

The Power of God's Servants: Catholic Hierarchy and the Independent State of Croatia

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The Catholic Church's role in the Holocaust has been hotly contested for decades. Countless polemics have emerged from historians, journalists, and clergy denouncing the Catholic Church, Pope Pius XII in particular, for its seemingly idle stance on Nazism and the Holocaust. For every polemic denouncing The Church there exists a polemic defending or apologizing for its actions.

The excuses given in defense of The Church range from a lack of power to a fear of retribution against Catholics. Many of these apologetics and counter arguments spend their time focusing on Vatican relations with France, Germany, Italy, or Poland (where Church activity saw the most success). These apologists, often ignore the fate of the 30,000 Jews¹ and the 330,000-390,000 Serbians² who perished under the Ustasha regime of the Independent Croatian State (NDH). However, a number of historians³ have criticized the Catholic Church's relationship with the NDH and its failure to intervene in the killings committed under a self-proclaimed Catholic State.

Perhaps the most articulated argument, as well as free of ethnic, religious, or national bias, has been crafted by historian Michael Phayer. Phayer argues that since Croatia was a "Catholic State", the papacy could have acted against the NDH with no fear of retribution and in choosing not to act, the Church lost an important opportunity to exercise moral leadership.⁴ This argument appears to be very solid as many of the academic works defending the Church avoid the topic of Croatia all together: Frank J. Coppa, in his work defending the Church,

¹ Goldstein Ivo and Salvko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, trans. Sonia Biancanic and Nikolina Jovanovic (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016), 561.

² Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia Under Ante Pavelic*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), 71.

³ Most notably Michael Phayer, John Cornwell, Robert B. McCormick, Vladimir Dedijer, Peter Kent, Karlheinz Deschner, Carlo Falconi and Stella Alexander

⁴ Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 39, 55.

doesn't mention Croatia at all⁵, Rabbi David G. Dalin spends 2 pages on Croatia⁶, Margherita Marchione mentions Croatia twice⁷ in passing, and José M. Sanchez simply concedes this point to Phayer⁸. However, when we dispel the myth of the “Catholic State” to see it for what it truly was (a fascist puppet state), and understand the Church's position, we can see that the Church likely did not have the power to curb the genocide and acted pragmatically to save as many as it could from the Ustasha terror.

Before diving into Phayer's argument, it is important to address the evidentiary issues in this case. Historian Robert B. McCormick notes that a careful dispassionate study of the NDH has yet to be compiled.⁹ This issue is plagued with ethnic tension, political leverage, anti-Catholic sentiment, blind apologetics, nationalist fervor, and many other issues. Specifically, the Vatican has yet to release all of the documents relating to Pius XII in accordance with their 75 year rule. Testimony from the trials of NDH officials and Catholic clergymen during Tito's Yugoslavia have questionable reliability. In addition, personal narrative and secondary studies¹⁰ have ethnic bias that make it difficult to understand what truly happened. The evidentiary issues in this matter have made scholarship difficult and more energy is needed from outside parties to examine the NDH state. The debate over what occurred in the NDH and to what extent the Catholic Church was involved is far from over.

The central aspect of Phayer and other historian's critiques are their belief that the NDH was truly a “Catholic State”. The evidence that the NDH was influenced by Catholicism is impossible to ignore. The concept of being Croatian had been synonymous

⁵ Frank J. Coppa, *The Papacy, the Jews, and The Holocaust*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

⁶ David G Dalin, *The Myth of Hitler's Pope: How Pius XII Rescued Jews From the Nazis*. (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005).

⁷ Margherita Marchione, *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

⁸ José M. Sanchez, *Pius XII and The Holocaust: Understanding The Controversy*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 162-163.

⁹ Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia Under Pavelic*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), 197.

¹⁰ For example Vladimir Dedidjer's work *The Yugoslav Auschwitz and the Vatican* has come under scrutiny for its anti-Catholic and anti-Croatian approach.

with being Catholic since the 17th century.¹¹ However, we must remember that the Ustasha and their allies (Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy) were fascist regimes. That being said, we should, as Sociologist Michael Mann proposes, take these fascist seriously.¹² In order to do this I have adopted Mann's elements of fascism as his study and classification of fascist regimes included studies of Italy, Germany, and Croatia. Two of the key elements Mann identifies are Transcendence and Nationalism.¹³ Mann argues that fascist states were deeply committed to the idea of nationalism and these states would often transcend existing conservative notions and incorporate classes and institutions.¹⁴ For the Ustasha, incorporating the Church would transcend the institutions authority while capitalizing on the Illyrian myth¹⁵ of the Croats being God's chosen defenders of the Balkans.

It is important to remember that the Ustasha were not a democratically elected regime like Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, but rather the Ustasha were installed by the Axis powers when they took over Yugoslavia in 1941. Therefore, it would certainly be characteristic of a fascist to solidify power in the state through nationalism and co-opting existing institutions. Ante Pavelic¹⁶ and the Ustasha used the Catholic Church to solidify his regime by seeking Vatican support¹⁷, receiving a state blessing from the Archbishop of Zagreb¹⁸, and enlisting the aid of hundreds of priests.¹⁹ Papal policy at the time was to not recognize new states during the war; however, the Archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac, at the request of Ante Pavelic, arranged for Pope Pius XII to meet personally with Ustasha's head, the Poglavnik.

¹¹ Pedro Ramet, "From Strossmayer to Stepinac: Croatian National Ideology and Catholicism," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 12, issue 2 (1985): 126.

¹² Michael Mann, *Fascists*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.

¹³ Ibid, 13.

¹⁴ Ibid, 13-14.

¹⁵ Pedro Ramet, "From Strossmayer to Stepinac: Croatian National Ideology and Catholicism," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 12, issue 2 (1985): 125

¹⁶ Head of the NDH from 1941-1945 often referred to as the Poglavnik.

¹⁷ Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 107.

¹⁸ Goldstein, Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, Trans, Sonia Bicanic and Nikolina Jovanovic. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016), 485.

¹⁹ Vladmir Ddijer, *The Yugoslav Auschwitz and the Vatican*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 103.

After which Pius XII noted that Pavelic was a “devout Catholic” and sent a Papal Legate to Zagreb.²⁰ While the NDH had not been officially recognized, it would have been of little concern to the Poglavnik as he had met personally with the pope and now had a papal legate. This added up to a de facto recognition. Furthermore, the NDH controlled the media which included the Catholic newspapers. Hence, the Poglavnik could spin this story in a way that benefited the power of the new Croatian state.²¹ As a result, even non fascists supporting the regimes initial rise to power.²² The fascist NDH had used the power of the Catholic Church to consolidate the power of the newly independent state of Croatia. The notion that the NDH was a truly devout “Catholic State” falls to the wayside when we consider that, ultimately, Pavelic and his regime were power hungry fascists who would never allow a conservative institution like the Catholic Church to hold more power in their state than the regime. It is more likely that Catholicism was a means of assimilating the Croatian people to their new regime.

Even if we entertain the idea of Croatia as a “Catholic State”, we must still recognize that the NDH was never in full control of its destiny. Ultimately, while Pavelic had free reign in his newly established state, he was still a tool of Nazi Germany and to some extent Fascist Italy. Three actions specifically point to this hierarchy of power. First and foremost, Nazi Germany put the Ustasha into power. The party was never elected to power by the Croatian people and was considered a fringe group until 1941.²³ Ante Pavelic and the Ustasha were hand-picked by Hitler and Mussolini to be the head of the newly independent state of Croatia. This choice in and of itself indicates that these fascists saw Pavelic and the Ustasha as a regime they could control.

²⁰ José M. Sanchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2002), 160.

²¹ Peter C. Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of Pius XII the Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943-1950*. (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002)

²² Ibid

²³ Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia Under Ante Pavelic*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), 12

Pavelic's other two actions, showing hierarchy of power, that are worthy of note are his secession of the area of Dalmatia to Italy and his persecution of the Jews to please Hitler. The coast of Dalmatia had been considered the cradle of the Croatian people since the 17th century and played a large role in Croatian nationalism and identity.²⁴ That being said, one of the first actions Ante Pavelic conducted as the Poglavnik was signing a treaty giving up territorial claims of Dalmatia to Italy.²⁵ This act certainly could not have pleased the majority of Croats, but the move was more of a kowtow towards the Italians who had harbored the Ustasha for several years.²⁶ In addition to giving up traditional Croatian lands, the Ustasha adopted anti-Semitic laws and policies to please Hitler. Shortly after the NDH's conception, Ante Pavelic traveled to Berlin and fell to Hitler's anti-Semitic pressure.²⁷ Only weeks later, the Ustasha adopted anti-Semitic racial laws that mirrored the Nuremberg laws of Nazi Germany, and established death camps, such as Jasenovac and Jadovno, months before the Wannsee conference and the construction of Belzec. This policy was likely to please the Nazi regime as the Ustasha pre-1941 were not adamantly anti-Semitic. It was anti-Serbdom that was central to Ustasha ideology according to historians Martin Broszat, John Steinberg, Yeshayahu Jelinik, John Cromwell, Michael Phayer, and Stella Alexander.²⁸ Historians Ivo and Slavko Goldstein argue that the Ustasha eliminated seventy-five to eighty percent of the Jews living in the NDH in an effort to garner favor with the Nazi regime.²⁹ Therefore, it seems likely that even if the NDH was a truly "Catholic State" where the Catholic Church had power, it would have been fruitless as the Church's authority meant little to the Nazi's

²⁴ Pedro Ramet, "From Strossmayer to Stepinac: Croatian National Ideology and Catholicism," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 12, issue 2, (1985), 124-125.

²⁵ Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia Under Ante Pavelic*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), 64.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 252.

²⁸ Mark Biondich. "Religion and Nation in Wartime Croatia: Reflections on the Ustaša Policy of Forced Religious Conversions, 1941-1942." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83, no. 1 (2005): 72.

²⁹ Goldstein Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, trans. Sonia Biancanic and Nikolina Jovanovic (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016).

who held less than favorable views of Christianity.³⁰ No matter what the appeal, the Church's arguments against the NDH would have fallen on deaf ears.

Despite this situation, it still begs the question why didn't the church attempt to exert moral authority in the NDH regardless of its efficacy? With this question, we are beginning to entertain virtual history, a popular subfield as far as the Catholic Church in the Holocaust is concerned. It is easy to dismiss this as mere speculation of what could have happened had the Church excommunicated or spoke up against the atrocities of the Holocaust in Croatia; however, these critiques of Church policy still present us with an interesting scenario. After all, even if these policies would have failed due to the nature of Fascism, we cannot ignore that the Catholic Church certainly could have at least attempted to use its moral influence in Croatia. The Ustasha may not have cared, but the Catholic Church remained an integral part to Croatian national identity. The institution was still a tool of Ustasha domestic policy. While there are several reasons the Church acted the way it did, there are three possible explanations that rise above the rest: The Church hierarchy had little authority in Croatia leaving few viable options, the Church considered Communism the greater threat in the Balkans, and more subtle methods were more successful.

One of the most intriguing explanations for Vatican inaction is that the Vatican's influence in Croatia was not particularly strong and a major policy failure could have presented broader implications for the Catholic Church. A common misunderstanding when thinking about the Catholic Church and the Papacy is the assumption that the Church is a unified body that follows a strict hierarchal command with the Pope at the top as the Vicar of Christ. Nothing in the history of the Catholic Church indicates this notion is correct. Even at the height of the Church's political power in the middle ages, the Pope's influence over states

³⁰ Karlheinz Deschner, *God and The Fascists: the Vatican Alliance with Mussolini, Franco, Hitler, and Pavelic*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2013).

and people outside the Vatican was severely limited.³¹ In reality, the Church could not control the actions of its faithful, its Priests, and even sometimes the actions of its Bishops. This was particularly true in instances where schismatic cracks in faith were present. Pedro Ramet describes such a situation emerging in the late 19th century Croatia where the Roman Catholic Church was split between a conservative faction loyal to traditional Catholicism and a new liberal Illyrian Church that opposed Papal and Vatican authority. By the emergence of the Ustasha regime, many clergy distrusted the Vatican Curia.³² While the threat of another schism was miniscule, the threat still existed. Pius and the Church realistically had little control over the actions of the Croatian clergy, and where they did have control, the threat of another church faction existed. Yet, the illusion that the Vatican had control over the Croatian Church and the Catholic NDH presented its own issues.

Since the Papacy of Leo XIII, scholars have agreed the political power of the papacy has decreased, shifting more towards an authority over issues of morality and away from being considered a major player on the international political scene. José Sanchez points out that the careful and calculated policies of Pius XII and the Church during the war was a product of their diplomatic training. Pius XII in particular was acutely aware of the limits of papal power.³³ Had Pius excommunicated the Ustasha or taken a strong stance, he would not only be gambling with the risk of pushing the Croatian Church away from a united Catholicism but also risked showing how little power the Papacy had retained. We have to remember the Vatican's foreign policy is inherently different than that of all other nations due to its unique position as a nation state and the center of Catholicism. The lines between domestic and foreign policy are blurred because of the Catholic Church's position as an

³¹ For an excellent example of this limited power of the Church see Rebecca Rists' *Papal Protection and the Jews in the Context of Crusading*, 1198-1245.

³² Pedro Ramet, "From Strossmayer to Stepinac: Croatian National Ideology and Catholicism," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 12, issue 2, (1985), 129-132

³³ José M. Sanchez, *Pius XII and The Holocaust: Understanding The Controversy*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 90-93.

international institution with religion, not force, as its source of authority and power. Croatia was considered to be a “Catholic State”, and if excommunication or repudiation failed to stop the killings, it would have sent a powerful message to both the Allies and the Axis powers of the limits of the Catholic Church.³⁴ That could have possibly endangered the Church in occupied Europe and excluded the Pope from the possibility of mediating the conflict. John Morely notes that Vatican diplomacy has always been cautious and while there were other policies available, Pius chose diplomacy.³⁵

This source of the power problem was compounded by the youth and inexperience of the Archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac. The Catholic Church has traditionally relied on its Bishops and Archbishops to take control as far as local matters are concerned. However, Archbishop Stepinac faced a unique situation internally and externally. After serving in the Great War, Aloysius Stepinac underwent seven years of schooling in the Vatican before returning to Croatia. In 1937 at the age of 36, he was appointed, to his dismay, to be the Archbishop of Zagreb (the highest position in the Croatian Church) and at the time was the youngest Bishop in the history of the Catholic Church. A man who had never been a parish priest and who was virtually unknown to the people of Croatia was appointed to the largest Archdiocese in all of Europe. It is no wonder Stepinac had little confidence in himself and had little authority amongst the clergy of Croatia.³⁶

Stepinac initially embraced the Ustasha regime as was Catholic tradition, but his hope for a true Catholic State started to decline by the end of 1941 with the deportation of the

³⁴ We have good reason to believe that excommunication would have failed to produce change. Peter C. Kent notes in *The Lonely Cold War of Pius XII* that Pope Pius XII excommunicated everyone involved in the arrest and conviction of Archbishop Stepinac in October 1946. The excommunication failed to procure Stepinac release from prison and failed to produce a spark of resistance against Josip Broz Tito’s new communist Yugoslavia.

³⁵ John Morley, *Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust, 1939-1943*, (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1980), 208.

³⁶ Stella Alexander. “Archbishop Stepinac Reconsidered.” *School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies*, February 1978.

Jews.³⁷ From what we know of Vatican diplomacy, Stepinac would have likely had the same diplomatic training as Pius XII which would explain his very cautious nature. Slavko Goldstein notes that Stepinac spoke out most strongly when he felt he had the Church behind him.³⁸ Unfortunately, this rarely happened. Pius XII was largely silent on the matters in Croatia, and the only other church figure in the NDH of similar status as Stepinac was Archbishop Saric of the newly acquired Archdiocese of Sarajevo. Saric could not have possibly provided moral support for Stepinac considering Saric was a man so infatuated with the Ustasha that he wrote poetry for years singing praises to the regime and the Poglavnik.³⁹ Stepinac was a young man alone with little experience in an extraordinary situation.

The Archbishop chose to deal with the Ustasha regime in a diplomatic way attempting to reason with Ante Pavelic and the Ustasha. Much of Stepinac's early diplomacy occurred through letters to the Poglavnik and other upper members of the Ustasha regime. Stepinac attempted to convince Ante Pavelic that what the regime was doing was un-Catholic and Pavelic could remedy the current situation by following the moral guidance of the Church.⁴⁰ The appeal to reason failed, but Stepinac continued to pressure the Poglavnik with little to no avail. Eventually in 1943, Stepinac had changed his strategy towards about the Ustasha and attempted to speak out against the regime, but his appeal was very limited due to the Ustasha's control of the media. Never-the-less, Peter Kent writes that Stepinac was one of the most outspoken members of the Croatian clergy.⁴¹ Yet, no matter how outspoken Stepinac was in the later years of the NDH, he could only be so influential from the pulpit.

³⁷ Goldstein Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, trans. Sonia Biancanic and Nikolina Jovanovic (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016). 485-488.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 493

³⁹ Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia Under Ante Pavelic*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), 81-82

⁴⁰ Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 103.

⁴¹ Peter C. Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of Pius XII the Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943-1950*. (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 48.

We must also remember that the Archbishop's responsibilities are to protect the Church and its flock. Gitman notes that Stepinac was very concerned with how the Ustasha and the Nazis treated his people (Catholics).⁴² Stepinac was always concerned with how his actions might affect the Church.⁴³ Perhaps Slavko Goldstein put this situation best when he said, "Alojzije Stepinac was a man who faced many dilemmas during a painful time, when it was not easy to find clear answers, and often he did not find them."⁴⁴

In addition to a shaky authority, the Church saw Croatia as a bulwark of Catholicism against Orthodoxy, Islam, and most importantly Communism. This view was long held by the Church going back to 1519 when Pope Julius II declared, "The Head of the Catholic Church will not allow Croatia to fall, for they are the *Antemurale Christianitatis* (shield and bulwark) of Christianity."⁴⁵ This view was held by Pius XII and Archbishop Stepinac but with the specter of Communism in mind.⁴⁶⁴⁷ Fascism was bad, but Communism was the greater evil. We can see this in how the Church interacted with both the NDH and communist Yugoslavia. Pius and Stepinac continuously sought to influence the NDH to live up to its title of "Catholic State", but they turned their backs to Yugoslavia. Both the NDH and Yugoslavia imprisoned and killed priests, yet only Tito's Yugoslavia faced a harsh denunciation from the Vatican and Archbishop of Zagreb. Excommunication was policy option for Yugoslavia, but in the NDH, the harshest policy Stepinac and the Church executed was stripping certain clergy of

⁴² Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 107.

⁴³ There is some evidence that paints Stepinac as a man who was not concerned with faiths outside of his own. Stella Alexander and Pedro Ramet remind us that Stepinac was a young Croatian nationalist at a time where nationalistic views were widespread. Slavko and Ivo Goldstein note that in letters, between 1941 and 1943, Stepinac refers to Jews as a lesser people and even uses the term Aryan when describing Croats. Vladimir Dedijer and Karlheinz Deschner produce pre-Ustasha letters that decry and Orthodoxy as the greatest evils to plague Europe followed closely by Protestantism. However we must remember Stepinac was acting in a pre-Vatican II time where the church was not particularly friendly towards Jews and Schismatics. However, church teachings respected the lives of Jews and schismatics. We see ample evidence of this side of Stepinac in Esther Gitman's *When Courage Prevailed*.

⁴⁴ Goldstein Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, trans. Sonia Biancanic and Nikolina Jovanovic (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016), 502.

⁴⁵ Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 125.

⁴⁶ Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 104.

⁴⁷ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 270.

their priesthood. As Stella Alexander put it, Stepinac and the Church chided the fascists but hated the communists.⁴⁸ One reason for this may have been that the NDH allowed the Catholic faith to continue existing and The Church's disbelief of what was occurring in extermination camps like Jasenovac. José M. Sanchez argues that the Pope, like many in Europe, could not fathom the idea of extermination camps in 1942 and believed that forced conversions as well as other horror stories were hyperbolic products of Yugoslav partisans.⁴⁹ Slavko and Ivo Goldstein posit that Stepinac was not cognizant of the death camps until winter 1942.⁵⁰ Even Jews in ghettos across Europe had trouble coming to terms with the death camps.⁵¹ While this certainly does not excuse their treatment of the NDH, it does reveal a motivating factor in how the Church could reconcile their attempts to transform a fascist regime into a tool of God. The Church already knew how their faith would fare under communist rule. They saw repression and killings of Catholic faithful and Clergy in the Soviet Union. Communism was a greater threat than racist laws in fascist governments. Croatia was still the bulwark of Catholicism.

Lastly, the Catholic Church may not have taken a strong ostentatious stand against Croatia because their subtle policies were saving lives without drawing attention to their acts. These actions included interceding on behalf of individuals and groups, denouncing racial laws, facilitating mixed marriages, preaching from the pulpit, urging priests in the Ustasha military to remember their duty to God, petitioning high members of the Ustasha regime,

⁴⁸ Stella Alexander. "Archbishop Stepinac Reconsidered." School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, February 1978.

⁴⁹ José M. Sanchez, *Pius XII and The Holocaust: Understanding The Controversy*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 44, 161.

⁵⁰ Goldstein, Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, Trans, Sonia Bicanic and Nikolina Jovanovic. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016), 495.

⁵¹ Gustavo Corni, *Hitler's Ghettos: Voices from a Beleaguered Society 1939-1944*, trans, Nicola R. Inneli, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 294-296.

providing sanctuary in Churches, as well as providing food, water, and medicine for displaced people.⁵²

Two of Stepinac's most well-known attempts to save the Jews and Serbs was his rescue of Jewish Children and his allowance of forced conversion. The Archbishop used his position to get many local Zagreb Jewish children to safety in Italy thanks to his connections in the Church. What is most striking about this initiative is that Stepinac arranged for the children to be placed in orphanages but not be converted to Catholicism (as was the fate of many Jewish children in similar circumstances).⁵³ The Church was concerned about the lives of the persecuted, and even though he was not always successful, Stepinac never turned away a request from the Zagreb Jewish community. This care for children also occurred with several thousand Serbian orphans who had lost their parents in the Bosnia cleansings.⁵⁴

Perhaps one of the Church's most controversial means of saving lives was the acceptance of relaxed conversion amongst the Serbs and Jews. Stepinac realized that conversion was a way to save the lives of those whom the Ustasha sought to destroy and so he ordered priests to accept any conversion saying it was the Church's duty first and foremost to save lives.⁵⁵ These methods may not have taken a loud and clear stance morally, but one cannot argue that they did show the value of human life to the Church. These methods were used in Croatia and across Europe because they worked and saved lives without drawing too much attention to the Church. If the Church attracted the hostility of the state, these methods may have become unfeasible, or as was the case in the Netherlands, the number of victims

⁵² Goldstein, Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, Trans, Sonia Bicanic and Nikolina Jovanovic. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016), 4493-502

⁵³ Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 113-118.

⁵⁴ Goldstein, Ivo and Slavko, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, Trans, Sonia Bicanic and Nikolina Jovanovic. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016), 501.

⁵⁵ Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 108-109.

capable of being saved would drastically decrease. Throughout the entire Holocaust, the Church was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The Catholic Church's response to the Holocaust was not perfect, but to claim that a strong stance against the NDH would have saved the lives of the victims of the Holocaust in Croatia ignores what we know about the fascist regimes involved. The church did what it thought was best for its faithful, morality, and the victims. Considering the amount of power that was amassed to eventually stop the Axis powers, it seems ridiculous for us to assume that the Church, an international institution whose political power had been declining for over a century, could have stopped the atrocities. Archbishop Stepinac, Pius XII, and the rest of the Church did what they reasonably had the power to do. The Church was and is made up of servants of God, mere men, yet historians now look back critiquing their inability to save, prevent, and end the Holocaust. The servants of God are being asked to perform a miracle. A miracle only God himself was capable of.

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