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The controversy over the canonization of Pope Pius XII concerns whether he spoke out enough against the slaughter of Jews during World War II. But that question is a red herring when trying to grasp the big picture of the Vatican's role during the war.

The real question is whether the Vatican supported the world order, or at least aspects of it, that the Third Reich promised to bring, a world order in which dead Jews were collateral damage - which Pius indeed regretted. The answer can be found in a region of Europe that is generally ignored despite being the nexus of world wars: the Balkans.

The Catholic Church was looking for a bulwark against expanding, ruthless, church-destroying communism, but in doing so it supported a Croatian movement called Ustasha, which rose to become the genocidal regime of Nazi satellite Croatia.

American historian Jared Israel points to a February 17, 1941 New York Times article which reported that the archbishop of Zagreb (Croatia's capital), Alojzije (Aloysius) Stepinac, was holding conferences in Vatican City "seeking the freedom of Catholic priests detained in [pre-Nazi] Croatia in connection with the circulation of... 'Free Croatia!' pamphlets, attributed to Ante Pavelic." Pavelic, who once criticized Hitler for originally being too soft on the Jews, was the founder of the fascist Ustashes, who were engaging in terrorism all over Europe to "liberate" Croatia from Yugoslavia. He famously said, "A good Ustasha is one who can use a knife to cut a child from the womb of its mother."

Israel explains the significance of the understated Times article: "The arrested priests were agitating for a fascist coup d'etat," and if these had been rogue priests, "the Vatican would have disciplined them and perhaps issued a statement condemning them; it certainly would not have [held] top-level conferences to manage their defense."

At the time, Pavelic was being harbored in Mussolini's Italy - where his Ustasha soldiers were

being trained - after France sentenced him to death for masterminding the 1934 double assassination of Yugoslavian King Alexander I and French foreign minister Louis Barthou. When Hitler invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, Pavelic was activated and became fuehrer, or "Poglavnik," of the new, clerical-fascist Croatia.

Archbishop Stepinac held a banquet for Pavelic, blessed the Ustasha leader and regime, calling them "God's hand at work," and the following month had Pavelic received by Pius XII. This was four days after the massacre in the town of Glina, where the Ustashes locked hundreds of Serbian Orthodox inside their church and burned it down, as became standard practice in Pavelic's Independent State of Croatia (known by its Croatian acronym NDH). Pius XII received Pavelic despite a Yugoslav envoy's request that he not do so, given the atrocities taking place.

In July of that year, Pavelic's minister of education, Mile Budak, publicly outlined the purification process, already being implemented against Serbs: Kill a third, expel a third, convert a third.

That August, more than a thousand Serbs had gathered inside another Glina church for conversion, after which Zagreb police chief Bozidar Corouski announced, "Now that you are all Roman Catholics, I guarantee you that I can save your souls, but I cannot save your bodies." In came Ustasha henchmen with bludgeons, knives and axes, killing all but one man - Ljuban Jednak - who played dead, then stole away from the mass grave he was dumped into.

Pius and Pavelic continued exchanging "cordial telegrams," as author Vladimir Dedijer - former cochairman of Bertrand Russell's International War Crimes Tribunal - wrote in his 1992 book *The Yugoslav Auschwitz and the Vatican*. The Croatian Catholic press consistently published approving articles about the regime.

In his forthcoming book *The Krajina Chronicles: A Short History of Serbs in Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia*, Dr. Srdja Trifkovic writes, "A part of the Roman Catholic hierarchy became de facto accomplices, as did a majority of the clergy. The leading NDH racial 'theorist' was a clergyman, Dr. Ivo Guberina... He urged Croatia's 'cleansing of foreign elements' by any means. His views were echoed by the influential head of the Ustasha Central Propaganda Office, Fr. Grga Peinovic.

"When the anti-Serb and anti-Jewish racial laws of April and May 1941 were enacted, the

Catholic press welcomed them as vital for 'the survival and development of the Croatian nation'... Archbishop of Sarajevo [then part of Croatia] Ivan Saric declared... 'It is stupid and unworthy of Christ's disciples to think that the struggle against evil could be waged... with gloves on.'"

IN AN unusual move, Germany entrusted Croatia with running its own concentration camps, without oversight. Shamefully, clergy members took a voracious dive into the bloodbath, serving as guards, commanders and executioners at the 40 camps, most famously Jasenovac, the Holocaust's third-largest yet least spoken-of camp. There, they killed Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and anti-fascist Croats. On August 29, 1942, a friar from the monastery of Siroki Brijeg, named Petar Brzica, won first place for killing the most Serbs in the shortest time, boasting 1,350 throats slit in one night.

Historian Carl Savich quotes an AP report stating that "a priest from Petricevac led Croat fascists, armed with hatchets and knives, to a nearby village. In the 1942 attack, they butchered 2,300 Serbs." Testimony from a survivor of that February 7 massacre, Selo Drakulic, reads: "Prior to killing the adults, unborn children were violently cut from their mothers' womb and slaughtered. Of the remaining children in the village, all under the age of 12, the Ustashas brutally removed arms, legs, noses, ears and genitals. Young girls were raped and killed, while their families were forced to witness the violation and carnage. The most grotesque torture of all was the decapitation of children, their heads thrown into the laps of their mothers, who were themselves then killed."

Archive photos of sadism that would make horror filmmakers blush survive today: Ustashas displaying an Orthodox priest's head; an eyeless peasant woman; Serbs and Jews being pushed off a cliff; a Serb with a saw to his neck; and a smiling Ustasha holding the still-beating heart of prominent industrialist Milos Teslitch, who had been castrated, disemboweled and his ears and lips cut off.

Italian writer Curzio Malaparte in his 1944 book Kaputt offers this detail: "While [Pavelic] spoke, I gazed at a wicker basket on the Poglavnik's desk [which] seemed to be filled with mussels, or shelled oysters... 'Are they Dalmatian oysters?' I asked. [Pavelic] said smiling, 'It is a present from my loyal Ustashas... Forty pounds of human eyes.'"

In their 1991 book Unholy Trinity: The Vatican, the Nazis and the Swiss Banks, reporter Mark Aarons and former Justice Department attorney John Loftus corroborate the grisly Croatian

crimes, as does Genocide in Satellite Croatia 1941-1945 by Edmond Paris: "The Italians photographed an Ustasha wearing two chains of human tongues and ears around his neck."

It has been 60 years, and the world still doesn't know the story of wartime Croatia, where not only did the Vatican not speak out against crimes, not only was it complicit in the genocide of a million people, but it subsequently never expressed remorse for the spilled Orthodox blood as it's done for Jewish blood. Because the world never demanded it. Which points to the same apprehensions that have dogged Jewish groups about the Vatican's genuineness, especially with its reluctance to open archives about Pius's World War II conduct.

ONE CAN'T help wondering whether the Vatican as an institution was silently cheering the decimation of its Orthodox rival. Stepinac, who was photographed blessing the Ustashas before an upcoming battle or slaughter, reported in May 1944 the good news about 244,000 forced conversions to Pius. (Pius himself might have caught BBC broadcasts such as on February 16, 1942: "The Orthodox are being forcibly converted to Catholicism and we do not hear the archbishop's voice preaching revolt. Instead it is reported that he is taking part in Nazi and fascist parades.") Observing the liquidation of Croatia's Orthodox, Heinrich Himmler's second-in-command, Reinhard Heydrich, wrote a February 17, 1942, letter to Himmler stating, "It is clear that the Croat-Serbian state of tension is not least of all a struggle of the Catholic Church against the Orthodox Church."

It is not Jews to whom the Church owes the biggest apology over World War II, but Serbs. If by not speaking out about Europe's Jews Pius hoped to avoid endangering millions of Catholics, what could have been the reason for not speaking out about Croatia, which itself horrified the Nazis to the point that German and Italian soldiers started shielding Serbs from Ustashas? And what would have been the risk to the faithful inside Croatia?

A July 5, 1994, Washington Times article attempted to get to the bottom of why so little is known of the Croatia chapter of World War II, and why Jasenovac is so rarely spoken of: "For years the gruesome details... remained officially taboo. Although documents and eyewitness accounts were at first ignored, and then mysteriously removed from international archives... it now appears that a vast international conspiracy involving Marshal Josip Broz Tito... [and] the United Nations, some Vatican officials and even Jewish organizations strove to keep the Jasenovac story buried forever... Tito's watchwords were 'brotherhood and unity,' and to pursue these high goals he tried to erase the chapter of Jasenovac. The West generally went along, particularly after Tito broke with Stalin in 1948. The Vatican wanted to protect Roman Catholic Croats, who had been willing Nazi proxies in the Balkans.

"The silence of Jewish organizations is less easily explained... [The late Milan Bulajic, of Belgrade's Genocide Museum, met] officials of the Holocaust Museum [in Washington to] find out why no one mentions the Yugoslav Jews who died there. He did not seem to get a clear-cut answer... When Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991... troops of newly independent Croatia briefly captured the site and, according to Serbian sources, blew up whatever was left of the camp and destroyed all remaining records."

An apology is also owed to Catholic clergy whose appeals the Church ignored. Archbishop Misic of Mostar, Herzegovina, asked Stepinac to use his influence with authorities to prevent the massacres. And Bulajic wrote of a group of Slovenian Catholic priests who were "sent to the Jasenovac camp because they refused to serve a mass of thanksgiving to Ustasha leader Ante Pavelic... One of the imprisoned Slovenian priests, Anton Rantasa, managed to escape... On 10 November 1942, he informed [Stepinac and the papal legate Ramiro Marcone]... on the crimes of genocide being perpetrated at Jasenovac. He was told to keep silent."

Similarly, historian Savich writes, "It bears noting that Stepinac was tried and convicted... by Roman Catholic Croats... under the regime of a Roman Catholic Croatian... Many of the historians who documented the Ustasha NDH genocide were Roman Catholic Croats, such as Viktor Novak."

In his 1950 book *Behind the Purple Curtain*, Walter Montano wrote of the Stepinac trial: "A parade of prosecution witnesses testified at Zagreb, on October 5, 1946, that Catholic priests armed with pistols went out to convert Orthodox Serbs and massacred them... Most of the witnesses were Croat Catholic peasants and laborers."

INDEED, JUST as blame for tacit approval of a genocide and subsequent escape for the perpetrators can't fall merely on "a few individuals," it's more than a few individuals who deserve credit for the opposite. For example, Jews were saved by the entire Catholic nation of Italy (in its sovereign pre-1943 form), including the commandant of the Ferramonti concentration camp, who "said his job was to protect the inmates, not kill them," as UPI reported in 2003. Not surprisingly, Italian soldiers also intervened in the slaughter of Serbs by Croats and Axis-aligned Albanians in Kosovo.

Unfortunately, rather than distancing the Church from Aloysius Stepinac, the Vatican-centered

newspaper L'Osservatore Romano responded that the "trial was a trial against the Catholic Church." New York cardinal Francis Spellman outrageously named a parochial school in White Plains after Stepinac, and in 1952 Pius XII made him cardinal. Then, despite requests by the Simon Wiesenthal Center to hold off until the cardinal's wartime role could be better assessed, Pope John Paul II beatified Stepinac in 1998.

Croatian groups (and some Croatian Jews) even appealed to Yad Vashem to give Stepinac the Righteous Gentile title, since he saved some Jews on condition of conversion. To which Yad Vashem had to reply in almost absurd terms: "Persons who assisted Jews but simultaneously collaborated or were linked with a fascist regime which took part in the Nazi-orchestrated persecution of Jews, may be disqualified for the Righteous title."

The same should be said to Pope Benedict about his efforts to canonize Pius XII. Even as it denied Stepinac's well known association with the Ustasha, Pius's Vatican served as the conduit for smuggling the Ustashes out after the war. According to declassified US documents introduced in a recent class-action lawsuit against the Vatican Bank for laundering Ustasha loot - used to finance the Ustashes' escapes and postwar sustenance - Pavelic was hidden in a Croatian Catholic monastery in Rome, where the office of the American Counterintelligence Corps on September 12, 1947, reported that "Pavelic's contacts are so high, and his present position is so compromising to the Vatican, that any extradition of subject would deal a staggering blow to the Roman Catholic Church." From Rome, Pavelic fled to Argentina, where he became a security adviser to Juan Peron, who issued thousands of visas to fleeing Ustashes.

Haaretz in 2006 reported that Msgr. Giovanni Battista Montini, Pius's undersecretary of state and later Pope Paul VI, learned of "the investigation [that US Army counterintelligence agent William] Gowen's unit was conducting. Montini complained about Gowen to his superiors and accused him of having violated the Vatican's immunity by having entered church buildings, such as the Croatian college, and conducting searches there. The aim of the complaint was to interfere with the investigation."

A May 2007 press release from plaintiffs' attorney Jonathan Levy in the Vatican Bank case states, "To date, the Vatican attorneys... [are] insisting that the Vatican Bank's money laundering scheme for Axis plunder violated no international law, since the Ustasha's victims, mainly Orthodox Christian Serbs, were technically citizens of 'Independent' Croatia. The unrepentant tone of the Vatican bodes poorly for Pius XII and the current controversy involving his elevation to sainthood."

THE VATICAN'S ongoing World War II identity crisis was evident last September when, after prodding from Croatian leaders, Zagreb Archbishop Josip Bozanic paid a 60-year-late visit to the Jasenovac memorial site, the first official representative of the Croatian Church to attend the annual memorial ceremony. Instead of an apology, Bozanic defended Stepinac and the Church, and used the long-awaited moment to also mourn the massacre of fleeing Nazis by partisans in Bleiburg, Austria - where an annual, Croatian government-sponsored commemoration ceremony is well attended by Catholic dignitaries. Bozanic was not reproached by the Vatican, which also doesn't reproach the Croatian Church's tolerance of the ubiquitous pro-Nazi symbolism in that country, which reemerged as Croatian "culture" in the early 1990s.

President Stjepan Mesic himself, who just left office after 10 years, had to recently ask the Vatican to pay closer attention to a bishop and military chaplain who regularly recites a violent poem that ends with the Ustasha saying: "For the fatherland, ready."

This is the Balkan country that's on the fast-track for EU membership. That's where decades of evasion, deflection and cover-up get us, something that contributed to John Paul II's own neglect of Jasenovac - the Balkans' largest killing grounds - during his three trips to Croatia. It also leads us to last December's spectacle of Pope Benedict having a private audience with Marko Perkovic, lead singer of the notorious clerical-fascist Croatian pop band Thompson, which regularly invokes "For the fatherland, ready" and had odes to concentration camps on earlier albums. Many Thompson fans engage in Nazi salutes, and nuns and politicians attend the "patriotic" concerts.

People bury history in order to repeat it. John Ranz, chairman of Buchenwald Survivors, in a 1996 letter to The New York Times, wrote: "Ironically, with US help, [1990s president] Franjo Tudjman was able to accomplish last year what the Nazis and their World War II collaborators could not, namely the uprooting of the entire Serbian Krajina population... The World War II fascist regime of Ante Pavelic is being officially rehabilitated in Croatia today. Streets and public buildings are being named after the architects of the Holocaust, Nazi-era currency revived, while the numbers and scope of the human carnage are being rewritten."

Had history not been dumped into a mass grave, Western publics might have been allowed a fuller understanding of the Balkan wars, given that by 1991 it was "normal to kill Serbs," as Zarko Puhovski, of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, put it. When Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia in June 1991 - and the Vatican was the first to recognize it despite a UN resolution warning this could imperil a peaceful solution - survival dictated that the Serbs secede from the secessionists. "A few days after the Croatians declared war," writes historian Israel, Pope John Paul II "sent a letter to the Yugoslav government demanding it not suppress the rebellion." And so it was that in 1991 three Croatian soldiers saw "truckloads of bloated,

stinking bodies, mothers and children blown up by bombs, and someone wearing a necklace made of ears," Reuters reported on January 28, 1998.

And so it was that president Tudjman was a prominent guest at the inauguration of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993, despite saying that "900,000 died, not 6 million," and ranged from calling Jasenovac a "myth," to blaming Jews for the killings there, to offering a formal apology for the 20,000 Jews killed there - but not for the several hundred thousand Serbs. And so it was that in 1995, as Croatian soldiers with Ustasha insignia cleansed the Krajina of Serbs - under US air cover - the Glina massacre survivor Ljuban Jednak once again fled for his life, dying a refugee in 1997.

And so it was that in 2005, when then Hague prosecutor Carla del Ponte learned that indicted 1990s war criminal Gen. Ante Gotovina was being sheltered in a Franciscan monastery in Croatia, the Roman Catholic lady found herself "'extremely disappointed' to encounter a wall of silence from the Vatican" which, she told the Daily Telegraph, "could probably pinpoint exactly which of Croatia's 80 monasteries was sheltering him 'in a few days.'"

And so it was that at the 2006 inauguration of the spruced-up Jasenovac memorial, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Efraim Zuroff observed "the absence of any identification of the individuals responsible for the crimes described... I was amazed that none of the speakers mentioned... Croatia's greatest achievement in facing its Ustasha past - the prosecution and conviction of Jasenovac commander Dinko Sakic... Could it be that the punishment of such a criminal... is so unpopular, even in today's Croatia...?"

And so it was that Sakic was buried last July in full Nazi uniform, with a Father Vjekoslav Lasic - one of many who hold masses in honor of Ante Pavelic - officiating. "Independent State of Croatia is the foundation of today's homeland of Croatia," Lasic said. "Every honorable Croat is proud of the name Dinko Sakic."

When no Croatian official of stature spoke out against the display, Zuroff called on the president to condemn the organizers and remind Croatian society that Sakic brought it shame, not pride.

In enshrining the Church's divided World War II loyalties by canonizing the ambivalent pope at the time, the Church would be announcing to the world what it's made of. But the Church is

Vatican's WWII identity crisis

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better than the sum of its nastier parts. Canonizing Pius XII would be unjust to Catholics who did more than he, and an insult to Catholics everywhere. Pius shouldn't be demonized, but he shouldn't be sanctified.

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