergy of his archdiocese to fulfil their duty towards the state under the new circumstances (Tomasevich 2001:555; for full text of the circular see Dedijer 1992: 95–97). In May, Stepinac issued an order to perform a *Te Deum* in all churches for the well-being of the new state (Shelah 1989: 326). In communication with the Vatican, Stepinac defended the Ustaša state against accusations which he claimed stemmed from Serbian propaganda and ‘had no other purpose but to make the prestige of the present regime in Croatia fall in the eyes of the Holy See’ (Tomasevich 2001:371). At the same time, Stepinac also delivered several sermons with rather explicit, direct criticism of the Ustaša. In October 1943 he told his flock that

the Catholic Church cannot accept that races or nations, merely because they are big or strong, will do violence to weaker races or nations... We condemn all injustice, all murder of innocent people, all burning of peaceful villages, all killings (Tomasevich 2001: 557, quoted also in Alexander 1987: 98–99; and Shelah 1989: 336).

Stepinac's sermons were later repeated by Partisan-controlled radio and broadcast by Allied propaganda over German-controlled Europe (Tomasevich 2001: 557; Ramet 2006: 127). In a letter to Pavelić in 1943 he called the Jasenovac concentration camp 'a shameful blot of the Independent State of Croatia' (Tomasevich 2001: 400).

These highly disparate statements and actions have given rise to very different assessments of the Croatian Church in general and the position of Stepinac in particular. According to Tomasevich, Stepinac was 'a determined supporter of the new state' in the early years of the war; only as the war progressed, especially after the Stalingrad debacle, did he begin to attack Fascism (Tomasevich 2001:554– 56).

Sabrina Ramet, however, points out that several of Stepinac's anti-racist sermons were delivered in 1941 and 1942, at a time when many still believed that the Axis powers would win the war. Hence, his motives were more principled than Tomasevich suggests. Both in Stepinac's private communication and in his public sermons, condemnations of the Ustaša regime abound (Ramet 2006: 122). Ramet quotes with approval the American Church historian Michael Phayer's assessment that 'no leader of a national Church ever spoke about genocide as pointedly as Stepinac' (Ramet 2006: 127). Phayer, however, whose primary research interest is the Vatican and the Holocaust, balances this assessment with the observation that 'neither Stepinac nor Pius XII publicly condemned the Ustaša government. ... They were willing to countenance what both knew to be a moral outrage for the short term hope of a favorable political landscape in the future' (Phayer 2008: 13).

Many Western scholars lean more towards Tomasevich's position than that of Ramet (see Singleton 1989:179; Tanner 1997: 144–145, 155). The German historian Holm Sundhaussen regards clerical circles in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina as 'an important stronghold (*Stützpunkt*) for the Ustaša regime (Sundhaussen 1982: 119). However, researchers who focus more narrowly on the case of Archbishop Stepinac than on the Croatian Catholic Church in general tend to present a more favourable picture – not least, it seems, to counterbalance the extremely negative view presented by the Titoist regime (Pattee 1953; Alexander 1987; Gitman 2006).

The Canadian historian Mark Biondich asks why Stepinac lacked the will to condemn publicly the Ustaša regime and its numerous atrocious acts. Part of the answer, he believes, is that 'Stepinac continued to fear the Communist Scylla much more than the Fascist Charybdis to the very end' (Biondich 2009: 163–64). Perhaps even more important was the archbishop's yearning for an independent Croatian state. He and the other Catholic bishops preferred a Croatian state to Yugoslavia, in whatever form. The Ustaša and only they had realized the age-old coveted dream of Croatian statehood. The desire for a separate state had been the central issue that united all political factions in Croatia in the 19th century. For a while after 1918 it seemed that the dream of Croatian statehood might be realized within the framework of Yugoslavia, which until 1929 officially bore the name the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Biondich 2004: 55–57). The Croat elites, however, soon concluded that this state was merely a continuation of the Serbian kingdom in which ethnic Serbs dominated and Croatian interests were ignored. The fact that NDH seemed to resurrect Croatian statehood, dormant since 1102, covered a multitude of Ustaša sins.

The Yugoslav discourse on church complicity in Ustaša atrocities

Although religion was not suppressed in Communist Yugoslavia to the same degree as in other Eastern European countries, the Titoist regime opposed Christianity and Islam in various ways. Especially the Catholic Church felt the pressure of the state, evidently because it was best organized and perceived as the most threatening competitor for the allegiance of the people (Alexander 1979; Perica 2002; Ramet 2002: 81–99; Krišto 1997). The Tito regime also made full use of its control over information and book publication to smear if not the entire Catholic Church, then at least much of its clergy, as accomplices in the Ustaša crimes.

After the Partisans' seizure of power, Stepinac immediately distanced himself from the new regime and was brought to court in September 1946, accused of collaboration with the genocidal Ustaša regime. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison (but was released after five). In 1946, the Communists published 500 pages of documents, *On The Anti-People Activity of a Part of the Catholic Clergy* (Horvat and Štambuk 1946: 3). Two years later, this broadside was followed up with the publication of *Magnum Crimen – Half a Century of Clericalism in Croatia*, where Viktor Novak, a professor at the University of Zagreb, set forth the thesis that

this entire Ustaša terror... would never have acquired the scope and breath which it did had it not been for the help and support it received from the militant enemy of all that was freedom-loving in the NDH state – meaning catholic clericalism, this genuine monster of clerico-fascism (Novak 1986: XII).

After Tito's death in 1980, the renowned Yugoslav historian Vladimir Dedijer, who had been a close friend of Tito and a sort of court historian in Communist Yugoslavia, joined the fray. In *New Contributions to Tito's Biography* (1981), he called Archbishop Stepinac 'a war criminal' on a par with Serbian Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović (Dedijer 1980: 398). In 1987 Dedijer devoted a full-length book to the topic of *The Vatican and Jasenovac*, soon appearing in abridged German and English translations (Dedijer 1992). Dedijer sought to implicate the Vatican directly in the atrocities committed by the Ustaša regime. The fact that the Pope had ordained Archbishop Stepinac as military chaplain for the Ustaša Army spoke volumes about the Vatican's attitude towards NDH, Dedijer asserted, claiming that in his relations with the Vatican, Stepinac 'always represented the Ustaša ideology' (Dedijer 1992: 329).

In 1989 the soon-to-be president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, published a major counterattack against what many Croats saw as deliberate distortions and lies about wartime Croatia (Tuđman 1990: 375–418). Tuđman was a former general of the Partisans and was personally not particularly devout, but he wanted to defend the Church against what he regarded as outrageous accusations that, by implication, smeared the entire Croatian people. He quoted Stepinac's remarks about Jasenovac as 'a shameful blot' in the letter to Pavelić, and also pointed out that the archbishop had on one occasion successfully negotiated the release of 200 Orthodox Christians from a subcamp in the Jasenovac camp system. Tuđman concluded that 'there was probably no high-ranking ecclesiastic in the lands of Hitler's New European order throughout the entire

war who opposed Nazi-Fascist and racist ideology and practice so resolutely, consistently, and systematically' (Tuđman 1990: 388).

The treatment of the Croatian Church's war record in Yugoslav history writing and media in the Tito era was biased, even viciously so, and contributed to what has later been described as the Church's 'persecution syndrome' (Butković 2008, see below). The Church dug into its trenches and increasingly aligned itself with the Croatian right, even to the point of taking a leading role in the commemoration of the Ustaša soldiers who were executed by the Partisans, the so-called Bleiburg victims.

Jasenovac versus Bleiburg: Competing struggles for victimhood

The main venue for commemorations of Ustaša soldiers and others who had tried to flee from the advancing Partisans after the defeat of the Axis powers is the Bleiburg fields in southern Austria, near the Slovenian border. Here more than 200,000 Croats, some of whom had the blood of Jasenovac victims on their hands, sought to surrender to the British occupation forces on 15 May 1945. The British turned them all back and handed them over the Partisans, who showed no mercy. The prisoners were herded into Yugoslav territory where perhaps as many as 75,000 were murdered without trial (Kolstø 2010). Each year in May, upwards of 8,000 Croats congregate at the fields of Bleiburg to commemorate their fate. The Catholic Church plays a crucial role in these rallies, and a requiem mass is the central part of the ceremony.

The Bleiburg commemorations began in the 1950s as a private gathering of Ustaša survivors and their relatives. In Mark Biondich's words, Bleiburg was 'the Croatian Jasenovac' for the Croat emigration (2004: 68). When Yugoslavia disintegrated, this perception was imported into Croatia and struck deep roots. In 1990, it became possible for people from Croatia to participate at these assemblies, and gradually Croatian state institutions as well as the Croatian Catholic Church became involved at increasingly high levels. In 2005, at the sixtieth anniversary of the Bleiburg massacre, the requiem mass was for the first time officiated by a cardinal, Vinko Cardinal Puljić of Upper Bosnia. Two years later, the Archbishop of Zagreb and head of the Croatian Church, Josip Cardinal Bozanić, celebrated the mass. In 2008 it was decided that each future commemoration would be held on a Saturday rather than on a Sunday, since priests are normally busy with their congregations on Sundays and would be unable to attend. This change was a strong indication of the importance of the Bleiburg ceremony for the Croatian Catholic Church and its servants. In the Bleiburg narrative, the slain Ustaša soldiers are referred to not only as innocent victims but also as 'martyrs' (*mučenici*) (Kolstø 2010).

In stark contrast to the solid ecclesiastical presence at Bleiburg in May, Church participation at the official Jasenovac commemorations in April is extremely low-key. Here, the Croatian Church has occasionally been represented by the local parish priest only, and he has never given a speech or performed any other official function during the ceremony. The conspicuous absence of the Croatian prelates is by many regarded as offensive. As a commentator of *Feral Tribune* expressed it, it leaves the impression

that to the Church ‘the Bleiburg victims are «ours» while those who died at Jasenovac are «alien» (*tuđe*)’ (*Feral Tribune*, 2008: 6). In the weekly magazine *Globus*, Jelena Lovrić described Jasenovac as ‘an open wound, probably worse than Bleiburg’. In her view, sending only the local priest to attend meant pouring salt into this wound, suggesting to the world that the Church operated with a hierarchy of victims, some more worthy of commemoration than others (Lovrić 2008).

In the nationalist press, such criticism was regarded as intolerable. *Hrvatsko slovo* wrote about ‘a witch hunt’ against the Church and the cardinal (Pandža 2007). The Church leadership defended its virtual absence from Jasenovac in various, if not always convincing, ways. Most commonly, they insisted that they could not send a delegation to the commemoration as long as it was politically manipulated – as if that were not the case with the Bleiburg commemorations. The entire Jasenovac atmosphere was permeated by Communist rhetoric and symbolism, they pointed out. For instance, in his annual talk at Jasenovac, Croatian president Stipe Mesić, a former prominent member of the Yugoslav League of Communists, continued to address those present as ‘Dear comrades’. Furthermore, the number of Jasenovac victims was grossly exaggerated, the Church insisted. While this certainly is true with regard to the Serbian nationalist discourse, it is not, in fact, the case for the official commemoration. The Jasenovac memorial centre has published a book with the names of 72,193 victims, and this figure represents the best scholarly estimate today (Kolstø forthcoming).

Most importantly, the Church felt that it was being held responsible for the Jasenovac atrocities. In an interview with *Jutarnji list*, Bishop Mile Bogović complained that ‘Jasenovac is a symbol for the attack on the Church’ (Pavičić 2006a). To this charge, the chairwoman of the Jasenovac Memorial Council replied that

no state institution at any level has ever described the Catholic Church as an accessory to the Jasenovac atrocities. All these years the bishops have been cordially invited and their presence been hoped for, but instead they have sent only the local parish priest (Stipetić 2006).

Asked by *Jutarnji list* under which conditions he would consent to go to Jasenovac, Bogović pointed out that bishops normally go to events where mass is being celebrated. If he could be assured that no manifestations would take place in Jasenovac that that could ‘bring forth unhealthy feelings’, he was prepared to go and celebrate mass there himself (Pavičić 2006b).

The next year Cardinal Bozanić somewhat unexpectedly addressed the thorny topic of Jasenovac in his sermon at the Bleiburg commemoration, noting that

while we today commemorate the Bleiburg tragedy I also think with horror about the Ustaša camp in Jasenovac. I find it necessary here, at this very moment, to say that for us, on account of our faith in God and our love for Croatia, we should not blur the view to this atrocity. In this spirit I repeat the words of blessed Alojzije Stepinac, who with no ambiguity, already during the war, on 19 February 1943, publicly called the Jasenovac camp ‘a shameful blot’ and described the killings that took place there as ‘Croatia’s greatest tragedy’ (Bozanić 2007).

Bozanić's assertion that Stepinac had criticized Jasenovac 'publicly' was stretching the truth somewhat, since this condemnation had in fact been written in a letter to the *poglavnik* that was not printed until after the war. Even so, Bozanić's remarks were noteworthy. A senior editor of *Jutarnji list* called them 'a responsible and intelligent political move':

We can be sure that many of those who were present [at Bleiburg] did not want to hear this. There can be no doubt that parts of the Croatian right not only want to minimize the atrocities that were committed in the NDH and the atrocious nature of that state itself. They even think that the Jasenovac camp was no atrocity at all but a legitimate defensive measure against the communists and the Chetniks (Butković 2007).

Indeed, such viewpoints were expressed not only in the secular rightist press but also in some Catholic publications. For instance, in *Narod*, a monthly edited by a retired priest, a certain Hrvoje Bošnjak claimed 'it is impossible to compare Jasenovac and Bleiburg' (Bošnjak 2007). In Bošnjak's interpretation, Bleiburg was a war crime whereas the Jasenovac camp was part of normal warfare:

The Serbs in Jasenovac were insurgents. In Jasenovac there were Serbs and communists who had either taken up arms or had connections to the Chetniks or the partisans. Hence, they were people who had rebelled against the existing authorities at the time. It's a big lie that Serbs were sent to Jasenovac simply because they were Serbs (Bošnjak 2007).

Narod is not an official organ of the Croatian Catholic Church, but it clearly enjoys the support of influential elements within the Church; my own copy of *Narod* I picked up for free at the cathedral in Hvar. Even if it is difficult to assess how widespread its ideas are, it clearly was time for the ecclesiastical leadership to act. Rather than attend the official Jasenovac ceremony in April, however, they would go on their own on a time of their own choosing. First out was the bishop of the local diocese where Jasenovac is located, Požega in Western Slavonia. Archbishop Antun Skvorčević made a pilgrimage to Jasenovac on Good Friday in 2007 together with 90 local priests and deacons, as well as a visiting Slovenian archbishop.

According to press reports, in his address to the pilgrims Skvorčević claimed that 'we still do not have the full truth about Jasenovac, free of ideological manipulation and propaganda'. He had also balanced his criticism of the Ustaša by drawing attention to atrocities which the Serbs had committed in his diocese during the Homeland War of 1990–95 ('Biskup...' 2007). Prior to the bishop's visit, a journalist from *Jutarnji list* had characterized the pilgrimage as ambiguous: Skvorčević would go 'not privately, but also not officially, not publicly and not secretly'. Nevertheless, the journalist acknowledged that the Church was in a difficult conundrum:

The partisan mythology which can be heard at Jasenovac is permeated by harsh words about cardinal Stepinac, and throughout the entire socialist period the Church was virtually accused of having had their own butchers in Jasenovac. It goes without saying that the bishops do not take that lightly (Pavičić 2006c).

If the Church leadership had hoped that Skvorčević's visit would be enough to mollify the critics, it grossly miscalculated. If anything, the ambiguous signals this visit sent out seem to have further incited passions on the political left, as seen in the Fumić affair one year later.

The Fumić intermezzo

Ivan Fumić is a former Jasenovac inmate and the former leader of the Union of Anti-fascist Fighters in Croatia. In his address to the annual Jasenovac commemoration in 2008, he lashed out against what he saw as distorted versions of the Bleiburg events. Bleiburg is presented as a scaffold of Croats, Fumić lamented, but the Partisans never killed anyone for their national affiliation – they killed only those who had committed atrocities, he insisted. By contrast, in Jasenovac and in many other Ustaša camps, people were killed simply for belonging to this or that faith or race. Fumić went on to say that 'it is sad, but true that the Ustaša had ample support from a substantial part of the Catholic clergy, and even today this clergy, as a last bastion, defends that order' (Fumić 2008).

The speech created a scandal. In an official pronouncement, the publishing office of the Croatian Episcopal Conference asked in whose interest such accusations against the Church were made, but it left the question hanging in the air (Priopćenje 2008). An answer was suggested by *Hrvatski list*, which intimated that only forces seeking to destabilize Croatian society would give room to such extremist statements that spread hatred rather than honouring the memory of the victims (Galović 2008). Cardinal Božanić, for his part, suggested that the Office of the Public Prosecutor should look into the matter (*Feral Tribune*, 2008: 6).

The official organ of the Croatian Episcopal Conference, *Glas koncila*, addressed Fumić's speech in an editorial (Miklenić 2008). The editor, Father Ivan Miklenić, saw it as an abuse of the Jasenovac commemoration and as a way to sow new seeds of hatred. As Fumić had tried to link the Church to Ustaša, Miklenić counterattacked by associating Fumić with Greater Serbian chauvinism. Had it not been for 'the Jasenovac myth', Serbian president Slobodan Milošević and his henchmen would probably not have been able to manipulate the Serbs so easily to go to war, the editor indicated. This 'myth' held that 700,000 people had died in Jasenovac, and that the entire Croatian population was genocidal by nature. Miklenić ignored the fact that Fumić, himself a Croat, had never said anything of the kind. Finally, Miklenić also claimed that not all the victims in Jasenovac had been killed by the Ustaša: some had died at the hands of the Partisans. This rather surprising claim built on a new myth about Jasenovac then gaining currency in Croatian nationalist circles. According to this myth, the Partisans had continued to use Jasenovac after the war as a concentration camp for their own enemies (see Šeparović 2009). Thus, in its efforts to combat the Jasenovac myth, *Glas koncila* in effect added new layers to it.

The reactions of the liberal and leftist press to the Fumić affair varied. *Slobodna Dalmacija* interviewed a dissident Catholic theologian who claimed that Fumić was

completely correct: the Catholic Church had indeed been involved in the NDH establishment ‘up to the neck’ (Drago Pilsel, quoted in *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22.4.2008). Davor Butković in *Jutarnji list*, however, remarked that no sensible person could agree that the Church had provided the ideological basis for Ustašism. With this claim, Fumić had gratuitously handed the Church a strong argument in support of its conspiracy theory and had strengthened its persecution syndrome. All the same, Butković concluded, ‘when the tragic events in Croatian history are being commemorated each spring the Church cannot, for its own sake and for the sake of its faithful, continue to stand on one side, on the side of Bleiburg, only’ (Butković 2008). We can conclude that even if the Church received a measure of sympathy from secularists after the Fumić affair, one consequence was nevertheless increased pressure on its top leadership to go to Jasenovac.

Cardinal Bozanić in Jasenovac: The big pilgrimage and its aftermath

In October 2008 Prime Minister Ivo Sanader publicly pleaded with the Church to give up its Jasenovac boycott (Sanader 2008). Sanader was no leftist or rabble-rouser; he represented Franjo Tuđman’s old political party, HDZ, even if this party had moved considerably towards more centrist and less nationalist positions under Sanader’s leadership. The immediate knee-jerk reaction of the Church was that ‘representatives of the Church will not go to Jasenovac simply because the prime minister tells them to’ (Reakcija 2008), but in June 2009 it was nevertheless made public that Bozanić would indeed lead a large pilgrimage to Jasenovac on 24 September that same year (*Jutarnji list*, 18.6.2009). While some comments in the media saw this as ‘too little, too late’ (Radoš 2009; Zakasnela 2009), others were more upbeat. Marinko Čulić, a former journalist in *Feral Tribune* and normally not among the Church’s devotees, expressed the hope that the forthcoming visit could ‘mitigate the historical-ideological division that presses upon our country like a millstone and keeps it from breathing, walking, and working normally’ (Index.hr as quoted in *Danas*, Belgrade, 22 June 2009). To what extent the pilgrimage would contribute to this healing process would, of course, depend greatly upon what the cardinal and his retinue would do and say while in Jasenovac.

Pope Benedict XVI had proclaimed 2009 ‘a year for priests’, and Bozanić’s journey was conceived as a priestly pilgrimage within that framework. Approximately 300 priests participated. The clerics made altogether four calls: in Stara Gradiška – a subcamp for women and children within the Jasenovac camp complex; in the village of Jasenovac; at the Jasenovac memorial ground; and finally in the nearby town of Petrinja (Kožul 2009). At the Jasenovac memorial ground, the pilgrims visited the Museum and the Educational Centre, but they did not go all the way to the Flower Monument, a fact that was commented upon by several newspapers (see e.g. Frlan 2009). Petrinja was not connected to the events of World War Two, but was chosen as one of the stops because it had been badly destroyed during the Serb occupation in

1990–95. This town was seen as ‘a symbol of the heavy suffering in the Zagreb archdiocese of Serbian aggression in the Homeland War (1991–1995)’ (Kožul 2009), and the inclusion of Petrinja in the programme was clearly meant to balance the historical guilt of the Ustaša with a reminder of more recent Serbian atrocities.

In the local churches of Jasenovac and Petrinja, masses were held in which Bozanić officiated and delivered the sermons. The cardinal attacked not only Fascism but also – often in the same breath – Communism, condemning ‘race and class ideologies’ that led to ‘the enthrallment and extermination of entire groups of people, even nations’ (Propovijed Kardinala 2009). Bozanić expressed ‘deep pain for all victims... who were killed by members of the Croat nation, and even more, by members of the Catholic Church’. At the same time, he emphasized that the Church had nothing to apologize for. It had never taken part in any atrocities and had not abetted them through inaction. Once again the cardinal quoted Alojzije Stepinac’s words about Jasenovac as a ‘shameful blot’ on the Croatian nation.

Bozanić claimed that the Jasenovac victims had been used ‘to stigmatize the Croatian people as a genocidal people and the Croatian state as an undesired entity’. Therefore:

while we remember the victims of the Ustaša regime, we raise our lament from this place also for the truth about the victims of the Communist regime, because, regrettably, till this day the truth about the atrocities of Communism has been concealed for us, hushed up and denied (Propovijed Kardinala 2009).

While averring that he ‘would not engage in discussions and polemics’, Bozanić claimed:

it is not only a question of the outrage of the repressive system in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and not only of the terror of Ante Pavelić and the Ustaša, these blind followers of the national idea, whose path led them to link up with the ideology of Nazism and fascism. Their ideology was far removed from the Christian foundations and heritage of our people, and led the entire Croatian people into suffering and humiliation. [It is also] a matter of the ideological blindness and horror of the Partisans and the Communist power holders under Tito, people who, even to this day, under the mask of antifascism, do not want to acknowledge or take responsibility for its inhumanity which is on a par with Nazism (Propovijed Kardinala 2009).

The priestly pilgrimage not only made headlines in Croatia but was widely reported in Serbia as well (Bozanić *izjednačavao* 2009). For the most part, Serbian media were content to quote from Bozanić’s homilies, stressing especially his words that he had not come to apologize (Bozanić *u Jasenovcu* 2009). Most critical was *Blic press*, which argued that Bozanić had disparaged the importance of Jasenovac by mentioning the war in the 1990s in the same context (Kardinal Bozanić 2009).

The symbolic message of the great priestly pilgrimage to Jasenovac in September 2009 was so ambiguous that it is difficult to interpret the move as an outstretched hand. The decision to go there had obviously been forced upon the Church leadership, which had been more concerned about settling scores with ideological opponents than with

genuine soul-searching. Some Croatian commentators were laudatory in their assessments. Most buoyant perhaps was Davor Butković in *Jutarnji list*, who believed that Božanić had ‘done more than could be expected of him’ (Butković 2009). Butković regarded the cardinal’s arrival in Jasenovac as the most important political act in his twelve-year tenure as archbishop of Zagreb. Butković did not object to the fact that the bishop had mentioned the victims of Communism in his sermon. This particular aspect of the homily, however, strongly incensed Jelena Lovrić, one of the most hard-hitting critics of the Croatian Church leadership. Writing in the same paper as Butković she found it unacceptable that at the place of the worst Ustaša scaffold, Božanić had felt a need to settle scores with the Communist regime. This was ‘erroneous, disrespectful, and scandalous’. By mentioning Bleiburg at the very place where the Jasenovac victims were killed, the archbishop in effect shed tears also for their executioners. Lovrić had heard little in the way of prayer, observing numerous political statements instead. ‘In Jasenovac Božanić acted first and foremost as a defender of the Church, the Church of Stepinac as well as the current one’ (Lovrić 2009).

In the same vein, one commentator in *Novi list* asked why it had been necessary to contaminate the memory of the Jasenovac victims by referring to those victims ‘who followed after them and for whom they in no way could be guilty’: ‘Would it at all be conceivable that the Pope during the commemoration of the victims of Nazism in Auschwitz should engage in polemics about the necessity of the Allied bombing of Dresden or the American bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki?’ (Mijića 2009). Another commentator in the same newspaper found the cardinal’s behaviour particularly puzzling since he was not known to nourish any sympathies for the Ustaša regime. It would indeed be difficult to characterize him as a chauvinist or a radical nationalist, a description that on the other hand ‘would easily fit many other dignitaries of the Catholic Church in Croatia’. The only explanation this commentator could find was that Božanić was a weak leader who had become ‘a voluntary prisoner of the mental frame of the majority, for whom Croatian patriotism is just another word for hatred against Serbs, phantom communists, and conspiracies against all that is Croatian and Catholic’ (Dikić 2009).

Most devastating was an ‘open letter’ written by Slavko Goldstein, a leading Jewish intellectual in Zagreb. Goldstein’s criticism carried considerable weight because he was both a member of the Jasenovac Memorial Council and a renowned historian who had written a prizewinning book on Croatia during World War Two. In his adolescence, Goldstein had been incarcerated in the Jasenovac concentration camp, from where some of his family members never returned. Later he joined the Partisans and identified with their cause.

In his open letter to the bishops, Goldstein reported that he had been very happy when he learned about Božanić’s planned trip. In Božanić’s sermons, as they were published in the media, Goldstein found some valuable sections – but also very bewildering and downright offensive ones. Goldstein accepted the archbishop’s claim that during and after World War Two, atrocities were committed by the Partisans as well, but he denied that these crimes are being hushed up in Croatia today (Goldstein 2009).

Bozanić's words – that he felt great pain for all victims who were killed by members of the Croatian nation and the Catholic Church – Goldstein regarded as courageous, but the force of this statement was undermined by the claim that the Croatian Church had nothing to ask forgiveness for. Goldstein pointed out that

at the beginning of the war many distinguished representatives of your Church and the majority of its publications greeted the establishment of the NDH enthusiastically.... In that way they share the guilt for the fact that a part of the Croatian Catholics for too long believed in Ante Pavelić and his Ustaša (Goldstein 2009).

Goldstein acknowledged that some members of the Croatian Church had indeed stood up bravely against the Ustaša, but he believed it was wrong to mention Stepinac in this connection, since the archbishop in fact had not suffered any harm at the hands of the Ustaša. It would have been much more apposite for Bozanić to mention some of those priests who actually had paid dearly for their resistance to the Ustaša movement.

Goldstein reserved his harshest words not for the message in the Cardinal's sermons but for his actions, or more precisely his inaction: Bozanić had failed to walk up to the Jasenovac Flower Monument and kneel down at the crypt that housed victims' bones. Goldstein found it incomprehensible that the head of the Croatian Church would not follow the example of the two popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Such a potent symbolic act would have spoken louder than many words. 'Over the last 40 years the monument has become the most moving emblem of the totality of Jasenovac and, I dare say, those who have not walked up to the monument, they have not been in Jasenovac' (Goldstein 2009). The priests had at long last started on the final leg of the road towards Jasenovac, but had turned back 200 meters from the destination – and that carried a symbolic meaning.

Goldstein's open letter was widely reported in the press in Croatia and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia – a Google search in December 2009 on the exact words of the title of the Open Letter gave 4688 hits. The Church leadership was bound to react in one way or another. They chose to do so in the form of an unsigned 'review' of the letter in the main organ of the Croatian Church, the *Glas koncila*. Like Bozanić himself, the anonymous reviewer – reviewers, probably – averred that the intention was not to engage in polemics or quarrel. Even so, the open letter was characterized as 'cynical, prejudiced, and biased, in one word: incorrect' (Istina 2009). The review reiterated the charge that the truth about Communist atrocities was brushed under the carpet in present-day Croatia, and challenged Goldstein to find one single case in which a member of the Communist Party or Yugoslav state structures had been brought to justice for any atrocity he or she had committed. The author(s) of the review had a somewhat harder time justifying the Cardinal's failure to walk up to the Flower Monument to pray, and simply noted that if he had done so, 'someone would probably have objected since Catholics were in minority among the victims there'. This reply was disingenuous since it, with equal justification, could have been used against the two popes' genuflections in Auschwitz – to my knowledge neither of them has been upbraided for this act of homage and penitence.

The author(s) of ‘the review’ agreed that, figuratively speaking, some 200 meters or so did indeed remain before a full rapprochement between the Church and its detractors in Croatian society could be accomplished. However, the Church, for its part, had completed a major stride: now it was time for ‘someone else’ to walk that walk.

Concluding remarks

When political pluralism was introduced in Croatia around 1990, the Catholic Church positioned itself on the right side of the political spectrum. With a large following of the faithful accustomed to taking advice from their priests, the hierarchy wielded formidable political power, should they decide to use it. And they did. Prior to the parliamentary elections of April–May 1990 the bishops stated that the Church’s presence in politics was a requirement of the Gospel. They pointed out that the priests were in a difficult position: on the one hand they should help the voters decide which political programme was best, while on the other they should avoid endorsing any specific political party. As Jure Krišto points out, ‘Given the above criteria, and provided that the faithful would listen to their bishops – which was not in doubt – it was already clear that the communist party still in power could not win free elections’. The triumph of Franjo Tuđman’s HDZ party ‘was already decided’ (Krišto 1995: 441).

After the fall of Communism, Croatian society has remained ideologically divided between a Socialist/anti-Fascist wing harking back to the Tito era, and a stridently nationalist right. In this picture, the Church has placed itself squarely on the side of the latter. An important reason is the way the Church was treated in Tito’s time, when it suffered harassment and was painted as an accessory to the horrible crimes of the Ustaša regime. The same charges can be heard in Croatia today, even if this is no longer the hegemonic discourse. Rather than distancing itself maximally from the Ustaša regime, however, the Church has reacted with a message that, paradoxically, further nourishes this discourse: ‘well, the Ustaša were bad, but the Yugoslav communists were no better’.

Epilogue: The *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of the Croatian Church in an East European comparative perspective

Several other European countries that were allied with Nazi Germany during the war had local Fascist leaders who appealed to the local Church for support and received it to varying degrees. The complicity of the national Church was perhaps strongest in Slovakia, where the president, Jozef Tiso, was an ordained priest. Also many other men of the cloth had leading positions in the wartime ‘independent’ Slovak state. The Tiso regime enjoyed close collaboration with Nazi Germany, and became notorious for its willingness to deport Slovakia’s Jewish population.

After the fall of Communism, rightist groups such as the nationalist SNS party have attempted to rehabilitate Tiso. Commemorative plaques have been put up in some towns, but the Slovak Catholic hierarchy have generally kept aloof. An exception is

Archbishop Jan Sokol, who in 2008 celebrated a requiem mass for the executed cleric. The Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, however, resolutely distanced itself from this action (Archbishop Prays 2008). Therefore, in contemporary Slovak public debate the Slovak Church as an organization is not saddled with guilt for the crimes of the Tiso regime.

In Romania, the Iron Guard was a Fascist movement with a strong religious (Orthodox) plank in its ideology. Several priests were active in the Iron Guards before and during World War Two, but few members of the Romanian Church today seem to look back on this religious Fascism with any strong degree of nostalgia. Both during and after the reign of Nicolae Ceausescu, revelations that a person had been a Guard member could tarnish his or her reputation irreparably. The Communists exploited this circumstance by threatening such people by public exposure of their past exploits unless they collaborated (Stan and Turcescu 2007:71). The most controversial aspect of the recent history of the Church in Romania has been how its hierarchy caved in to Communist pressure, more than their wartime record.

In Serbia, the situation is different, and more similar to the Croatian case. Also in Serbia the role played by some Church leaders during World War Two is highly controversial. This is particularly the case with Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, whose wartime record is extremely chequered: on the one hand, he spent some time in Dachau towards the end of the war – but under far more comfortable conditions than other inmates. Astonishingly, while in this notorious concentration camp Bishop Nikolaj penned a virulent attack on the Jews as ‘the children of Satan’. Already then he was known as the mentor and spiritual guide of Dmitrije Ljutić, leader of the Serbian Fascist movement Zbor, a counterpart of the Iron Guard in Romania. In May 2003 Bishop Nikolaj was canonized by the Serbian Church. According to Jovan Byford, Velimirović’s numerous critics in the contemporary Serbian public debate are ‘vastly outnumbered and outvoiced by the bishop’s admirers’ (Byford forthcoming).

This short survey cannot give room to any thorough comparison of attitudes in the various East European Churches towards their wartime history. I have only indicated some possible parallels and contrasts that may be explored further by other researchers. Rather than presuming to draw any general conclusions from my observations, let me note that, with the possible exception of Serbia, there are few places where the wartime history of the national Church seems to agitate the public more than in Croatia.

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