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A Beleaguered Church The Serbian Orthodox Church in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) 1941–1945

Abstract: In the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) from its establishment only days after the German attack on Yugoslavia in early April 1941 until its fall in May 1945 a genocide took place. The ultimate goal of the extreme ideology of the Ustasha regime was a new Croatian state cleansed of other ethnic groups, particularly the Serbs, Jews and Roma. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), historically a mainstay of Serbian national identity, culture and tradition, was among its first targets. Most Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries were demolished, heavily damaged or appropriated by the Roman Catholic Church or the state. More than 170 Serbian priests were killed and tortured by the Ustasha, and even more were exiled to occupied Serbia. The regime led by Ante Pavelić introduced numerous laws and regulations depriving the SPC of not only its property and spiritual jurisdiction but even of its right to existence. When mass killings stirred up a large-scale rebellion, a more political and seemingly non-violent approach was introduced: the Croatian regime unilaterally and non-canonically founded the so-called Croatian Orthodox Church in order to bring the forced assimilation of Serbs to completion. This paper provides an overview of the ordeal of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the NDH, based on the scholarly literature and documentary sources of Serbian, German and Croatian origin. It looks at legislation, propaganda, the killings and torture of Orthodox clergy and the destruction of church property, including medieval holy relics. The scale and viciousness of some atrocities will be looked at based on unused or less known sources, namely the statements of Serbian refugees recorded during the war by the SPC and the Commissariat for Refugees in Serbia, and documents from the Political Archive of the Third Reich Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Keywords: Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), Independent State of Croatia (NDH), Croatian Orthodox Church (HPC), Ustasha, Second World War, genocide, persecution, destruction

The Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH),¹ one of the most monstrous countries in the history of civilization, was es-

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¹ On the history of the Ustasha movement, the NDH and the genocide committed in it see Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska: 1941–1945* (Zagreb–Rijeka: Liber; Školska knjiga, 1977); Bogdan Krizman, *NDH između Hitlera i Musolinija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986); Bogdan Krizman, *Ustaše i Treći Reich*, 1–2 (Zagreb: Globus, 1986); Srdja Trifković, *Ustaša: Croatian separatism and European politics 1929–1945* (London: The Lord Byron Foundation for Balkan Studies, 1998); Nevenko Bartulin, "Ideologija nacije i rase: ustaški režim i politika prema Srbima u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj 1941–1945", *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povjest* 39 (2007), 209–235; Milan Koljanin, "Ideologija i politika uništenja Srba u NDH", *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 1 (2011), 66–91, and, by the same author: "The Role of Concentration

tablished in the early days of the German invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. On 10 April 1941, four days after the beginning of the invasion, Colonel Slavko Kvaternik, a former officer of the Austro-Hungarian army and one of the leaders of the Ustasha movement, proclaimed Croatian independence and the creation of a new state. The territory of the NDH considerably exceeded both historic and contemporary Croatia. Apart from most of present-day Croatia, it comprised the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Srem, and a tiny part of Slovenia.² According to German data, it had a population of about 6.25 million, of which 1.9 million were Serbs.³ The NDH was a one-party dictatorship ruled by the pre-war terrorist Ustasha organization whose leader, Dr. Ante Pavelić, took the title of *Poglavnik* and de facto was the country's supreme ruler. Although both German and Italian forces were present in the NDH and the state was undoubtedly a puppet-state of Nazi Germany, Pavelić and his associates had much freedom in internal policies, and the main one was the ethnic cleansing of its territory of the Serbs, Jews and Roma (Gypsies).

During the Second World War a large-scale genocide against the Serbian people and the Holocaust took place in the NDH. The exact number of victims has never been established, at first mostly because of political pressures on historiography after the communist takeover, and later on because of the rise of extreme nationalism in the 1990s. It is certain, however, that hundreds of thousands were killed, more than 200,000 Serbs were deported or fled to occupied Serbia,⁴ and thousands were forcefully converted to Roman Catholicism (and there are no reliable data on how many of them reverted to the faith of their ancestors after the war and the communist revolution). The Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, SPC), being a vital institution and symbol of the Serbian people, was one of the greatest victims of the tragic events in the NDH which have probably been best described by Dinko Davidov as "total genocide".⁵ Historically present for centuries in the territory that now became

Camps in the Policies of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in 1941", *Balcanica XLVI* (2015), 315–340; V. Dj. Krestić, *Dosije o genezi genocida nad Srbima u NDH* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 2009); Vasilije Dj. Krestić, *Genocidom do Velike Hrvatske* (Belgrade: Katena Mundi, 2015).

² Most of Dalmatia was under Italian control from May 1941 (Rome Agreements) until September 1943 (capitulation of Italy), when it was integrated into the NDH.

³ Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i NDH*, 106.

⁴ The Commissariat for Refugees in occupied Serbia officially registered 241,011 refugees. However, high-ranking German officials in Serbia Dr. Franz Heuhausen and General Heinrich Danckelmann had estimates of 300,000–400,000 refugees, most of them from NDH territory (Slobodan D. Milošević, *Izbeglice i preseljenici na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga; ISI, 1981), 278–280.

⁵ Dinko Davidov, *Totalni genocid: Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2013).

the NDH, the SPC faced one of the greatest challenges in its ever turbulent and difficult history and was brought to the brink of total destruction.

The sufferings of the SPC in the NDH have been the object of attention of many historians, popular history writers, SPC officials and other researchers. This wide and multifaceted topic has been addressed in a number of books.⁶ Although limited in size and scope, this paper still hopes to provide a useful contribution to the discussion on the genocide in the NDH and on the persecution of the SPC as one of its major components. It will offer an overview of the reliable and relevant literature and data, adding some new angles and contexts, mainly relying on almost unused historical sources: the statements of Serbian refugees given after their escape to occupied Serbia and documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Third Reich. These sources provide detailed information about the scale and brutality of the crimes committed by the Ustashes and the suffering of the SPC.

NDH legislation, the Serbs and the SPC

It was obvious from the very first day of the creation of the NDH that the stage was being set for large-scale ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Serbs, Jews and Roma. A large number of anti-Serb decrees were passed in the first weeks and months of the Pavelić regime. The Law Decree on the Defence of the State and the People published as early as 17 April 1941 legalized the destruction of everyone and everything that might stand in the way of “the vital interests of the Croatian people” or offend the “honour of the Croatian people”.⁷ The purpose of the decree prohibiting the use of the Cyrillic alphabet of 25 April was clearly the genocidal assimilation of the Serbs in the NDH. The Serbs were forbidden to use their alphabet in official and public communication, and high penalties and/or a month in prison were prescribed for those who did not comply.⁸ In June 1941 all Serbian confessional schools and kindergartens were closed and the Serbian Patriarchate was stripped of its right to collect the tithe

⁶ Among many books and papers see in particular Veljko Dj. Djurić, *Ustaše i pravoslavlje. Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva* (Belgrade: Kosmos, 1989); Radmila Radić, “Srpska pravoslavna crkva u Drugom svetskom ratu”, *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 1/1995, 203–218; Veljko Dj. Djurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Ami, 1997); Djoko Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, vol. II (Belgrade: JRJ, 2002); Dinko Davidov, *Totalni genocid*; Radmila Radić, *Život u vremenima: Gavrilo Dožić (1881–1950)* (Belgrade: INIS, 2006); Jovan Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj/Suffering of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Independent State of Croatia* (Belgrade: Svet knjige, 2016).

⁷ *Hrvatski narod*, 17 April 1941. These terms were purposely left undefined in order for the authorities and courts to be able to apply them to any part of the opposition or any person they wanted removed from Croatia.

⁸ *Narodne novine*, 25 April 1941.

(10% tax on the income of Orthodox citizens); moreover the SPC was forbidden to receive and register any kind of financial support from NDH citizens and entities. In the following months many place-names were stripped of their Serbian or geographical components and croatized: Sremska Mitrovica became Hrvatska Mitrovica, Sremski Karlovci – Hrvatski Karlovci, Srpske Moravice – Hrvatske Moravice, to mention but a few examples.⁹

The aim of a special set of laws was to assimilate the Serbs and turn them into Croats. As early as 3 May 1941 the Law Decree on Conversion from one Religion to Another laid down the rules for converting to Roman Catholicism, but the significance of this law became much more obvious in the following months.¹⁰ In July 1941 a decree was issued banning the use of the term “Serbian Orthodox faith”, and replacing it with “Greek-Eastern faith”.¹¹ Conversions of Serbs were spurred by local authorities and Roman Catholic clergy, and were usually approved by their superior bishops and archbishops. Some archbishops, such as Dr. Antun Akšamović, Archbishop of Djakovo, launched large-scale campaigns for conversion with the support and close collaboration of the Ustasha regime.¹² The Serbs were being assured that all human rights they had been deprived of by previous NDH legislation would be restored to them by the act of conversion. The Serbs complaining to local- or national-level authorities for whatever reason were first asked if they had filed a request for conversion to Roman Catholicism, and if the answer was negative their complaints and pleas were simply ignored.¹³ The massacres of Serb civilians in the Orthodox church

⁹ For more examples see Djurić, *Ustaše i pravoslavlje*, 54.

¹⁰ The question of “religious conversions” in the NDH and, especially, the role of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac in the process remains highly controversial in historiography. For more on the topic see Djurić, *Ustaše i pravoslavlje*, 65–80; Jure Krišto, “Crkva i država. Slučaj vjerskih prijelaza u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj”, *Dijalog povijesničara – istoričara*, 1 (Zagreb: Fridrich Naumann Stiftung, 2000), 189–205; Bartulin, “Ideologija nacije i rase”, 225–232.

¹¹ *Narodne novine*, 19 July 1941.

¹² Davidov, *Totalni genocid*, 45–62. The role of the Catholic clergy in the genocide against the Serbs in the NDH has already been the subject of many extensive scholarly studies, e.g. Viktor Novak, *Magnum Crimen: pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj* (Belgrade: Nova knjiga, 1986); Erve Lorijer, *Ubice u Božje ime* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 1987), first published as Hervé Laurier, *Assassins au nom de Dieu* (Paris: Éd. la Vigie, 1951); Krestić, *Dosije o genezi genocida*; Krestić, *Genocidom do Velike Hrvatske*. The role of the Roman Catholic Church in the preparation and execution of the genocide in the NDH was documented in detail in the report produced by the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes of the Occupiers and their Collaborators [hereafter: YSC], Arhiv Jugoslavije [Archives of Yugoslavia; hereafter: AJ], 110–611–321/363, “Političko-verska aktivnost Vatikana na Balkanu kroz vekove” [Political and religious activity of the Vatican in the Balkans over the centuries].

¹³ This is corroborated by the statements of many Serb refugees: Muzej Srpske pravoslavne crkve [The Serbian Orthodox Church Museum; hereafter: SPC Museum], *Ostavština*

in Glina and in the Vrginmost area showed that not even religious conversion was enough to save one's life.

Finally, a full-scale plunder of the SPC's property was legalized under laws introduced in September and October 1941. This type of legislation and administrative actions were amply backed by the propaganda activity of the Ustasha regime. In the summer of 1941 the only content of political rallies held throughout the NDH was anti-Serb speeches and calls for their destruction. The Croatian press was rife with anti-Serb discourse on a daily basis, selling malicious lies and misinterpretations of history, vilifying the Serbs as the arch-enemy of the Croatian people, a cancer eating away at Croatian statehood.¹⁴ The Serbian Orthodox Church, being a mainstay of the Serb community in Croatia and its identity, was under constant attacks. There were even pseudo-scholarly attempts to prove that historically there had never been any Serbs in Croatia or that they in fact were Orthodox Croats.¹⁵

Murders of the SPC's priests, monks and officials in the NDH

Torture and killing of SPC priests and monks began almost immediately after the creation of the NDH. The total number of deaths has never been established accurately. Official estimates – made by the SPC and the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes of Occupiers and Their Collaborators – and scholarly estimates vary from “more than 100” to “more than 500”, with the majority of the latter ranging between 120 and 300.¹⁶ One of the reasons for the discrepancy in the estimated figures is the fact that some scholars

Radoslava Grujića [Radoslav Grujić Papers; hereafter: ORG], ORG 1301/V – Hearings of Serb refugees – Actions of the Roman Catholic Church; ORG 1301/VI – Hearings of Serb refugees – Franciscan actions; ORG 1301-VII – Hearings of Serb refugees – Bosnia and Herzegovina.

¹⁴ Djurić, *Ustaše i pravoslavlje*, 56–57; Mario Jareb, *Mediji i promidžba u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2016), 806–809; 822–828.

¹⁵ Prof. Dr. Edo Lovrić, “O nazivu istočne crkve u području Kraljevine Hrvatske i Slavonije do konca Svjetskog rata”, *Alma mater Croatica. Glasnik Hrvatskog sveučilišnog društva V/1* (Zagreb, Sept. 1941); Mile Budak, Govor u Slavonskom Brodu [Speech in Slavonski Brod], *Hrvatski narod*, 16 June 1941.

¹⁶ The SPC Calendar for 1945 contains the list of 193 Serbian Orthodox priests murdered by the Ustasha and the foreign occupiers of Yugoslavia; an internal report by the Holy Synod entitled “The list of Orthodox priests killed in the Independent State of Croatia” contains 128 names, while the Report of the Holy Synod of the SPC to the Holy Assembly (March 1947) gives the figure of 171 (in tables 172) victims of the Ustasha. See Veljko Dj. Djurić, “Sudbine arhijereja i sveštenika Srpske pravoslavne crkve u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj – prema objavljenim dokumentima Srpske patrijaršije”, in *Zbornik o Srbima u Hrvatskoj*, vol. 4, ed. V. Dj. Krestić (Belgrade: SANU, 1999), 218–219.

and researchers counted in all priests, monks, theology students and administrative church staff, while others counted only the priests in active service on the eve of the Second World War.¹⁷

Among the murdered were also bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church:¹⁸ Metropolitan of Dabar-Bosnia Petar (Zimonjić), Bishop of Banja Luka Platon (Jovanović), Bishop of Gornji Karlovac Sava (Trlajić), while the Metropolitan of Zagreb Dositej (Vasić) was transported to occupied Serbia where he died in consequence of the brutal torture he had been subjected to by the Ustashas.¹⁹ The circumstances of Metropolitan Petar's death have not been fully established. It is known that he was arrested on 12 May 1941, taken to Zagreb and treated like a criminal, and then sent to prison in Samobor and from there to Gospić. His whereabouts after Gospić and the place of his death are still unknown: according to some sources, he was taken to Koprivnica, according to others he died in a concentration camp (either Jadovno or Jasenovac).²⁰ Bishop of Banja Luka Platon was required by the Ustashas to leave the NDH and move to Serbia, but he refused. As a result, he was arrested in the early days of May 1941 and taken in the direction of Kotor Varoš. On 23 May his body and the body of Dušan Subotić, Episcopal Dean of Gradiška, were found in the Vrbanja River. The bodies were savagely mutilated and the victims had obviously been tortured before they were finished off with a bullet in the head.²¹ Bishop Sava (Trlajić) was arrested in Plaško in June 1941, after he had refused to leave the

¹⁷ On the methodology of, different approaches to, and problems in the estimation of the number of killed SPC priests see Veljko Djurić Mišina, "Neki problemi istraživanja istorije Srpske pravoslavne Crkve", in *Genocid u XX veku na prostorima jugoslovenskih zemalja*, ed. J. Mirković (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida; INIS, 2005), 477–488.

¹⁸ For a detailed account of the deaths of SPC bishops in the NDH see Djurić, "Sudbine arhijereja i sveštenika", 211–281.

¹⁹ Metropolitan Dositej was arrested on 7 May in Zagreb; allegedly found in his apartment were passports, a ticket to Bombay and a "chetnik diploma" – probably some document supposedly proving that he had been a participant in the Chetnik movement in the early years of the twentieth century. Documents from German archives show that the metropolitan was subjected to brutal torture by the Ustashas and that his life was spared through German intervention, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts [PA AA], Geistliche Angelegenheiten (RZ 509), R 67687.

²⁰ Djurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 136–137.

²¹ Bishop Platon's eyes were scooped out, his beard ripped off and parts of his face cut off. The torture that preceded his death was brutal and sadistic and he must have died an agonizing death. The YSC accused Viktor Gutić, a high-ranking Ustasha official responsible for Bosanska Krajina, of having ordered Bishop Platon's arrest and murder, alongside numerous other atrocities against the Serbs in that area. Published Report No. 85 (*Saopštenje br. 85*) of the YSC contained a photograph of Bishop Platon's body, and despite its low resolution and poor quality, mutilations were obvious (Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, *Saopštenja br. 66–93*, Belgrade 1946, 771–772). Gutić's responsibility for

NDH. He was taken to Gospić with other imprisoned Serbs and killed in the area of Mount Velebit.

Some of more than 170 Serbian priests killed in the NDH were subjected to brutal torture and mutilation prior to their deaths. The deaths of Danilo Dane Babić, the village priest of Svinica, and Branko B. Dobrosavljević, the parish priest of Veljun, are paradigmatic of Ustasha savagery. Babić was captured by Ustashas, buried to his waist in the ground, and his flesh was cut off with knives bit by bit for several hours.²² Dobrosavljević was brutally murdered alongside other 525 Serbs, mostly his parishioners, victims of the infamous mass war crime known as the Veljun Massacre. The priest was first forced to watch his own son, who was a local teacher, being tortured and murdered, and to say a prayer over his dead son's body. Then he was blinded, his beard and hair were ripped off, his ears cut off, and then he was finished off by Ustashas.²³ Georgije Bogić, a young parish priest from Našice, also died after long and painful torture and mutilation. His murder was instigated by Fra Sidonije Šolc, and committed by the Ustashas led by Feliks Lehner, a local milkman.²⁴ Jovan Andrić, the parish priest of Tepljuh (Dalmatia), was arrested and tortured in Drniš prison. The Ustasha slashed his ribs and cut off all his fingers before throwing him, already half-dead, in a disused pit of the mine in Kljaci/Kljake.²⁵

Desecration, plunder and destruction of the SPC's buildings and property in the NDH

The area which came under Ustasha control in the spring of 1941 abounded in Serbian Orthodox monasteries and churches. In keeping with the ideology and

Bishop Platon's death was confirmed by statements of several Serbian refugees from the Banja Luka area (SPC Museum, ORG 1301/VI, Bajić Djordje's statement taken on 25 April 1942).

²² This callous torture and murder took place in the night between 14 and 15 June 1941 in Svinica (Banija). The priest's mutilated body was taken to the village of Graboštani, Majur municipality, where a "commission" made up of several Ustashas pronounced that Babić had been murdered by unknown perpetrators (Lorijer, *Ubice u Božje ime*, 85–86; Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 43).

²³ Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 68. In 2000 Dobrosavljević was officially included among the saints venerated by the SPC. The feast day of St Branko of Veljun the Hieromartyr is 7 May, the date of his murder.

²⁴ Vojni arhiv, Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije [Military Archives, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia; hereafter VA], Funds NDH, 233–15/2-15; *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske 1941–1945*, vol. 1 of *Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u Prvom i Drugom svetskom ratu – zbornik dokumenata* (Belgrade 1993), doc. no. 76, German Legation in Zagreb to the Administration of the Military Commander in Serbia on the crimes of the Croatian Ustashas against the Serbs and measures for their destruction.

²⁵ Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 308.

nature of the Ustasha regime, they were destined to be plundered, desecrated and destroyed. The exact number of the churches of the SPC which were burnt down, demolished, devastated or taken over by the Roman Catholic Church has never been established, partly because many sustained damage or destruction during the fighting and bombing in a later stage of the war. The Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes of Occupiers and Their Collaborators made several estimates, most of them being around 450 destroyed and 800 damaged Orthodox churches.²⁶ Official publications of the SPC offered estimates ranging between 399 and 450 destroyed churches.²⁷ The most recent estimate, made by Jovan Mirković who has been researching this topic for decades, offers the following figures (destroyed churches by region): Banija – 70; Kordun – 44; Lika – 56 (with Gorski Kotar and Ogulinsko-Plašćanska Valley included – 94); Slavonia – 54; Dalmatia – 19 (17 churches and two monasteries; plus 18 destroyed parish houses and 23 damaged churches); Srem – 28 (many of which were monastery churches; plus 62 damaged churches); Bosanska Krajina – 64; Central Bosnia – 29; Eastern Bosnia – 46; Herzegovina – 1 (18 damaged churches).²⁸ The SPC suffered the greatest damage and loss of life in the Eparchy of Gornji Karlovac: 188 out of 220 churches were destroyed, and 65 out of 157 priests, including Bishop Sava Trlajić, were killed by the Ustasas.²⁹

The scale and dynamic of destruction varied from one part of the NDH to another but it has been established that plundering and destruction as a rule took place in several phases, beginning in the very first days of the NDH and (in some cases) lasting until the last weeks of the war. The first phase was the Ustasha revolutionary terror in the summer of 1941: Orthodox churches were desecrated, plundered, damaged, and then closed. Contemporary sources record numerous atrocities taking place in churches and monasteries, from rapes and beatings³⁰ to murders, setting on fire and mass killings such as the slaughter in

²⁶ AJ, Funds 110 Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, f. 675, doc. 466.

²⁷ Cf. Risto Grdjić, *Srpska crkva na istorijskoj prekretnici* (Belgrade: Pravoslavlje, 1969), *Srpska pravoslavna crkva: njena prošlost i sadašnjost / The Serbian Orthodox Church: Its Past and Present* (Belgrade: Pravoslavlje, 1989) and Djurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 181.

²⁸ Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 22, 60, 99–100, 169, 291–292, 316, 373, 446, 472, 530.

²⁹ Arhiv Srpske pravoslavne crkve [Archives of the SPC], Holy Synod, Report to the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the SPC no. 1060/1947, session of 27/14 March 1947, document made available to me by Dr. Radmila Radić.

³⁰ Among the most hideous Ustasha atrocities were brutal rapes committed in churches, usually on the altar. Historical sources contain detailed descriptions of the mass rape of Serbian women that took place in the Orthodox church in Topusko on 2 August 1942 (SPC Museum, ORG 1301/V, Stanko Šapić's testimony of 4 October 1941), which was followed by the massacre of Serbs (*ibid.* Julka Škaro's testimony taken on 5 January 1942).

the Orthodox church in Glina.³¹ Such atrocities were so numerous that they cannot be discussed in any significant detail in an article of limited size. Among the better documented war crimes are those committed in Kusunje, Kolarić, Zborište (near Bosanska Krupa), Sadilovac/Slunj and Dobro Selo, where the churches full of Serb civilians were set on fire and burned to the ground, resulting in hundreds of deaths and complete destruction.³²

A second phase in the plunder and destruction of the SPC's property was much more systematic. Numerous decrees and orders issued by both state and local authorities required the confiscation of all objects found in churches. Most of these decrees were issued in the summer of 1941, but some issued at a later date have also been preserved. As evidenced by documentary sources, church bells seem to have been of special interest for the Croatian authorities: many were taken from Serbian Orthodox churches and melted down for re-use in the war industry or some other purpose; some were used to replace or enhance the bells in Roman Catholic churches and monasteries.³³ The total number of looted church bells has never been established either, but the State Commission's findings offer an estimate of more than 700. In most cases, the SPC's possessions were confiscated and stockpiled by local authorities, and an official receipt for confiscated property was produced on the spot.³⁴ However, the most valuable objects ended up in the Croatian state Museum of Arts and

³¹ In his extensive study on the ordeal of the SPC in the NDH, Jovan Mirković states that, according to the "War Victims 1941–1945" database, as many as 48 different churches are listed as murder sites. The most horrifying war crime took place in Glina, in the church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, where Ustasha-led Croatian regular troops (*domobrani*/Home Guard) organized a wholesale slaughter of civilians between 29 July and 5 August. Serb civilians from the Vrginmost area who came voluntarily to convert to Catholicism were massacred together with Serbs from Topusko and Glina. Djuro Aralica identified 1,241 victims by name, while the plaques for the memorial which has never been set up contained names of 1,564 victims. In order to cover up this crime Croatian authorities hired two private building contractors to raze the church to the ground. The slaughter was confirmed and described in much detail by refugees whose testimonies are now kept in the SPC Museum. Some Croatian historians seek to minimize this war crime and some even deny that it ever happened. For more information on the crime see Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 9, 30; Djuro Aralica, *Ustaški pokolj Srba u glinskoj crkvi* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida; Udruženje Srba iz Hrvatske, 2010); Davidov, *Totalni genocid*, 63–76.

³² Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 9–10; 77, 87.

³³ Several urgent orders for the bells of Orthodox churches to be dismantled issued by local authorities and the NDH Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs have survived and are now kept in the Military Archives in Belgrade (VA, NDH, 203–2/2).

³⁴ See e.g. AJ, 110–679–14, "Zapisnik od 30. kolovoza 1941. Spisan kod gradskog poglavarstva u predmetu preseljenja pokretnih stvari iz grčko-istočne crkve".

Crafts in Zagreb.³⁵ Monasteries in remote places sometimes had more luck: because of their location they were not in the direct path of the Ustasas, and later on commissaries were assigned to them to be in charge of the property, and so their libraries, furniture and artworks partially survived the war. Many buildings of the SPC in the NDH were appropriated by the Roman Catholic Church (mostly for religious services for converted Serbs), or by Croatian civil authorities and the military, in which case they were put to profane use (stables, warehouses, barracks, granaries).

The demolition of Serbian Orthodox churches in the NDH occurred on a massive scale during the autumn and winter of 1941. The Regional Vojvodina Commission for the Investigation of Crimes of Occupiers and their Collaborators established beyond doubt that there had even been an institution specifically charged with the demolition of Serbian Orthodox churches in the NDH. The Commission's investigation revealed the existence of the Office for the Demolition of Orthodox Churches (*Ured za rušenje pravoslavnih crkava*) which operated during 1941 and was shut down in April 1942.³⁶ Its premises were in Praška Street in Zagreb, and it was headed by one Dr. Dujmović, a physician from Zagreb and Ustasha officer with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. According to Dinko Davidov's research, there was no similar institution anywhere in Europe during the Second World War. The Office was responsible for arranging demolitions of Orthodox churches in Ilok, Osijek, Tenja and many other places, and left behind the correspondence with private contractors and local administration which conducted and assisted in the process.³⁷ However, the destruction of Orthodox churches cannot be linked only to this Office; such destructive acts were frequently instigated by local Roman Catholic clergy and

³⁵ A huge number of valuable religious art works and objects and objects of other types of Serbian cultural heritage were taken to the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb. The director of the Museum, Vladimir Tkalčić, played a controversial role in this enterprise. Some important and reliable sources (e.g. the statements of Prof. Radoslav Grujić and Prof. Viktor Novak given in the course of post-war investigations) described his conduct as one of honour and professional dignity, but we still do not have a full picture of his activity throughout the war years or whether he had some part of responsibility for the loss or destruction of many valuable pieces of Serbian cultural heritage which simply "went missing" never to be restored to their rightful owners or locations. Some authors blame Stjepan Gotvald, a Croatian right-wing intellectual, for plundering the SPC's possessions at the time they were in the custody of local authorities and the museum in Zagreb. For more on this see Davidov, *Totalni genocid*, 87–89; Djurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 187–190.

³⁶ The Commission's report has been discovered and partially published by Dinko Davidov, *Zlodela i gresi*, (Sremski Karlovci; Belgrade: Sremska eparhija, 1990), 77–259.

³⁷ The mentioned cases were analyzed in Dinko Davidov's studies, with several original documents published as an additional proof and illustration of the existence and operation of this Office.

Ustasha commanders. In many cases, complete destruction of churches and parish buildings coincided with campaigns for conversion to Roman Catholicism forced on the local Serb population.³⁸ Numerous records and statements of Serb refugees confirm this practice across the NDH (e.g. in Vojnić County,³⁹ Vrginmost, Novska⁴⁰ etc.).

Many orders issued by Ustasha and Croatian authorities (both state and local) concerning the demolition of buildings of the SPC contained instructions as to who should do the demolition job and what should be done with the demolition material. In many cases, churches and parish houses had to be torn down or dismantled by local Serbs or Jews, by order and under supervision of Ustasha officials.⁴¹ There are recorded cases of professionals being hired to demolish a church⁴² and of the demolition material being immediately reused elsewhere, following the order of the Ministry for Renewal or other Croatian state authorities. For instance, the material from the demolished Orthodox church in Kotor Varoš was reused for the construction of a Croatian Home (*Hrvatski dom*), while the wooden church in Timarci near Sisak (built in 1742) was dismantled and the material was reused on unknown location(s).⁴³ The Orthodox church in Osijek was demolished in stages by professional contractors and the material (mostly brick) was sold on the spot to whoever was interested in buying it.

³⁸ One of the better documented cases is that of Okučani, where Croatian authorities organized destruction of the local Orthodox church in December of 1941, followed in the first months of 1942 by a vigorous Catholic propaganda campaign for conversion to Catholicism. A missionary sent from Zagreb held numerous lectures and sermons which local Serbs were forced to attend. The purpose of his “missionary work” was to persuade the Serbs that Orthodox Christianity was sinful and that Roman Catholicism was much older and, therefore, the only true Christian faith (SPC Museum, ORG 1301/VI, Mileva Vukašinić’s statement, taken on 14 February 1942).

³⁹ SPC Museum, ORG 1301/V, Petar Zatezalo’s statement, taken on 16 May 1942. The statement mentions the demolition of the churches in Vojnić, Poloj, Primišlje, Tržić, Stobolić, Krnjak and Krstina. Actions for the forced conversion of local Serbs were described in much more detail than the actual demolition of churches.

⁴⁰ SPC Museum, ORG 1301/V, Božo Čokrić’s statement, taken on 18 May 1942.

⁴¹ Jews were used as labour force in the demolition of the Orthodox church in Okučani in December of 1941. They were forced to pull it down, and while doing it, to sing songs ridiculing the Serbs and their tradition: “Kako je čorbi bez mrkve, tako je Srbinu bez crkve [A Serb without a church is like a soup without a carrot] and “Srbin slavi svoju slavu da proširi hrvatsku državu [The Serb honours his patron saint to enlarge the Croatian state], see SPC Museum, ORG 1301/V, Milan Stanić’s statement, taken on 21 January 1942. The demolished church served as the source of building material for several different locations.

⁴² SPC Museum, ORG 1301/V, Julka Škaro’s statement, taken on 5 January 1942.

⁴³ Djurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 44–45.

Plunder and desecration of Serbian holy relics in the NDH

The various crimes committed against the Serbian people and its Church, culture and tradition in the territory of the NDH included even the plunder, desecration and destruction of holy relics. Some relics of Serbian and other Christian saints perished together with the demolished or burned down churches of the SPC in which they were enshrined. Particularly well-documented is the plunder and desecration of the holy relics which were kept in some of more than a dozen Serbian Orthodox monasteries on Mt Fruška Gora in Srem, a cluster of monastic communities which has a prominent place in Serbian culture and tradition. They had played an important role in the preservation of the culture, religion and national identity of the Serbs at the time when they had been subjects of two empires, the Ottoman and the Habsburg. The monasteries, mostly built or rebuilt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were active on the eve of the Second World War. Kept in them were numerous holy relics, old and rare books, manuscripts and charters from the medieval and early modern period. Between the spring of 1941 and 1942 a vast majority of the Orthodox monasteries on Fruška Gora were plundered and some of them were heavily damaged or destroyed either then or in a later stage of the war.

Having learnt about some of the most important medieval Serbian holy relics in the Fruška Gora monasteries being plundered or otherwise endangered, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of the Milan Nedić government, a collaborationist regime in German-occupied Serbia, set up a special commission chaired by Radoslav Grujić, a prominent church historian and professor at the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade. It was charged with the task of going to Fruška Gora, retrieving the holy relics and bringing them to Serbia. A high-ranking official of the German occupying authority, Dr. Johann Albrecht von Reiszwitz, played an important role in the entire enterprise, providing protection and assistance to Grujić and his team. Grujić's report from the site has survived.⁴⁴ The team first went to the Šišatovac monastery, where they found the relics of St Stevan Štiljanović (sixteenth century) robbed of all precious and artistically valuable objects (including Štiljanović's silver crown and jewellery) and left exposed. The valuables had been taken to Zagreb by special order of Croatian authorities. The German commissioner in charge of the monastery informed Grujić that all objects had been taken to Zagreb by a special commission led by Vladimir Tkalčić, director of the Museum of Arts and Crafts. Grujić's team recorded damage to the skin of Štiljanović's hand, inflicted probably while taking a ring off his finger.⁴⁵ Their next stop was the Jazak monastery, where the

⁴⁴ VA, Srpska vlada Milana Nedića [Milan Nedić Government] Fonds, 35-53-2.

⁴⁵ The monastery's treasury was found completely empty but the library was luckily left almost intact, including very valuable manuscripts dating from the 14th–17th century (ibid).

relics of the sainted last Serbian emperor, Uroš V (fourteenth century), were kept. The commission recorded that the precious cover had been stolen and the relics moved around but without any major damage. Jazak would sustain further and more considerable damage later in the war. By the time of liberation it had been robbed of more than one thousand rare and valuable books, all religious objects made of precious metals and most valuable icons and paintings, which had been taken to Zagreb.⁴⁶ The last stop of Grujić's commission was the Bešenevo monastery, where the relics of the Serbian saint and martyr Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (fourteenth century) had been brought shortly before the German attack on Yugoslavia. The relics were preserved but robbed of all valuables. Moreover, all valuable movable property of the monastery had been taken by the Ustashas.

Robbed of all its movable property by Croatian authorities, the Krušedol monastery, one of the most important Serbian monasteries on Fruška Gora, was used for housing Ustasha, German SS and the former Soviet General Vlasov's collaborationist troops. In the night between 24 and 25 May 1942 the monastery treasury was plundered by the Ustashas. After the war it was established that the sarcophagus of the Serbian Patriarch Arsenije IV Jovanović Šakabenta (eighteenth century) had been forcefully opened, the patriarch's remains thrown out and replaced with the heads of the Ustashas' local victims; that part of the relics of Venerable Mother Angelina (fifteenth century) had been stolen; and that one of the sarcophaguses contained bones of unknown origin.⁴⁷

A different kind of ordeal: the SPC, the Serbs and the so-called "Croatian Orthodox Church"

The focus of this paper has so far been mostly on the physical destruction of the clergy and property of the SPC. However, the picture of its ordeal would not be complete without touching upon the question of an uncanonical attack on the SPC and attempts to foment dissension among its clergy and adherents. Namely, among the numerous blows struck to the Serbian people and Church in the NDH the significance and implications should not be underestimated of the establishment of the Croatian Orthodox Church (*Hrvatska Pravoslavna Crkva*, HPC) in April 1942. For this uncanonical action, orchestrated from the very top of the Ustasha regime and with the support of the German intelligence and

⁴⁶ Archives of the SPC, Holy Synod, Records of the Holy Assembly of Bishops held in 1947, annex no. 9, p. 8, document made available to me by Dr. Radmila Radić.

⁴⁷ Mirković, *Stradanje Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 338. For official documents showing that the immovable property of the Krušedol monastery was re-registered as property of the NDH see *ibid.* 339.

diplomatic services, was supposed to be the final stage in the genocide against the Serbian people in the NDH, from assimilation to physical destruction.⁴⁸

An introductory step towards the establishing of the HPC was made by Ante Pavelić himself in a speech he gave in the Croatian Diet (*Sabor*) in February 1942. Having stated that he had “nothing against Orthodoxy”, he added, however, that the new Croatian state could not allow the existence of another nation’s national church on its soil and accused the SPC of acting against the interests and very existence of the Croatian people and state.⁴⁹ Preparations, including coordination with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a media campaign, took some time but the “Church” was established in early April 1942.⁵⁰

By April 1942 the SPC had already been in an extremely difficult situation: Patriarch Gavriilo was imprisoned by the Germans, the Holy Synod and the Metropolitan of Skoplje Josif, exiled from his diocese by Bulgarian occupation authorities, were under surveillance by the Gestapo and pressurized to support occupied Serbia’s collaborationist government. The nature of the German occupation of Serbia was such that the SPC was deprived of the right to voice its protest publicly: even though the Holy Synod made the official decision condemning the establishment of the HPC, German censorship prevented it from being published anywhere in Serbia.⁵¹ There are some indications that the Serbian collaborationist government tried to push the SPC leadership into cooperation with the HPC and that it was rejected with indignation.⁵²

⁴⁸ Viktor Novak wrote that the establishment of the Croatian Orthodox Church had in fact been the “denationalization of the Serbian people” (*Magnum crimen*, 599–604). Besides the obvious intention to turn Serbs into Croats, rewrite history and lay the foundations for an ethnically cleansed Croatian state, the HPC was created with one pragmatic goal – it was seen as an instrument of pacifying resistance movements in the NDH.

⁴⁹ *Hrvatski narod*, 26 February 1941. Pavelić’s views were shared by Ustasha officials, but also by some parts of the Catholic clergy and non-Ustasha Croat intellectuals. For more detail see Petar Požar, *Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva u prošlosti i budućnosti* (Zagreb: Naklada Pavičić, 1996), 113–127.

⁵⁰ The decree was signed by Pavelić on 3 April and published four days later; see Nikica Barić, “O osnutku i djelovanju Hrvatske pravoslavne crkve tijekom 1942. i 1943. godine: primjer Velike župe Posavje”, *Croatica Christiana Periodica* 74 (2014), 137.

⁵¹ The Holy Synod’s official stance on the establishment of the HPC was formulated at its meeting of 17/30 April 1942. It was published, with a short historical introduction and comments, only after the liberation of Yugoslavia: “Odluka o t. zv. Avtokefalnoj Hrvatskoj Pravoslavnoj Crkvi”, *Glasnik SPC* 4 (1946), 52–56.

⁵² According to Metropolitan Josif’s memoirs, Velibor Jonić, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs in the Nedić government, visited him and insisted that some Serbian bishops should accept Croat nationality and go to Zagreb and take leadership of the HPC (Josif, mitropolit skopski, *Memoari*, ed. Velibor Džomić (Cetinje: Svetigora, 2006, 227). Jonić’s wartime role is quite controversial, but no other sources that could confirm these claims have so far been found.

The man who was installed as head of the HPC, Russian Metropolitan Germogen Maksimov, had spent some time in Serbian monasteries and his actions were a betrayal of good relations between the Serbian and Russian Churches. Some Serbian and Russian priests, former members of the SPC, became involved in recruiting clergy and adherents for the new Church. Two controversial persons known for their problematic behaviour even before the war, Miloš Oberknežević (or Oberknezović) and Vasilije Vaso Šurlan, spared no effort to promote the HPC.⁵³ Oberknežević drew up its Constitution (in fact made minor modifications to the SPC's Constitution) and sought to recruit refugee priests from Serbia, while Šurlan published many articles in the Croatian press glorifying the Ustasha regime and promoting the ideological construct of "Orthodox Croats".

Croatian authorities intended to transfer some of the already confiscated property of the SPC to the newly-established HPC and, what was even more harmful, started vigorous diplomatic activity for the international canonical recognition of the HPC, using political pressures, German support and the fact that some of the most important Orthodox Churches – the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) – were under the control of German allies or collaborated, at least to some extent, with the Nazis. Surviving diplomatic documents show that this political action was orchestrated from the very top of the Croatian state – from the Poglavnik himself, and the ministries of Justice and Religious Affairs, and of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁴ Despite intense pressure, the Orthodox Churches refused to recognize the HPC canonically, but there was some unofficial collaboration between them and the new Church.⁵⁵ The Bulgarian Church assisted with the education and ordination of the HPC's clergy, while a Romanian bishop attended the ordination of bishops of the HPC. Yet, neither of the two Synods recognized the HPC, although they were under pressure to do so both by the NDH and the Germans. The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad played a different and more complex role. Although Germogen and some priests of the

⁵³ Mara Šovljakov, "Galerija likova Hrvatske pravoslavne crkve", *Spomenica istorijskog arhiva "Srem"* 9 (2010), 66–84; Radovan Pilipović, "Momčilo Djurić i Vasilije Šurlan – dva antipoda u sveštiničkim mantijama", *Glasnik Udruženja arhivskih radnika Republike Srpske* 3/2011, 339–355. Oberknežević, born in Belgrade and educated at the Faculty of Law, was convicted for fraud and false representation of identity in Hungary, while Šurlan was an admirer of Adolf Hitler and his ideas and had received disciplinary punishment several times before the war.

⁵⁴ Hrvatski državni arhiv (Croatian State Archives; hereafter: HDA), MUP Fonds, 002/5, box 9, "Posveta novog pravoslavnog episkopa u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj"; "Priznanje Hrvatske pravoslavne crkve od drugih pravoslavnih crkava".

⁵⁵ For a detailed description of actions for the formal recognition of the HPC, diplomatic interventions and forms of collaboration see Djurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, 331–345.

HPC were actually members of the Russian Church they were condemned and excommunicated by the ROCA's Synod.⁵⁶ Moreover, the Synod of the ROCA stood for the interests of the SPC in communication with other Orthodox Churches, pointing to the non-canonical and political nature of the HPC and informing them about the sufferings of SPC in the NDH.⁵⁷

It is difficult to measure the magnitude of damage that the establishing of the HPC inflicted on the SPC and its interests. Most Serbs in the NDH refused to cooperate and become adherents of the new Church, but Dinko Davidov's field research conducted in the 1980s has shown that the founding of the HPC did cause some confusion in the troubled hearts and minds of local Serbs.⁵⁸ Moreover, the idea of "Croatian Orthodoxy", the perception that an Orthodox Church in Croatia must be a Croatian one (and much more importantly – must not be Serbian), has outlived the Second World War,⁵⁹ being especially manifest during the 1991–1995 war in Croatia. The HPC established by Pavelić's decree fell apart by the end of the war and was condemned immediately after the liberation.

Conclusion

During the Second World War the Serbian people and its institutions were victims of a genocide devised and conducted by the Ustasha regime and supported by a faction of the Roman Catholic clergy in the NDH. The fate intended for the Serbian Orthodox Church was annihilation: falsely accused by propaganda of historically acting against the Croatian people and state, it was robbed of its property and jurisdiction, forbidden to exist by numerous decrees issued by Pavelić and his ministers. Apart from the arrest and deportation of hundreds of its priests ordered by Croatian military and local authorities, its

⁵⁶ PA AA, RAV Belgrad 62/7.

⁵⁷ Aleksej J. Timofejev, *Rusi i Drugi svetski rat u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: INIS, 2010), 100; Mikhail Vital'evich Shkarovskii, "Sozdanie i deiatel'nost' Horvatskoj Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny", *Vestnik tserkovnoi istorii* 3/7 (2007), 221–262.

⁵⁸ Davidov, *Totalni genocid*, 39–42. Having witnessed a mass genocide and atrocities against their neighbours and relatives, some Serbs were prepared to accept even such an artificial creation as the HPC, just to be left in peace to pray in the same churches in which they had been baptized, married, in which they have mourned and buried their relatives – even if they were not SPC churches anymore.

⁵⁹ Savić Marković Štedimlja, "Pravoslavlje u Hrvatskoj", in Požar, *Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva*, 72–73; Miloš Oberknežević, "Razvoj pravoslavlja u Hrvatskoj i Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva", reprint from *Hrvatska revija*, (Barcelona-Munich 1979); Ante Pavelić, *Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva* (Madrid: Domovina, 1984); Tomislav Vuković, "Kako su Hrvati i Slovenci postali pravoslavni Srbi", *Glas koncila – katolički tjednik* no. 10, 10 March 1991, 13; Požar, *Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva*, passim.

priests, monks and officials were being murdered in both the revolutionary terror of the Ustasas and in organized war crimes. More than 170 of them perished, many after being subjected to brutal torture and mutilation. Many churches and monasteries were burned down or razed to the ground, and almost all the rest were damaged or were confiscated and used by local authorities or the Roman Catholic Church. The annihilation of the SPC was supposed to be wrapped up with mass conversion of its adherents to Roman Catholicism and the establishment of the HPC.

The main among several conclusions that may be drawn based on the historical sources – original first-hand testimonies, photographs, diplomatic correspondence, decrees and orders of Croatian authorities – concerns the scale and intensity of a total genocide against the Serbian people in the NDH, a crime against one nation and its institutions rarely seen in the history of civilization. The SPC and its clergy was among those that suffered the most. The vicious nature of some murders, such as those of Bishop Platon, the Svinica priest Danilo Babić, and the Veljun priest Branko B. Dobrosavljević, suggests that hatred towards the Serbian Church and people must have been nurtured in several generations of Croats. The torture, rape and body mutilations provide clear evidence of the pathological aspect of the Ustasha ideology and practices. But it would be wrong and unjust to the victims to explain away the crimes against the Serbs and the SPC by attributing them to the pathology of a few individuals, for it essentially was an institutionally organized destruction which involved many perpetrators, collaborators and even more passive onlookers. An extensive logistics apparatus and many institutions were involved in the demolition of Serbian churches, the sale and reuse of the demolition material, the plunder of valuable objects and works of religious art. The fact that similar crimes, sometimes even in the same areas, took place again in the 1991–1995 war suggests a deep irrational hatred towards the Serbs and their Church.

In the eyes of the Ustasha regime the SPC was a cornerstone of Serbian national identity and strength; hence so many crimes against it. Pavelić and his associates believed that there would be no Serbs in Croatia once their Church was destroyed. His regime spared no effort to carry out the project of its destruction, with the assistance and inspiration of many members of the Roman Catholic clergy. The Second World War events in the NDH were just an episode in a much wider and long-standing effort to convert Serbs to Roman Catholicism and assimilate them into the Croat nation.

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