University of Groningen

Faculty of Religion, Culture, and Society

MA in Religion, Conflict, and Globalization

Master's Thesis

Memory Politics of Jasenovac Concentration Camp: A Comparative Analysis of the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church

Author: Danica Čović

Student Number: S6060684

Supervisor: Dr. Todd Weir

Second Reader: Dr. Gorazd Andrejč

Academic Year: 2024 - 2025

Submission Date:

Word Count: 19,479

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 4

1.1. Thesis Objectives and Sources 6

1.2. Sections of the Thesis 8

2. The Theoretical Framework 10

3. Historical Background - Jasenovac 15

3.1. Independent State of Croatia and the Ustaša regime 15

3.2. Concentration Camps in the Independent State of Croatia 17

4. The Catholic Church in Croatia 19

4.1. Catholicism in 20th-century Croatia 20

4.2. Church's Role during the Ustaša regime 22

4.3. Catholic Church - National Myth and the Memory of Bleiburg 24

4.4. Position of the Catholic Church in the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia 25

5. The Serbian Orthodox Church 28

5.1. Historical Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church 29

5.2. The Orthodox Church During World War II 31

5.3. The Orthodox Church in the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia 33

6. Mobilization of Jasenovac's Memory 35

6.1. Jasenovac in Yugoslavia 35

6.2. The Flower Monument 36

6.3. Jasenovac and the fall of Yugoslavia 39

6.3.1. The Serbian Orthodox Church during the Fall of Yugoslavia 40

6.3.2. The Catholic Church during the Fall of Yugoslavia 43

7. Jasenovac Today – A Past That Does Not Pass 45

7.1. The Catholic Church After Yugoslavia 45

7.2. The Serbian Orthodox Church After Yugoslavia 48
7.3. The Stepinac Commission 51
8. The Conclusion – Thesis Findings 51
9. The Bibliography 55

1. Introduction

On May 9th, 1991, the regular meeting of the Church Sabor, one of the highest bodies in the Serbian Orthodox Church, was scheduled to begin. It took place in the context of recent conflicts in Yugoslavia, just over a year after Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia and elected its first independent president. The Sabor was supposed to be held in Belgrade, as it had been in previous years. However, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Pavle, decided to open the meeting in Jasenovac and to use the opportunity to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the wartime suffering of the Serbian people in the shortlived independent State of Croatia which existed from 1941 to 1945 (Ramet, 2006, p. 349).

Fast forward, and the year is now 2005. The 60th anniversary of the Bleiburg massacre (when 60,000 to 70,000 people were killed by the Partisans in Austria) is marked by the first official mass held by Catholic Cardinal Vinko Puljić - this tradition would continue with different Croatian Cardinals celebrating mass in Bleiburg each year on the anniversary of the massacre. In sharp contrast stands the fact that Catholic Church officials have, up to that moment, not once visited Jasenovac on its anniversary, only sending members of the local parish to the annual commemoration. On this, Cardinal Bozanić stated that he could not attend as long as the number of victims of Jasenovac is used for political purposes (Kolsto, 2010, p. 1167).

Jasenovac stands as a painful moment in the history of both Serbia and Croatia. In both of these societies, instead of being regarded as a crime of the fascist regime and understood in today's time as a potential for healing, Jasenovac is still, to this day, utilized by political and social actors to advance their narratives and agendas, whether those are nationalistic, religious, or political on both the domestic and international levels. The memory of Jasenovac has been used by nationalists, politicians, religious leaders, authors, and historians in both Serbia and Croatia. Instead of using the painful memory of Jasenovac to heal and promote a future where such events could never happen again, many actors from both countries use Jasenovac and its victims to portray themselves today as victims, engaging in various forms of competitive victimhood,

claiming the ultimate right to the truth of Jasenovac, and employing historical revisionism to present themselves as “being on the right side of history.”

On the Serbian side, this often manifests in an exaggeration of the number of victims - the most recent example coming from Professor Gideon Greif, a Holocaust scholar best known for his research on Jewish prisoners who were forced to dispose of bodies at the Nazi death camps. In Serbia, he is both famous and infamous for his exhibition and his book concerning Jasenovac, both of which he collaborated on with the Serbian Foreign Ministry. The exhibition took place in 2018 at the UN headquarters in New York and was widely criticized for two things: the inflated number of victims, some 700,000 Serbs that Greif claims were killed in Jasenovac, and the way the exhibition itself was presented – it was centered around graphic images of those who were murdered at Jasenovac, while later some of the images were shown not to be from Jasenovac. Greif later denied being used for the nationalist aims of the Serbian government (Sokol, 2022).

On the Croatian side, we see an opposing example, the latest one from 2019, when a book titled *Razotkrivena jasenovačka laž* (*The Exposed Truth of Jasenovac*) was published and promoted in the hall of the Church of the Heart of Jesus. The author of the book, Razum, claimed that there is no evidence that Jasenovac was used for mass killings and that Jasenovac was actually a labor camp, in which most of the detainees were Croats (RTVBN, 2019). This book was promoted in the shadow of another controversy in Croatia, which occurred in 2016, when a “documentary” asserting that Jasenovac was a labor camp was screened and was attended by the Croatian culture minister Zlatko Hasanbegović, who stated that such films “shed light on a number of controversial places in Croatian history.” The film was titled *Jasenovac – the Truth*, and its director, Jakov Sedlar, claimed that the number of victims in Jasenovac was between 20,000 and 40,000. For reference, the official Jasenovac Memorial Site has 83,145 victims listed by name in its database (Milekić, 2016).

Jasenovac has been used by every government since World War II to advance its own agenda – first by the socialist regime, to promote its anti-fascism and "brotherhood and unity" as the foundational principles upon which the new, socialist

Yugoslavia was built. When the socialist government began to collapse in the 1980s, and new regimes started to emerge from its ruins, it was used by nationalist governments to further escalate tensions between countries and fuel ethnic hatred. On the Serbian side, it was employed as a scare tactic to mobilize Serbs living in Croatia and to spread fear of a "new Jasenovac" that the Croatian government was allegedly preparing. On the Croatian side, narratives about Jasenovac varied widely, from complete denial to the Bleiburg massacres being used as a symbol of Croatian victimhood and evidence of Serbian genocidal intent.

In the background of governmental revisionism stood two main religious institutions in both countries - the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. While in some cases they cooperated with their respective governments on official policies and commemorative practices regarding Jasenovac, they also often acted according to their own objectives, especially once both institutions began to regain influence and popularity in the post-socialist societies. These narratives not only shape how these societies perceive Jasenovac, but they also significantly contribute to either fostering reconciliation or reinforcing division.

1.1.Thesis Objectives and Sources

This paper argues that the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church play crucial roles in shaping national identities in their respective countries. Using Jasenovac, and specifically the discourse that surrounds it, as a focal point, this paper examines how both churches have cultivated narratives of competitive victimhood. While Jasenovac serves as the primary example, it also reflects broader political and social narratives that these religious institutions construct and sustain. These narratives have continuously influenced both Serbs and Croats, two nations historically divided by war, politics, and propaganda. The paper highlights not only the churches' positions on Jasenovac but also why those positions matter. It demonstrates that the narratives accepted and promoted by the churches align with wider national

and political discourses in Serbia and Croatia, shaping the prospects for interethnic reconciliation and political cooperation between the two countries.

In doing so, the study contributes to memory studies, religious studies, and political science by addressing a significant research gap: the role of religious institutions in producing and maintaining conflicting memories of Jasenovac. While the political instrumentalization of Jasenovac has been explored in academic literature, little attention has been paid to the specific ways in which the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church construct and circulate these narratives through sermons, public statements, and commemorative practices.

Methodologically, the paper draws primarily on existing literature, as well as church documents, commemorations, and clergy sermons. Using memory politics as its theoretical framework, it focuses on the concept of cultural memory as shaped by institutions and collective rituals (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Jasenovac is approached as a "past that does not pass" (Odak, 2016), a site of enduring trauma that continues to influence both political and religious discourse. By examining how each church interprets, claims, and commemorates Jasenovac, the paper identifies broader patterns and dynamics of identity, memory, and power in post-Yugoslav society.

As Gopin (2000, p. 4) notes, there are currently several possible trajectories for the relationship between humanity and traditional religion. Some patterns suggest that religion may contribute to large-scale violence in the near future. However, other indicators point to the potential for religion to help foster a global community grounded in shared values such as compassion, human rights, and peace. While this paper concludes with a brief exploration of possibilities for reconciliation, given the significant role religious institutions have historically played in both conflict escalation and post-conflict healing, reconciliation is not its central focus. Rather, by tracing the historical development of the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church, along with their deeply rooted political and social positions, particularly regarding Jasenovac, this thesis examines the limitations of cooperation between them. By analyzing their longstanding conflict and mutually opposed narratives, the paper aims to shed light on

the challenges and constraints of interreligious dialogue in this context, as well as the persistent divide between these two influential religious and political actors.

1.2.Sections of the Thesis

In order to understand the importance of both the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church in their respective societies, as well as their positions regarding Jasenovac and the broader implications for interethnic relations between Croats and Serbs, this thesis is organized into several distinct sections. The first section, following the introduction, presents a theoretical framework that situates this thesis within broader academic debates surrounding memory politics and competitive victimhood, a subset of memory politics. This framework introduces key definitions of both concepts and provides the analytical lens through which the memory of Jasenovac and interpretations of victimhood in both Serbia and Croatia are examined. The theoretical perspective established here is used throughout the thesis, particularly when discussing the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox Churches' understanding of Jasenovac's legacy and the role of religion in constructing and disseminating national narratives.

Following the theoretical section, a historical framework is provided to contextualize the longstanding tensions between the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. This framework is divided into three categories: the context of the Independent State of Croatia and the Jasenovac concentration camp; the historical role of the Catholic Church in Croatia; and the historical role of the Serbian Orthodox Church. It argues that both Churches played pivotal roles in developing and preserving national identities in their respective societies. Their conflicting understandings of memory, history, and politics, particularly during the interwar period and World War II, laid the foundation for competing narratives of victimhood that persist to this day.

After a brief overview of Jasenovac and the Independent State of Croatia, the next section focuses on the historical and political significance of the Catholic Church in Croatia. While it includes a short overview of the Church's long-standing historical

presence, the emphasis is placed on its political and social role during the 20th century, especially the interwar period. This emphasis stems from the fact that the Ustaša movement (which would later lead the Independent State of Croatia) began to take shape during this time. It was also a period when both the Catholic and the Orthodox Church found themselves on unfamiliar terrain, with their societal roles increasingly challenged by new and shifting political regimes. Next, this section examines the relationship between the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Ustaša regime during World War II. This is followed by an exploration of the Church's role in the post-war era, the scrutiny it faced, and its defensive responses. Finally, this chapter addresses the power that the Catholic Church gradually received during the fall of Yugoslavia and how that influenced the Church's policies.

The following section, and the final one included in the historical background, focuses on the Serbian Orthodox Church and its relationship to Jasenovac. This section primarily explores the historical importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as its role in the process of Serbian nation-building. This focus is necessary because the Serbian Orthodox Church maintains that, due to its historically significant position in society, it is entitled to a voice in both political and social matters, one of which is the issue of Jasenovac. This chapter, much like the preceding one on the Catholic Church in Croatia, briefly addresses several key historical moments for the Serbian Orthodox Church. It also covers the period of World War II, including the controversies surrounding the Church's wartime conduct, as well as its role and position within socialist Yugoslavia. Mirroring the structure of the previous chapter, this section concludes with an analysis of the national and religious revival that took place in Serbia during the 1980s, and the part that the Serbian Orthodox Church played in that process.

After the historical section that reviews both of the Churches, their historical role, and their view of Jasenovac before the fall of Yugoslavia, Jasenovac is explored as one of the most prevalent topics for both Serbs and Croats, and for both of the Churches during and after the fall of Yugoslavia. Starting with a section on the memorialization of Jasenovac and the Holocaust in general, several sections follow that detail the ways in which the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church used Jasenovac

as their political battleground, with the addition of Bleiburg in the case of the Catholic Church. This part of the paper explores how Jasenovac was used during the Yugoslav Wars and how this cemented Jasenovac as one of the most important moments in the history of both peoples. It also examines how Jasenovac is viewed and commemorated today by both Churches.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the paper's findings, with particular emphasis on the role of both the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church in shaping and sustaining memory politics related to Jasenovac. It also highlights this thesis's findings and offers recommendations for future research. The limitations of this study are acknowledged, along with suggestions for future researchers who may wish to explore similar topics.

2. The Theoretical Framework

This paper positions itself within the theoretical framework of memory and its potential for political instrumentalization, as well as the framework of competitive victimhood. Both of these frameworks are essential for understanding the political climate in the Balkans, but especially for comprehending how memory is employed in cases of mass suffering.

The definition of collective memory that is primarily used in this paper is Assmann's definition of cultural memory (1995, p. 126) – in contrast to everyday memory, cultural memory is defined by various cultural formations and institutional practices, such as commemorations, reproductions of tradition, myths, and identity (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106). A distinguishing feature of cultural memory is that it is inherently related to group identity – collective memory serves as the vast pool of knowledge from which groups abstract their unity and their uniqueness in relation to other groups (J. Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130). This is demonstrated through the examples of Jasenovac and Bleiburg commemorations – both on the governmental

level, but also the commemorations organized by religious communities, and how these commemorations play into the cultural myths about Jasenovac.

The relationship between memory and identity is especially noticeable in the case of national identity. Since nation-states have widely been accepted as the primary factor in organizing social identity (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 123), it is evident that they employ historical memory to serve their interests (1998, p. 110). However, the interpretation of historical memory by state actors is often challenged by alternative groups and actors (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 14), some of whom are religious actors. As is demonstrated in the paper, in certain cases governmental and religious actors cooperate in their interpretations of the past; in other cases, they challenge each other's narratives.

Politicians often use collective understandings of the past to mobilize remembrance as a tool for their political agendas. This also includes using the past strategically and manipulating memory in order to connect it to current events in the collective consciousness of their community (Verovšek, 2016, p. 529). This trend has been especially prominent since the 1960s, and one of the three reasons that Verovšek references for the so-called "memory boom" is the resurfacing of national issues and concerns of different ethnic groups after the fall of communism (Verovšek, 2016, p. 530). This led to contested truths and competing mainstream narratives of certain events, and in the case of former Yugoslavia, the events of World War II. As Hodgkin and Radstone argue (2003, p. 1) - "If what is disputed is the course of events – what really happened – new answers, particularly by groups whose knowledge has previously been discounted, may challenge dominant or privileged narratives. But to contest the past is also, of course, to pose questions about the present, and what the past means in the present. Our understanding of the past has strategic, political, and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward."

Verovšek argues that the politics of memory should focus on two different approaches – firstly, it must address the version of collective memory expressed by actors within state institutions, and secondly, it must also consider the "interactive

channels through which ideas about the past are conveyed, disputed, silenced, and negotiated outside these formal settings" (Verovšek, 2016, p. 531). These ideas of the past are also shaped by religious actors, particularly in the context of the national awakening in the 1990s in the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

Concepts of collective memory explored by authors such as Halbwachs became especially relevant during the memory boom, and even more so during the 1990s in the Yugoslav context. As Halbwachs explains, "collective memory is always mediated through complex mechanisms of conscious manipulation by elites and unconscious absorption by members of society." These social frameworks not only give meaning to individual memories, but they also provide the broad historical imagination that shapes the selection and interpretation of formative events (Verovšek, 2016, p. 531). Some of these formative events for the Yugoslav context include the events of World War II, and more specifically, the existence of the Independent State of Croatia.

Collective memory is linked to ethnicity, nationalism, and cultural identity, and is often grounded in the understanding of the self versus the perception of the other (Verovšek, 2016, p. 532). Another issue that arises with memory is that while memory is "not history... it is sometimes made from similar material" (Fogu & Kansteiner, 2006, p. 285). Collective understandings of past events can even result in "false memories" and may be so influential that they reshape the historical narrative (Verovšek, 2016, p. 532). Many authors who study memory politics focus on political actors who construct narratives of the past; however, another crucial aspect is the acceptance of these narratives by the broader public (Smith, 2003, p. 32). In order for a particular memory to become a permanent part of a nation's history and historical understanding, it must be presented to a receptive audience (Odak & Benčić, 2016, pp. 815–816).

When discussing memory politics, it is important to not only define what memory politics entails but also clarify what it does not. Most importantly, the politics of memory is not about correcting popular (mis)understandings of history through the provision of factual information. In many cases, memory is employed in political contexts to manipulate or distort certain facts. The study of memory politics is not concerned with correcting misconceptions in order to arrive at historical truth

(Verovšek, 2016, p. 537), but rather with analyzing how memories are used to achieve particular political aims.

Memory is subject to contestation both on the national and international levels. Seeing that both Croatia and Serbia regard World War II, as well as the Yugoslav Wars, as central elements of their contemporary national identities, each grounded in opposing narratives, this creates a specific space for an interpretive "memory war" between them (Radonić, 2018, p. 483), which is examined in this paper through the example of memory politics surrounding Jasenovac. These "memory wars" are waged not only by political actors but also by religious institutions that use memory to advance their cultural and political agendas. They often take the form of competitive victimhood, evident in the way both religious communities portray their real and perceived suffering as proof of their moral innocence.

The main definition of competitive victimhood that this paper adopts is Christian Nielsen's: he defines competitive victimhood "as a process in which the ingroup is not only focused exclusively on its own real and alleged suffering, but also aspires to demonstrate and assert that this suffering is greater than that of other groups" (2018, p. 177). This is analyzed through the case studies of the memory of Bleiburg and Jasenovac. Competitive victimhood is examined through the exaggeration of the number of victims on the Serbian side (and through comparisons of Jasenovac with other atrocities, both real and fabricated), and through the emphasis on the Bleiburg massacre as evidence of Croatian suffering and martyrdom.

Nielsen states that during and after the Yugoslav Wars, multiple communities attempted to prove that they were the primary, or even sole, victims of the Yugoslav regime and its aftermath. This prompted the newly independent post-Yugoslav states, especially in the years following the wars, to develop exclusive notions of national victimhood (2018, p. 177). The competitive victimhood in which ex-Yugoslav states engage, particularly Serbia and Croatia in the context of Jasenovac, also results in a complete lack of interest in the individual humanity of victims, who are generally presented as symbols of collective suffering and as a defense against future accusations.

In this perspective, one group views itself solely as a victim and never a perpetrator, while the group it identifies as "the other" is perceived as exclusively a perpetrator and never a victim (Nielsen, 2018, p. 178). This is especially notable in the cases of Serbia and Croatia, both of which sued each other before the International Court of Justice in The Hague for alleged genocide. Each country used claims of historical suffering to argue that it could not possibly be a perpetrator of other atrocities, which is a prime example of competitive victimhood (Odak & Benčić, 2016, pp. 812–813). Odak and Benčić, citing Žunić, argue in their article that Serbs framed Jasenovac as a site of exclusive ethnic victimhood and used it as evidence of continued victimization in other scenarios, while Croats used Bleiburg as proof of their own suffering and wartime experiences (2016, pp. 811–812).

The hearing before the International Court of Justice was further proof that both Croatia and Serbia use Jasenovac as an anchor for their narratives of national suffering. However, these memories and interpretations of Jasenovac would not persist without a collective memory of past traumas. Jasenovac's symbolic place in the histories of both Serbs and Croats is not inherently problematic; the issue arises when it is used as evidence of continuous suffering and persecution (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 816).

Competitive victimhood is associated both with lower intergroup empathy and trust, as well as with higher in-group identification. A shared sense of competitive victimhood was shown to impact intergroup relations negatively, and more importantly, it impedes post-conflict intergroup forgiveness, undermining mutual understanding between groups in the process (Yilmaz, 2024, pp. 8-9). This paper shows examples of the mutual misunderstandings between Croats and Serbs on the topic of World War II, but it also briefly explores the potential for post-conflict forgiveness and cooperation. Due to the importance that religious institutions hold in both societies, as well as their active involvement in commemorative practices and teachings about Jasenovac, both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia emerge as key actors in the collective formation and reproduction of memory. This role is examined in the thesis alongside the roles played by the Croatian and Serbian governments in using

collective memory for political purposes and in fostering narratives of competitive victimhood.

To understand why the collective memory of Jasenovac is as important as it is in both of these cultures, but also to understand why the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church hold the influence that they do, we must look at the histories of these institutions. Before examining the memory politics surrounding Jasenovac, this thesis first turns to the historical background necessary to understand both the significance of Jasenovac itself and the roles of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia. This section outlines key historical developments related to these institutions and highlights their potential for political mobilization.

3. Historical Background - Jasenovac

Before turning to the histories of the Churches, this thesis first examines the background of Jasenovac to establish why this topic remains so divisive. This brief section explores the nature of the Independent State of Croatia and the role played by the Ustaša regime within it. It provides an overview of the Jasenovac concentration camp and explains why it continues to hold such significant importance in both Serbian and Croatian historical memory.

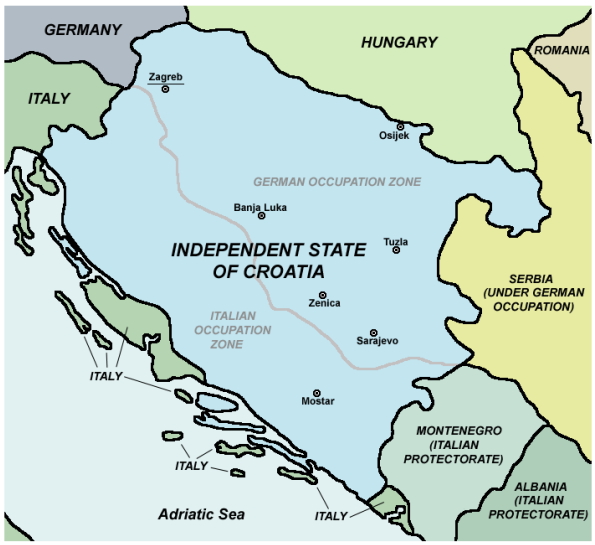
Commented [TW1]: redundant

3.1.Independent State of Croatia and the Ustaša regime

Almost 85 years ago, on April 6th of 1941, Yugoslavia was occupied and invaded by Fascist and Nazi forces. This would lead to the creation of the Independent State of Croatia only four days later, and to the return of Ante Pavelić (the head of the fascist Croatian Ustaša forces) to Croatia from his exile in Italy. Pavelić assumed the role of the head of state, or in Croatian, the *Poglavnik* (Leader), and Croatia was divided between Germany and Italy into two zones of influence. The Independent State of Croatia included not only the territory of Croatia, but also that of Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Slavonia, Srem, as well as a part of the Dalmatian Adriatic coast (Retchkiman, 2020, p. 78).

On April 25th, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet was prohibited by a Croatian decree; after that, on April 30th, the Law on the Protection of Aryan Blood and the Dignity of Croatian People was issued, and it banned marriages between Jewish people (and other persons of non-Aryan origin) and Croatian people. All people of Jewish descent were forced to wear a badge that had the letter "Ž" on it (meaning *Židov – Jew*), while Serbian people had to wear a badge with the letter P (*Pravoslavac – an Orthodox Christian*). In May, the Serbian Orthodox Church was officially prohibited in Croatia, and all properties that Jews and Serbs owned were taken from them and declared state-owned (Retchkiman, 2020, p.84).



Map of the Independent State of Croatia (as of 1941) (Wikimedia)

In many ways, the fascist Croatian state was similar to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy – all three of them supported the Final Solution, and all three of them propagated extreme nationalistic politics and measures. What separated fascist Croatia from its allies was their extreme anti-Serb politics (alongside their anti-Jew and anti-Roma politics), as well as their noted and continuous support of the Catholic Church, and Catholicism as one of the key elements of their statehood (Retchkiman, 2020, p. 79).

Commented [TW2]: not entirely true of italy

At the head of the Independent State of Croatia was a fascist Croatian movement, called the Ustaše. The Ustaša movement was established in the 1930s, and its main goal was to destabilize Yugoslavia as much as possible by executing different terrorist acts. One of their most famous acts was the assassination of King Alexander Karađorđević and the French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou in Marseilles in 1934 (Tomashevich, 2001, p. 33). The Ustaša movement wasn't created as a specifically fascist movement – at its beginning, it had no concrete ideology, let alone a fascist one, and it was defined as an ultra-nationalist, and by some definitions, a terrorist group (Payne, 2006, p. 410). They lacked real organization, ideology, or intellectual circles inside the movement, which is what ultimately showed once they came to power with the formation of the Independent State of Croatia, and once the movement began to develop in many different directions (Yeomans, 2013, p. 25).

3.2.Concentration Camps in the Independent State of Croatia

During the existence of the Independent State of Croatia, several concentration camps were established on its territory. The first death camp that was established was called Danica, and it was located near Koprivnica (Miloševski & Mišić, 2025, p. 7). Several camps followed – Stara Gradiška, Đakovo, Jastrebarsko, as well as Jasenovac. In the first years of Ustaša rule, and after a decree about sending "unwanted" people to camps was accepted in 1941, many of these camps would close very soon after their opening. This, however, would change after Jasenovac was established in the summer of 1941.

Jasenovac was not a singular camp, as some of the other camps were – it was a complex of five different concentration camps. It was spread over 240 square kilometers and is widely accepted as the largest death camp on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Jasenovac was not only a death camp – it also served as a camp for slave labor, and many people in Jasenovac died as a result of forced slave labor (Goldstein & Goldstein, 2011, p.25). The first two camps in the Jasenovac complex were established by Croat authorities in August of 1941, and they were called Krapje and Brocica – they were closed four months later. The third camp was called Ciglana, and it was established in November 1941 and was closed only in April 1945. The fourth was Kozara, established in 1942 and closed in April of 1945, and the fifth, and final one, was Stara Gradiška, which was turned into a concentration camp for women in 1942 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005).

Commented [TW3]: Are you sure this was a "death camp" like Auschwitz?

Political and social actors on the Serbian side often recall the brutality of the Ustaša when they talk about Jasenovac, and use it as proof that Jasenovac was more brutal and worse than camps established by the Nazis (Byford, 2011, p. 63). This is examined further in the paper – however, it's important to note here that some authors (such as Alexander Korb) argue that to simply describe Ustaše as sadists would be a disservice both to the victims, and to our understanding of fascism and the Ustaša movement (Korb, 2010, p. 1). To truly understand Ustaša violence, he states, one must take into consideration that the Independent State of Croatia was one of the most ethnically and culturally complex countries during World War II, and that the existence of many different political and ethnic groups inside the country perhaps contributed to the mass violence that occurred, or in some other way shaped and formed it (Korb, 2010, p. 2).

The Ustaša regime fell in April of 1945, once the Partisans entered the Independent State of Croatia. As soon as the end of the Ustaša regime was imminent, Jasenovac was destroyed by the Ustaše to eliminate the evidence of their crimes. Jasenovac was never truly liberated by anyone other than the prisoners themselves – once the Ustaše set fire to the camp and demolished most of the buildings, the prisoners

of Jasenovac, 1,037 of them, attempted to escape from the camp. In the end, 169 of them succeeded (Srna, 2025).

4. The Catholic Church in Croatia

The relationship between the Catholic Church of Croatia and the Ustaše has been widely debated for decades, and there are almost no facts that all historians would agree on when it comes to the potential cooperation between the Catholic Church and the Ustaše. During the socialist period, the Catholic Church was viewed mostly as complicit with the crimes of the fascist Ustaša regime, and its clergy were subjected to trials (and in instances, jail time) over their, both real and alleged, collaboration with the fascist government of the Independent State of Croatia. Croatians often perceived this as another element of alleged Greater Serbian supremacy that was, in their view, present both in the first Yugoslavia (the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) as well as in its second rendition, the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia.

Most documents that would be of great importance in the process of trying to understand and piece together the real involvement of the Catholic clergy in Ustaša crimes have either been destroyed or classified (Israeli, 2015, p. 142), and what we are left with are the sermons from some of the clergy during the Ustaša period, as well as letters and personal diaries which offer insight into the involvement of certain members of the clergy. One of the greatest controversies of this time (or, more precisely, the one that is still widely debated amongst various historians and the general public in the Balkans) is the involvement of the Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, with the Ustaša government. Decades after the war, debates are held over his support for the Ustaša regime – some describe him as a devoted supporter of the Ustaša, while others argue that his actions, especially his sermons and private actions, tell a different story (Biondich, 2006, p. 429).

The topic of Alojzije Stepinac remains a point of contention between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia to this day. On the Serbian side, the role of Alojzije Stepinac is often exaggerated, and he is frequently

perceived as the embodiment of the involvement of the Catholic clergy in Croatia with the fascist regime. On the Croatian side, however, he is regarded as a saint and a martyr who advocated for independence. Later in this paper, we explore how both churches engage in dialogue and collaboration concerning Stepinac's life and actions. Firstly, however, we explore the position that the Croatian society and the Catholic Church in Croatia were in during the 20th century, and how different Croatian social movements potentially used the fear of Greater Serbian supremacy to propel both the conflicts during World War II, but also the conflicts surrounding the Yugoslav Wars.

4.1.Catholicism in 20th-century Croatia

For most of the modern era, Croatian nationalists did not associate their nationality with religion. While there were some significant movements in Croatia in the interwar period that did emphasize religion, most nationalist movements did not place a major emphasis on it. Since the 19th century, the focal point of Croatian nationalism, as is demonstrated in the following parts of this paper, has been the belief that Croats have a historical right to a state, and that Croats as a nation are identified with the Croatian state. Croat nationalists held the belief that, while Croatia did enter into multiple unions with various countries during its existence, it never truly lost its sovereignty, and that in modern times, the Croat nation was the bearer of the Croatian state (Biondich, 2006, p. 431).

To understand the position of the Catholic Church in Croatia during the interwar period, two key points must be emphasized. First, the Croatian political movements prior to World War II were not primarily centered around Catholicism, contrary to later claims. Political parties that foregrounded Catholic identity, such as the Croat People's Party, were often marginalized and eventually dissolved during the dictatorship of King Aleksandar Karađorđević (Biondich, 2007, p. 383). Nevertheless, while Catholicism may not have held a dominant place in formal political life, it maintained a significant role in Croatian social movements. During the royal dictatorship in particular, Catholic organizations were active in shaping public discourse, mobilizing youth, and defending

what they perceived as Croatian national and religious interests. Through its involvement in social and cultural spheres, the Catholic Church preserved its influence and continued to shape Croatian identity during a time of political repression and national uncertainty.

During this period, the Catholic movement had several prominent groups and organizations. Some of the main ones were the Catholic Action, various youth organizations, and academic societies such as *Domagoj* (Zavčar, 2020). During the dictatorship, which lasted from 1929 to 1934 (but more realistically until 1939), Catholics in Croatia believed themselves to be marginalized in favor of Orthodox Christianity. They believed this was harmful to both Catholic and Croatian interests and viewed Yugoslavia as an instrument of Serbian national ambitions and Orthodox religious supremacy (Perica, 2009, pp. 9–10). In response, the Catholic movement launched several smaller initiatives during the royal dictatorship to promote its objectives and mobilize Catholic and Croat youth. Most notably, groups such as the *Hrvatski orlovski savez,* along with its successor, *Veliko križarsko bratstvo i sestrinstvo,* entirely abandoned their support for Yugoslavia in favor of nationalism and the ideology of Greater Croatia. Due to their fear of alleged Great Serbian ambitions, they began to emphasize the "homeland," commemorate Croatian monarchs, and promote Croatian nationalism (Biondich, 2007, pp. 389 - 390).

One of the greatest disappointments for Catholic Croats, and one of the turning points that led to even more radical ideologies and opinions, was the unsuccessful Concordat between the Catholic Church and Croatia. After a draft of the Concordat was finally created in 1935, the Serbian Orthodox Church opposed it, claiming that this behavior favored the Catholic Church; this led to large street demonstrations organized by the Orthodox Church, which occasionally turned violent. The government had to retract its support of the Concordat, and for Croatian Catholics, this served as definitive proof of the disadvantaged position they held in Yugoslavia (Timotijević, 2022, p. 99-101).

While the Catholic movement in Croatia as a whole favored the Catholic nation, believed in superior and inferior peoples, and highly regarded corporatism and

authoritarianism, they still had reservations about Nazism and Fascism. They envisioned the salvation of both Croatia and Europe as lying in the Catholic Church (Oršanić, 1939, p.1), and they strongly rejected Nazism's atheism, its treatment of the Catholic Church, and its secular state cult. This would lead to the emergence of various movements within the Catholic Church in response to the fascist rule of the Ustaša, a topic explored in the following section.

4.2.Church's Role during the Ustaša regime

Once the Ustaša regime was established, members of the Catholic clergy responded in varied ways to the new reality of the Independent State of Croatia. Many clergy members joined the Ustaša movement - some served as commanders of concentration camps, others held positions within the government, or used their pulpits to promote support for the regime. At the same time, some bishops and priests expressed open dissatisfaction with the Ustaša government, and a few even assisted prisoners in escaping from the camps (Kolstø, 2011, p. 39). The most important person in the Catholic Church in Croatia during this time, and the figure who remains a topic of debate decades after his death, is Alojzije Stepinac. During World War II, Stepinac served as the Archbishop of Zagreb, which was the highest-ranking position in the Catholic Church in Croatia (Gitman, 2006, p. 50). According to some sources, he also served as a chaplain for the Ustaša army, but this was never confirmed with complete certainty (Kolsto, 2011, p. 40).

To this day, Stepinac's life and work have been dissected repeatedly in pursuit of different narratives. To some, he is the embodiment of everything the Ustaše stood for, and he is the prime example of why the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches could never cooperate (which can further be translated into irreconcilable differences between Serbs and Croats). To others, he is a martyr who did everything in his power to help those who were persecuted under the Ustaše, all while believing in the right of Croats to their own independent state, and in the intrinsic value of Catholicism. While many aspects of his life and actions remain unknown to this day, there are certain facts

that can help us understand Stepinac, and in understanding him, can help us comprehend the role and attitudes of a number of priests in the Catholic Church in Croatia during this period.

While Stepinac did initially approve of the formation of the Independent State of Croatia, he soon began to criticize it. Some of the most notable criticisms that Stepinac directed at the Ustaša were from as late as 1943 and 1944. These are also the statements and sermons that are typically used to demonstrate that Stepinac wasn't a fervent supporter of the regime and, in fact, was condemned by the leaders of the Ustaša for his apparent lack of support. While Stepinac undoubtedly criticized the regime in some of his sermons and in his private notes and journals, it's also important to emphasize that he never made a public denunciation of the Ustaša regime. This, of course, relates to his belief that while the Ustaše were harmful, the socialist regime and another version of the Yugoslav state would be even worse for Croatia's independence and Croat statehood (Kolsto, 2011, p. 41). During 1943, Stepinac sent a letter to Pavelić, the leader of the Independent State of Croatia, and heavily criticized the existence of the concentration camp Jasenovac. In 1943, after seven refugee Slovene priests that were innocent of the crimes that they were captivated for were killed, Stepinac wrote to Pavelić and told him that Jasenovac is „a shameful fault for the Independent State of Croatia" and asked that „...the killers, who are the greatest misfortune for Croatia, be brought before a court of justice" (Tomashevich, 2001, p. 400).

It's evident from Stepinac's sermons and letters to various Ustaša leaders that he was a deeply conflicted and divided man during the existence of the Independent State of Croatia. While he never denounced the Ustaša regime during his visits to the Vatican or during his public appearances with Ustaša leaders, he also, on occasion, tried to advocate for the victims of the Ustaša regime. It's clear that he was guided by his belief in Croatian statehood and that he believed the Church could benefit from Croatian independence. It's also evident that, while he showed initial enthusiasm for the Ustaše, he soon realized that although the Ustaše might bring independence to Croatia, they also brought immense suffering and terror to many different groups.

Stepinac is often one of the central figures discussed when it comes to the role that the Catholic Church in Croatia played during World War II, and his conduct during the Ustaša regime reflects the broader ambiguity that characterized the Catholic Church's position during this period. Although he was the Archbishop of Zagreb, which is technically one of the highest-ranking positions in the Catholic Church of Croatia, even with his public (and private) protests and appeals, he didn't prevent the deportation of Jews, the mass executions of Serbs, Jews, and Roma people, as well as the forced conversions. From his sermons and testimonies, we can glance into the broader tensions within the Catholic Church that showcased a fragile balance between moral responsibility, institutional survival, and nationalistic tendencies. This ambiguity was not limited to Stepinac alone but permeated the Church as a whole. Despite isolated acts of resistance, the Catholic Church failed to adopt a unified stance against the atrocities committed by the Ustaša regime. This failure remains central to understanding the Church's wartime legacy and continues to shape ethnic and religious tensions in contemporary Serbia and Croatia.

Commented [TW4]: good, also true of Vatican

4.3.Catholic Church - National Myth and the Memory of Bleiburg

The events that took place after the war ended are often murky and disputed, much like many other aspects of this period. Immediately after the Partisans entered the Independent State of Croatia, and most concentration camps were liberated, Ustašas, Serbian Četniks, and other groups affiliated with the Nazi forces began to flee toward Austria, hoping they could surrender to the British forces. On May 15th, however, Ustašas were captured by British troops near the town of Bleiburg in Austria and handed over to the Partisans. The total number of victims remains unknown to this day – the closest that we have to the precise number of victims is 62,000 victims that were noted by name, and this includes all post-war victims that came from the territory of the Independent State of Croatia, many of whom were Croats themselves (Dizdar, 2005, p. 118).

In the years and decades that followed, Bleiburg, as one of the alleged socialist crimes, was suppressed by the new regime, and no one was held accountable for it. This would eventually lead to Bleiburg assuming a mythic and symbolic status in Croatian society, particularly after the collapse of the Socialist Yugoslav government, when narratives of World War II began to be reexamined. As Kolsto, citing Đerić, writes, myths thrive when there is a culture of silence and suppression (Kolsto, 2010, p. 1154). This is true both in the case of Bleiburg and in the case of Jasenovac - while they are not similar in nature, the suppression of their memory orchestrated by the socialist regime would lead to the formation of myths surrounding them. The memory of Bleiburg, which stands in contrast to the memory of Jasenovac, would become one of the focal points of Croatian remembrance of World War II. The Bleiburg commemorations would go on to develop strong religious undertones and come to symbolize Croatian martyrdom (Kolstø, 2010, p. 1154), a theme explored in subsequent sections of this paper. To understand why the Church insists on its own martyrdom and on Bleiburg as a central symbol of that narrative, the following chapter examines the suppression and position of the Catholic Church under the socialist regime, as well as the various national and social movements that emerged in connection with the Church during this period.

4.4.Position of the Catholic Church in the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia

Once World War II was over, and a new, socialist regime was established in Yugoslavia (the new regime was headed by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and at the head of the new Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia was Marshal Josip Broz Tito (Lampe & Allcock, 2025)), the regime declared itself atheist and began to view religious institutions as outdated and unnecessary. Although all religious communities were generally treated equally, with minimal privileges and limited influence, the Catholic Church was singled out as particularly harmful. This was largely due to its perceived support for the Ustaša regime during World War II, as well as its openly hostile stance toward the socialist government and the new political leadership.

Immediately after the war, and during the initial years of the new regime, many bishops from the Catholic Church were imprisoned, some were executed, and some disappeared. Among them were the Uniate bishop Šimrak, as well as Catholic bishops Čule of Mostar, Josip Srebrić of Krk, Ivan Stjepčević, and others. Clergymen who were accused of collaboration with the Ustaša regime were executed immediately, and many members of the clergy fled Croatia once the new regime was established (Velikonja, 2003, p. 200). Much of the Church's wealth, land, and property were nationalized during this period, and the Church was frequently accused by the socialist regime of being loyal to both the Vatican and the former state (Velikonja, 2003, p. 201). The Catholic Church was pushed to the margins of society, and the regime hoped it would eventually become irrelevant. This was intensified by an encyclical issued by Pope Pius XII in 1949, which prohibited Catholics from joining Socialist parties or supporting communism. This further alienated the Church from society, as they were unable to participate in decision-making processes or remain present in the political life of the country (Velikonja, 2003, p. 203).

The Church was, undoubtedly, in a disadvantaged position, which was further exacerbated by unstable relations between the Vatican and the socialist regime. After severing and reestablishing relations several times, full diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and the Vatican were finally established in 1970 (Velikonja, 2003, p. 205). In the period between the end of the war and 1970, the Church had limited influence. It was largely stripped of its finances and material possessions (such as land), and it lost many of its followers. However, one major event from the 1970s drastically changed the position of the Catholic Church, and that event was the "Croatian Spring" - a movement of Croatian national awakening that occurred between 1969 and 1971 (Velikonja, 2003, p. 205), which brought the Church to the forefront of the Croatian society as a significant pillar of national identity and aspirations for independence.

The Croatian national movement in Yugoslavia was not led by conservative leaders, such as the Catholic Church, or the surviving enemies of the Partisans from WWII. It was initiated by liberal socialists, who sought more power for the republics and autonomous provinces, which would come at the expense of the federal

government (Perica, 2004, p. 56). Once the movement took shape and form, and once the "Croatian Spring" began, the Church started to awaken from its decades-long dormancy once again. It experienced a remarkable increase in the number of believers who began to attend worship services, as well as in the number of adults who received baptisms (Perica, 2004, p. 58). There were several actions that the Catholic Church undertook with its newly gained influence, and most of these actions were preformed to reawaken the memory of the Croatian state, and to reignite the longstanding wish for Croatian statehood – the first Croatian saint was canonized, the cult of the Virgin Mary was established, and the number of believers, particularly those who went on pilgrimages, rose to almost 150,000 people. This was unprecedented for the Church during the socialist regime and helped the Church reestablish itself as a significant factor in Croatian independence (Perica, 2004, pp. 59–61).

After the initial regaining of influence in the 1970s, in the following decade, the Catholic Church was particularly focused on advocating for amnesty for political prisoners, and it concentrated on the rehabilitation of Cardinal Stepinac. The rehabilitation of Cardinal Stepinac happened for a number of reasons, but most importantly, it was due to the fact that the national reawakening was based on ethnicity, which included the revival of national historical figures (Barišić, 2017, p. 18), as well as the rehabilitation of controversial ones. The Catholic Church also engaged in various discussions about human rights and democracy (Velikonja, 2003, p. 206) and positioned itself as a key actor in the unstable political and social climate of late-stage socialist Yugoslavia. This would further contribute to the Catholic Church's significance during the Yugoslav Wars and to its importance in the Croatian independence movement.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in detail the revival of the Catholic Church during the 1970s and 1980s. However, it is important to emphasize that this revival energized the Croatian national movement, whose members felt they had been treated unjustly by Socialist Yugoslavia, just as they believed they had been mistreated in earlier versions of the Yugoslav state. They viewed the Church as an essential part of their national movement and saw it as a guarantor of their aspirations

for independence and of their centuries-long desire for statehood, and after national tensions in Yugoslavia intensified and the wars ensued, a large part of the society turned towards the Catholic Church to gain understanding and sense of their past. In the same way that the Catholic Church was one of the most crucial actors in the national awakening of the Croatian people in the 1980s, so was the Serbian Orthodox Church for the Serbian people. The following chapter provides a systematic overview of the role played by the Serbian Orthodox Church in the nation-building process in Serbia, highlighting how the Church mobilized this role to establish itself as a crucial political and social actor within Serbian society.

5. The Serbian Orthodox Church

In her paper on the politics of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Sabrina Ramet writes that "most, if not all, religious organizations would qualify as political organizations" (2005, p.1). This is due to a variety of factors; however, the one most relevant to this paper and our topic is that religious institutions (and in this case, both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia) strive for influence on earth and aim to translate their doctrines and principles into laws and conceptions of rights and values (Ramet, 2005, p.1). If one considers that in Serbia, most people place their trust in the Serbian Orthodox Church, as opposed to the police or the government, for example (N1, 2018), it is clear why the ideologies that the Church promotes have a significant impact on a large portion of the population, as well as the official policies of Serbia itself.

The connection between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian people dates back centuries and is one of the reasons why the Serbian Orthodox Church often portrays itself as the only institution that has "never in history let down the Serbs" (Barišić, 2017, p. 18). This was particularly evident during the national reawakening in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Orthodox Church attempted to depict its pro-war stance as self-defense. In Serbian society, the Orthodox Church is one of the main advocates of continuous Serbian victimhood (which especially became apparent during the Yugoslav Wars with the Church's persistent emphasis on Jasenovac, and Croatia more

broadly, as not only a site of past genocide against Serbs, but also of future, already planned genocides against them) (Barišić, 2017, p. 10). This function and the role of the Orthodox Church are further discussed in the following section of the paper. However, to fully grasp the significance of the Orthodox Church in Serbian society, particularly its historically close relationship with various forms of government, the following chapter first briefly examines the Church's role throughout the 20th century, focusing on the interwar period, World War II, and its position in socialist Yugoslavia.

5.1.Historical Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church

When reading the literature about the Serbian Orthodox Church, one often comes to the conclusion that the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian nation have been inseparable during the process of Serbia gaining statehood. Since the Middle Ages, and the earliest forms of the Serbian state, the Orthodox Church and the state have existed in a state of "symphony." Symphony, in the case of politics and religion, represents a relationship where both the Church and the state retain their autonomy but support one another and remain loyal to each other. This is evident in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has mostly remained loyal to various state authorities throughout the centuries and has rarely rebelled against them, unlike other clergy in some instances (Veković, 2024, pp. 66 - 67). During the period when Serbia was under Ottoman rule, the Orthodox Church held a particular place in the society - authors such as Jovan Radonić describe this peculiar situation as "a state in a state." In practice, this meant that the patriarch stood at the head of the people, and the people were predominantly loyal to the Church, rather than to any specific government (Veković, 2024, p. 70).

The Church invokes the memory of Ottoman rule to this day as an example of its significance and its close bond with the Serbian people, as well as the last period in which the Church undoubtedly held the most influence in Serbia and over Orthodox believers. The Church also emphasizes that, especially during periods of external domination, it preserved the "historical memory" of the Serbian people by maintaining

monasteries, frescoes, and church relics, and by functioning as a "place of memory" where the Serbian people could recall their past during times when their present and future were uncertain (Morozova, Kolobova, Korshunov, Mitrović, & Zhiganova, 2022, p. 678). This further highlights the emphasis that the Orthodox Church places on history, memory, and its past, which becomes particularly evident once we turn to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. The Church has consistently used memory to serve its goals, whether those were nationalistic in nature, aimed at securing its own interests, or otherwise. Once Ottoman rule ended and a new Serbian state began to emerge, the position of the Church became less clear, and the Church encountered conflicts with the new governments. However, the most significant change came once the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was established.

During the 1880s, Orthodoxy was established as the state religion in Serbia (Kingdom of Serbia Constitution, 1888, Article 3), and the king was required to be an Orthodox believer himself (Kingdom of Serbia Constitution, 1888, Article 4). However, once the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was established, King Alexander abolished the privileged status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1919 and declared all recognized religions equal (Barišić, 2017, p. 3). Both during the existence of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and after the name was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Church's properties and funds remained under state oversight. The Church was deeply disappointed with the position it found itself in, and this dissatisfaction was particularly evident when a Concordat between the Catholic Church and Yugoslavia was proposed in 1937. This prompted large demonstrations by the Orthodox Church, which saw the proposal as yet another example of its disadvantaged status in the newly formed Kingdom, and this largely reflected the Church's position at the onset of World War II (Barišić, 2017, pp. 4 -5).

Since the Orthodox Church traditionally considers itself both the religious and national guardian of the Serbian people, and holds the belief that the nation cannot survive without its Church (and vice versa) (Barišić, 2017, p. 16), the Orthodox clergy were deeply dissatisfied with the position they found themselves in within the newly

formed country. This dissatisfaction would continue to trouble the Church, particularly during the years of the socialist regime following the end of World War II.

5.2.The Orthodox Church During World War II

Considering that, on the brink of World War II, the Serbian Orthodox Church was already highly dissatisfied with its position in the newly formed Yugoslavia, and that it experienced significant hardships during the war, it is unsurprising that, after the war ended, the Church began to emphasize its victimhood, often overlooking its involvement with various political movements during the conflict, some of which had close ties to the Nazi regime. While a detailed analysis of the Church's political role during the war falls outside the scope of this paper, the following chapter briefly examines one of the most controversial Orthodox figures of the period: Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. As was the case in the analysis of Archbishop Stepinac, Velimirović does not represent the entire Church; however, by exploring his writings and the theology surrounding his legacy, we gain critical insight into how the Holocaust, and more specifically, the Jasenovac concentration camp, are understood by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

One of the movements with which the Church developed its closest ties during the war was the Četnik movement. Although the Četniks are often referred to as one of two anti-fascist movements in Yugoslavia (Gvozdanov & Sekulić, 2020, p. 18), historical evidence indicates that the movement also collaborated with the Nazi-aligned puppet government in Serbia, particularly under Milan Nedić (Sindbæk, 2009, p. 50). During the war, the Četnik movement was endorsed by King Peter II and, according to some accounts, was also financially supported by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The movement shared several characteristics with the Church, most notably, a strong anti-communist stance and support for a monarchy led by King Peter II, with the Orthodox Church as the social foundation of the new state. Authors such as Tomašević argue that while the Četniks did, at times, fight the Nazis, they were also

driven by the ideology of Greater Serbia and were not opposed to ethnic cleansing, particularly targeting Croats and Bosniaks (Gvozdanov & Sekulić, 2020, pp. 17–18).

The Četniks were also supported by the aforementioned Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, who remains one of the most divisive figures in Serbian Orthodoxy. After the war, Velimirović was quickly condemned by the socialist authorities; he was labeled a traitor, and his work was banned in Serbia, a ban that was only lifted in the 1990s. However, during the national awakening of the 1980s and 1990s, much like what occurred in Croatia, many right-wing figures were rehabilitated, and their histories were rewritten – this is evident in the case of Velimirović, who quickly rose to prominence as one of the greatest national figures since Saint Sava in the Orthodox Church, and who was, later on, canonized by the Church in 2003 (Byford, 2006, pp. 7–8).

In the early stages of his career, Velimirović was considered progressive and even liberal by some standards; however, in the 1930s, his theology shifted toward anti-communism and anti-Westernism, and most of his controversial works stem from this period. The largest controversy surrounding Velimirović centers on the blatant antisemitism in his writings. In his texts, Jews are portrayed as Christ-killers, a people who betrayed God, the "hidden force" behind secularization and modernism, and conspirators against "Christian Europe" (Byford, 2006, pp. 9–11). The antisemitism throughout Velimirović's papers is unmistakable; nonetheless, members and clergy of the Orthodox Church involved in Velimirović's rehabilitation have offered numerous justifications for his writings, most commonly claiming that they were "biblical" in nature and unrelated to Nazism (Byford, 2006, p. 16).

The process of Velimirović's rehabilitation illustrates how the memory of World War II is shaped and reshaped by the Serbian Orthodox Church to serve its current interests. Though the Church frequently invokes World War II to highlight Serbian suffering, it is quick to dismiss or ignore any accusations of antisemitism within its ranks, especially concerning Velimirović, who is now considered one of its most revered figures. This lack of accountability regarding Velimirović, as well as the Church's ties to the Četnik movement, which itself was complicit in Nazi collaboration,

exemplifies how the Church manipulates the memory of fascism and World War II to frame a narrative of Serbian victimhood, while actively neglecting or denying the suffering of other groups during the Holocaust, particularly Jews. This theme is further explored in the section of the paper that examines contemporary narratives of Jasenovac by the Serbian government and the Orthodox Church. For now, it is essential to recognize that the Orthodox Church has yet to reckon with its own troubling past related to fascism, with Velimirović's legacy standing as a potent symbol of that failure.

5.3. The Orthodox Church in the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia

The position of the Orthodox Church changed several times during the socialist regime, as did the position of the Catholic Church. While the Catholic Church was a "target" of the new regime due to both its alleged and actual collaboration with the fascist Croatian government, the Orthodox Church became a second "target" because of its long-established and mostly privileged role in society. Veković writes that the new regime sought to eliminate as many potential threats to its authority as possible during its first few years, which is why it targeted religion and religious communities (Veković, 2024, p. 76).

For the first time in the history of the Orthodox Church in Serbia, the state was officially separated from all religious communities, including the Orthodox Church, by Article 25 of the 1946 Constitution. Church activities were placed under governmental oversight (Constitution of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1946, Article 25), and the Constitution forbade the use of religious roles and beliefs in political discourse (Constitution of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1946, Article 25). After the new Constitution was enacted, the Orthodox Church endured several setbacks, including financial losses, but also territorial ones. The Yugoslav state attempted to establish several national churches, including the Macedonian and Montenegrin Churches. Although these efforts were not in accordance with Church canon, they aimed to diminish the privileges and authority of the Serbian

Orthodox Church, which maintained a staunchly anti-socialist stance even after Yugoslavia officially became a socialist state (Veković, 2024, p. 78).

Like other religious communities, including the Catholic Church in Croatia, the Orthodox Church remained in a disadvantaged position for several decades until the national reawakening began in the 1970s. In the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, several factors influenced the "de-atheization" of society. First, the growing political and socioeconomic crisis, which was especially severe in the 1980s, turned a large number of young people toward the Church, which they saw as detached from the current turmoil (Barišić, 2017, p. 18). The Church's antisocialist stance, as well as its general anti-establishment position, further generated solidarity among Serbs who were dissatisfied with the social conditions (Vesić & Peno, 2020, p. 272). Second, the different republics in the Federation of Yugoslavia began to experience national reawakening based on ethnicity during this period, and, as previously discussed, the Serbian Orthodox Church is closely tied to Serbian ethnic identity. This is why, in addition to the revival of national identity and historic figures, religion also emerged as a key factor in the newly forming, independent state-building process. People turned to the Serbian Orthodox Church as a guardian of national identity and cultural customs, and by doing so, simultaneously granted the Church the political legitimacy it sought (Barišić, 2017, p. 18).

From a theological standpoint, during this period, the Church organized a number of public activities, such as the transfer of Holy Prince Lazar's remains (Vesić & Peno, 2020, p. 266) and the construction of Saint Sava's Temple in Belgrade (Vesić & Peno, 2020, p. 264). Another important Church activity during this period was the dedication of the renovated temple in Jasenovac by Patriarch German in 1984. In the temple, alongside the remembrance of Jasenovac's victims, also stood the memory of the Battle of Kosovo and the Albanian cavalry, referring to the retreat of Serbian King Petar I, the people, and the Army during World War One through the Albanian mountains on their way to Greece (Ćulibrk, n.d.). These activities further reinforced the Church's role as a social actor within a transforming society, while reviving the memory of its historical influence and importance in previous centuries. It also enabled

individuals, many of whom had been raised without a strong religious background, to foster a sense of allegiance to the Church, all while the Church actively invoked the memory of past suffering to legitimize its growing nationalism.

This newfound authority and influence enabled the Church to establish itself not only as a vital social actor but also as a significant political force. In the climate of rising nationalism, the Orthodox Church, as a national institution by nature, positioned itself as a "protector" of the Serbian people. This often included the repeated emphasis on Serbian suffering, and the Orthodox Church selected Kosovo and Jasenovac as its two main symbols of victimhood, which is explored in the following section of this thesis.

6. Mobilization of Jasenovac's Memory

6.1.Jasenovac in Yugoslavia

The memory and history of Jasenovac were nearly erased during the existence of socialist Yugoslavia. In the years following the war, there were some efforts to remember and comprehend Jasenovac and the crimes committed there. Immediately after the war, the Yugoslav government proclaimed that 1.7 million people had lost their lives during the conflict. Shortly afterward, the *Report of the State Commission of Croatia for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupation Forces and their Collaborators* from 1946 stated that the number of victims from Jasenovac was between 500,000 and 600,000 individuals (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 809). Several foreign researchers attempted to determine the number of victims from Jasenovac in the decades that followed.

The number of victims that was determined by the Tito regime served to establish the regime's myths about the wartime Croatian state. While in the case of Tito's regime these alleged figures served to bolster the success of their struggle against fascism, these numbers would be repeatedly invoked by various Serbian actors in the decades that followed (and most notably, in the years preceding and during the

Yugoslav Wars) as evidence of the supposed genocidal nature of the Croats (Kolsto, 2012, p. 1154). Although many of these actors were openly anti-socialist and shared few positions with the former socialist regime, the victim figures promoted by that regime quickly became a key talking point among Serbian nationalists.

6.2. The Flower Monument

While Jasenovac was rarely mentioned during the socialist regime, a monument was commissioned two decades after the war ended, and in 1966, a statue in the shape of a stone flower was placed in Jasenovac. Of the monument, the architect Bogdan Bogdanović stated that "he envisioned a lyrical memorial that stood as a metaphysical statement on meditation, feelings of reconciliation, and a 'termination of the inheritance of hatred that passes from generation to generation" (Spomenik Database, n.d.). Jasenovac's memorialization is a controversial topic – specifically, the controversy surrounds the flower monument itself, as well as the general meaning and importance of Holocaust memorialization. Monuments themselves, and especially Holocaust monuments, appear as a specific research topic, and the Jasenovac monument could be explored in great detail in the context of broader Holocaust memorialization. While this is out of the scope of this paper, to understand the place that the monument itself holds in the memory of Jasenovac today, in the following section we briefly examine the meaning behind Holocaust monuments and memorials, and explore why these monuments, to this day, awaken different interpretations of both history, but also memory.

As Huyssen writes, our present and the current context shape our remembrance – more specifically, what, as well as how, we remember. In some cases, he states, this can turn into a mythic memory of sorts, and can become a "stumbling block to the needs of the present, rather than an opening in the continuum of history" (1994, p. 4). During the era of modernism, monuments were mostly seen as a thing of the past and were seen as a contradiction to modernity itself. In contrast, during the postmodernist era, and especially during the memory boom starting in the 1960s, monuments and

museums became one of the central focuses of different societies. While this revival of museums and monuments on one hand served as an antithesis of modernism, it also tried to preserve the memory of those who were alive during the Third Reich and the fascist and Nazi regimes, and who survived them (Huyssen, 1994, pp. 11–12).

The whole existence of Holocaust monuments was put into question by different artists and social actors. Some claimed that, since the fascist regime was obsessed with monuments, fascist tendencies would also be present in all future monuments, which is why the Holocaust should be remembered differently. Others claimed, similarly to Adorno's claim (that was later retracted) that it was "barbaric to write poetry after the Holocaust" (Schmidt, 2018), that to build a monument to such a horrific event would be barbaric in and of itself. However, in the decades after the War, several monuments were erected and continue to be dedicated to the Holocaust, whether generally or adjusted to the local context of World War II. In the United States of America, for example, the monuments mostly portrayed the US soldiers as liberators. In the Soviet Union, most monuments erected were focused on the war against Nazism, not specifically on the ethnicity of those who were affected, which is why the Jewish context is rarely seen in Soviet monuments (Huyssen, 1994, p. 15).

Some monuments and museums commemorate those who died during the war, others commemorate those who were a part of the resistance, while others focus specifically on the Holocaust itself (Young, 1994, p. 19). All of these monuments, however, are burdened by the understanding of history through the eyes of those who designed them, as well as the national myths and explanations of the context in which they exist. Some historians even state that these memorials often do not concentrate memory itself, but displace it, and relieve a community of its own interior memory work that needs to be done (Young, 1994, p. 20). The Jasenovac memorial has been criticized many times, usually for its alleged lack of meaning. It mostly exists in the local context and leaves out the Jewish experience, and it's not the only monument to do so (Young, 1994, p. 20). However, in the examination of this monument, it's important to understand that, as all monuments do, it participates in the creation and

recreation of the activity of memory (Young, 1994, p. 38), and that it's, to this day, exposed to different understandings and interpretations of itself.

The Stone Flower Monument in Jasenovac (Borba, 2022)

This monument served primarily for state commemorations, which aligned with the official state narrative regarding Jasenovac – that it was a concentration camp for anti-fascists, and that Croatia, alongside other republics that constituted Yugoslavia, fought and triumphed over the forces of fascism. This was largely the extent of Jasenovac remembrance. The architect of the monument and the monument itself were repeatedly accused of lacking meaning, and the socialist regime was criticized for concealing the truth about Jasenovac and about the nationalist and racist Ustaša laws that led to the murder and torture of tens of thousands of Serbs, Roma people, Jews, and anti-fascist Croats. Due to the lack of commemorations of Jasenovac in any meaningful way, as well as the fact that almost no independent research was conducted about Jasenovac during the existance of the socialist Yugoslavia, once the socialist

regime fell, Jasenovac was opened to different interpretations and memories, and both the Catholic Church in Croatia, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church, used this to create their own narratives and meanings about the past, and specifically, Jasenovac.

6.3. Jasenovac and the fall of Yugoslavia

In the tumultuous period before (and during) the fall of Yugoslavia, which was marked by the Yugoslav Wars, Serbs perceived Jasenovac as a symbol of their suffering and viewed their actions against the Croats during the Yugoslav Wars as preventive of a "repeated genocide." On the other hand, for Croats, Bleiburg was used as an example of "Serbian genocidal aggression" and as evidence of Serbia's desire for political domination. This echoed earlier Croatian ideas, developed decades before the Yugoslav Wars, in which Croats saw themselves as oppressed by the Greater Serbian agenda and as victims of the Yugoslav regime. In this way, the reality and history of Jasenovac became the truth of the new conflicts of the 1990s. Jasenovac appeared as a simultaneous moment in history – a moment that somehow exists in the past, yet also plays itself out in the present, and will continue to unfold in potential future conflicts (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 812).

Political programs that aim to relive a moment from the past can only succeed if there is an audience receptive to these ideas, and if there is a collective memory of the events in question that is shared by the general public. This memory is then, in turn, shaped to serve political propaganda or objectives, and in the case of Jasenovac, becomes a permanent fixture in the memory of a particular people. The past is so embedded in the present of Serbs and Croats that Ruiz Jimenez stated that "journalists who covered the wars in the Balkans during the 1990s could not easily infer whether the atrocities that local people spoke about had taken place just a day before, in 1941, 1841, or even 1441" (Odak & Benčić, 2016, pp. 815–816). It is, therefore, not difficult to comprehend why a historical trauma such as Jasenovac could mobilize a large portion of the population on either side. Milan Tadić, a Serb from Donji Lapac, said that the memories of WWII were used during the Yugoslav Wars to instill fear among

the people of a potential new genocide or new concentration camps. These individuals were presented with fear and aggression as a response to a perceived genocidal threat from the Croatian side, which fueled their anxiety and pushed them toward violence (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 817).

6.3.1. The Serbian Orthodox Church during the Fall of Yugoslavia

One of the first events around which the Church massively mobilized during the 1980s was the student demonstrations in Kosovo in 1981, when Albanians from Kosovo protested and demanded more autonomy within Yugoslavia. In response, the Church issued the *Appeal for the Protection of the Serbian People and Its Holy Sites in Kosovo,* published in 1982, which asserted that Kosovo was not merely a territorial issue but the core of the Serbian people's spiritual and historical identity. This appeal introduced the idea that Kosovo is the Serbian Jerusalem, and the idea that to protect its identity and history, the Serbian people must fight for Kosovo, just like their ancestors did in 1389. The central theme of the Church's mobilization around Kosovo became the Serbian suffering caused by Albanians in Kosovo, and the Church, similarly to the case of Jasenovac, often used graphic and gruesome imagery to spread its message (Subotić, 2019a, pp. 86 – 87).

It was during this period that the Serbian Orthodox Church fully embraced the narrative of victimhood surrounding both itself and the Serbian people. Both the Church and the Serbian population were depicted as victims of various forces - the Vatican, the United States, neighboring countries (particularly those with majority populations of different ethnic and religious backgrounds), and others. During this time, the memory of past suffering became a tool for political propaganda for the Church, particularly in its rhetoric regarding Croatia and Kosovo. In both cases, the Church invoked the past genocide against Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia as a warning of an alleged impending genocide threatening the Serbian nation. This narrative, combined with the already unstable political and economic situation in the

country, encouraged the population to adopt these beliefs and to see the looming threat as a fate comparable to that of Christ himself (Subotić, 2019a, p. 88).

The Orthodox Church not only emphasized its suffering but often invoked the suffering of Christ as a metaphor for its experiences. This rhetorical strategy was not unique to the Orthodox Church; a striking parallel can be drawn with the Catholic Church in Croatia, as both churches used the life of Christ to symbolize collective suffering. As we demonstrate later in this paper, the Catholic Church equated the massacre at Bleiburg with Christ's path to the cross. Conversely, the Serbian Orthodox Church used the perceived threat facing the Serbian people to liken their suffering to that of Christ. While the Yugoslav Wars were not religious and the Churches cannot be held directly responsible for the wars themselves, neither did they act to prevent them; in fact, they often contributed to the surrounding propaganda (Barišić, 2017, p. 20). It is evident that both Churches, by justifying their agendas through parallels with Christ's suffering, awakened a sense of righteousness in Serbs and Croats alike, convincing them that their suffering was the only true suffering.

On the eve of the Yugoslav Wars, and during the wars themselves, the Serbian Orthodox Church used the memory of World War II as both a shield for the crimes committed by Serbs and as evidence of ongoing victimization, and the narratives it invoked presented Serbs as victims not only of the Ustaše but of the entire Croatian population. During this period, the Church undertook several actions perceived by Croats as reopening old wounds - for instance, it demanded the exhumation of those killed during World War II so they could be buried according to Orthodox rites and, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, the Patriarch both opened the Church Sabor in Jasenovac and held a liturgy on the 50th anniversary of the "crucifixion" of the Serbs (Ramet, 2005, p. 3). It is important to note that liturgies for the victims of Jasenovac were held multiple times throughout that year, but not in April, the traditional time for commemorating the victims of Jasenovac.

As early as 1984, but more intensely as time went on, the Orthodox Church published several papers and documents about the atrocities that occurred in the Independent State of Croatia, often drawing comparisons between the crimes

committed then and the current situation in Serbia. In 1990, the Church issued statements describing the "difficult, almost occupation-like conditions" to which Serbs living in Croatia were exposed (Subotić, 2019a, p. 88). Patriarch Pavle went so far as to declare in 1991 that, due to the past genocide committed against Serbs in Croatia, Serbs must reside in Serbia, to escape a „second genocide“. He once again used the narrative of an alleged new genocide as a fear tactic, writing that “for the second time in this century, the Serbian people are faced with genocide and expulsion from the territories where they lived for centuries” (Saggau, 2024, p. 6). The Orthodox Church also used the concept of a just war to justify and absolve the crimes committed by the Serbian and Yugoslav armies. According to this theory, the atrocities carried out by Serbian forces were framed as acts of defense, committed in response to the alleged threat of a second genocide (Barišić, 2017, p. 20).

Members of the clergy also visited soldiers in barracks during the wars, and some clergy members, such as Hieromonk Gavrilo, even went so far as to give blessings to Serbian paramilitary groups. By extending their role far beyond pastoral care for the Orthodox faithful, members of the Church actively promoted nationalist propaganda during the wars and likely contributed to both the conflict and the fears of the Serbian population in Croatia (Subotić, 2019a, p. 89).

The presence and actions of both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia during the Yugoslav Wars remain a significant obstacle to potential collaboration between the two. This is especially true because the memory of the Yugoslav Wars is still vivid in the minds of both peoples and is often inextricably linked with memories of earlier conflicts. Relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia were of major importance to multiethnic relations between Serbs and Croats, and based on the evidence provided, it is clear that neither church was willing to confront past crimes in any way other than those which emphasized its personal suffering and victimhood. In such circumstances, the chances for reconciliation were slim, and the relations between both the people and the churches continuously deteriorated during the wars.

6.3.2. The Catholic Church during the Fall of Yugoslavia

As already mentioned, for social and political movements in Serbia, the suffering of Serbs during past conflicts became the main element of their political mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s. The national and political movements in Serbia viewed the treatment of Jasenovac and its memory during the socialist period as appalling, and these unacknowledged traumas and recollections were utilized as a tool of political propaganda, particularly aimed at Serbs living in Croatia (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 810). Once the socialist state began to collapse, many narratives that were previously accepted as unquestionable opened up to alternative interpretations, and in most instances, nationalistic reinterpretations. The fact that Jasenovac was presented as a "shrine of civil religion of brotherhood and unity" left profound marks on Serbian national identity and on the memory of Serbian victims from Jasenovac (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 820).

The socialist regime attempted to portray Jasenovac as a "shared tragedy" of those who resisted fascism, in order to maintain the supposed unity of the nations that now comprised the federal state. This, in turn, led to the suppression of certain historical narratives and complex emotions surrounding Jasenovac. Because these issues were largely left unaddressed during the socialist period, they resurfaced with renewed intensity during the Yugoslav Wars (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 821). The biggest problem for the socialist government lay in the fact that the Croatian (Ustaša) administration of the Jasenovac camp committed grave crimes against another Yugoslav nation, which significantly complicated the narrative of brotherhood, unity, and cooperation that was the central objective of the socialist regime (Subotić, 2019b, p.147).

Once the memory of Jasenovac became present in the political and social discourse of the 1980s, Serbs began to perceive Jasenovac as a symbol of collective suffering. The Croats, in turn, interpreted this as being collectively blamed for the crimes of their ancestors. To demonstrate that they, too, had endured suffering during WWII, Croatians began to emphasize the memory of Bleiburg and the alleged crimes

committed by the Partisans against Croatian civilians. They also began to reframe the memory of the Independent State of Croatia – while they regarded it as a flawed state formation, they also perceived the Independent State of Croatia as a step toward the realization of their aspirations for statehood and independence (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 811). Once Yugoslavia began to slowly crumble in the mid-to-late 1980s, Croatia decided to form its identity based on three pillars – ethnic nationalism, affiliation with European culture, and preservation of the memory of its independence war. Some actions undertaken to support these claims included distinguishing Croatian as a separate language and altering the ethnic origins of the Croat people (Subotić, 2019b, p. 150). The aspirations of Croatian statehood were still present; however, they carried the burden of World War II and the Ustaša regime. The memory of World War II had to be reexamined and reshaped to align with these decades-long aspirations for Croatian statehood, which led to the emergence of different interpretations of the Independent State of Croatia and its relationship with Serbia.

During the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Croatia was so dissatisfied with its treatment within Yugoslavia and with official Yugoslav policies (including those relating to the Independent State of Croatia and Jasenovac) that it briefly renamed all public institutions bearing the names of Yugoslav leaders after prominent Croatian figures, including leaders of the Independent State of Croatia (Subotić, 2019b, p. 151). The memory of the Ustaša past continued to be distorted and reshaped well into the 21st century. For instance, a memorial plaque was mounted by the Croatian government in 2011 at the Stara Gradiška camp, commemorating political prisoners who perished in the Stara Gradiška prison - completely ignoring the fact that Stara Gradiška was a concentration camp during the Independent State of Croatia and that many more than just political prisoners perished during this period (Subotić, 2019b, p. 152).

Jasenovac was mobilized not only by minor movements and figures on the political scene, but it was also utilized by those at the helm of the Yugoslav republics for various political objectives. For instance, Tuđman, the then-president of Croatia, referred to the “myth of Jasenovac” in his writings, claiming that Jasenovac was used solely to prove the “genocidal nature of Croats.” He also discussed the number of

victims in detail and proposed a figure that is lower than nearly any number suggested by other researchers (Odak & Benčić, 2016, p. 812). It is not difficult to believe that Jasenovac was truly a profoundly painful episode in history, both for Serbs and for Croats. It is crucial to remember that, although the period in which the Independent State of Croatia existed might have seemed like a distant past, in reality, only 45 years had passed between the establishment of the socialist regime and the onset of the Yugoslav Wars. Many of those wounds remained unhealed, and they were once again reopened by various political actors who exploited Jasenovac and the horrors of the fascist Independent State of Croatia for their own goals.

7. Jasenovac Today – A Past That Does Not Pass

The legacy of World War II remains difficult to grapple with for both the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Orthodox Church in Serbia. The absence of substantial, independent research on the concentration camps and the Ustaša regime in the years following the end of World War II created a significant gap that various political, social, and religious actors have attempted to fill since the collapse of Yugoslavia. Once Croatia gained its independence, the Catholic Church became one of the most influential actors in society. Its influence, which, as already demonstrated, had been growing since the 1970s, was finally solidified in the broader public sphere. However, this also meant that the Catholic Church had to confront the painful memory of the past and determine a direction for moving forward.

7.1.The Catholic Church After Yugoslavia

After Croatia gained independence, and the Church could finally establish itself as a significant actor in the newly sovereign country, it initiated the process of rehabilitating those it deemed wronged by the socialist regime. This primarily involved Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, who was declared a martyr in 1998 by Pope John Paul

II. The Church also began organizing commemorations for the victims of the Bleiburg massacre in 2005. The first mass was conducted by Cardinal Vinko Puljić, and commemorations officiated by Church representatives continued in the subsequent years. Those who were killed at Bleiburg were portrayed as martyrs, and the Ustaša members were presented as innocent victims (Kolsto, 2011, p. 43). The Catholic Church in Croatia assumed a leading role in both the creation and preservation of the Bleiburg myth. Since the first official mass was held in 2005, the highest-ranking church officials have continued to visit Bleiburg (Kolsto, 2012, p. 1166). For the Catholic Church in Croatia, Bleiburg occupies a significant position in the myth of statehood; it is not only presented as evidence of Croatian victimhood but is also depicted as the first "station of the cross", the fourteen stages of the journey that Jesus made to his death. By likening Bleiburg to Christ's path, the Church further perpetuates the myth of Bleiburg and assigns it religious undertones, drawing explicit parallels between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the Croat people at Bleiburg (Kolsto, 2012, p. 1169).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Bleiburg commemorations have frequently been attended by some of the highest-ranking politicians in the country, including current and former presidents. While some journalists claim that there is no politicization at Bleiburg, messages highlighting Croatian suffering are often heard, and Bleiburg is frequently compared to Serbian crimes from the 1990s Yugoslav Wars. As some, such as Ivan Fumić, argue, this further perpetuates hatred toward both Serbs and anti-fascists (Kolsto, 2012, p. 1163). Another recurring issue at the Bleiburg commemorations is the presence of Ustaša insignia and memorabilia. Although such symbols are technically banned at these events, they are often visible among attendees and occasionally used as decoration at the commemorations (RTV, 2010).

The Bleiburg massacre has been commemorated since at least the mid-1960s, initially by surviving Ustaša members and their supporters. These commemorations were primarily organized to honor the Ustaša regime and the Independent State of Croatia. Over time, the meaning of the commemoration has shifted, and it is widely accepted in Croatian society as commemoration of Croatian suffering during World

War II. This is another example of competitive victimhood, practiced both by the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. By declaring those killed at Bleiburg as martyrs, and by using the memory of Bleiburg to contrast with that of Jasenovac, the Church, along with political actors in Croatia, is attempting to level the moral narrative both domestically and internationally, using the memory of war crimes as evidence of their suffering.

Conversely, the commemoration of Jasenovac is regarded by the Catholic Church in Croatia as significantly less important, and the Church is typically represented only by a local parish priest, who does not deliver a speech or take part in the ceremony in any meaningful way (Kolsto, 2011, p. 43). The first pilgrimage made by the Catholic Church to Jasenovac took place in 2009, when Cardinal Bozanić, along with 30 other priests, visited Jasenovac, Stara Gradiška (a concentration camp for women), the Jasenovac memorial grounds, and the nearby town of Petrinja (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2009). What stood out during this visit was that the Cardinal and the priests never approached the Flower Monument that stands in Jasenovac, but instead turned away approximately 200 meters before it. The added stop in Petrinja was also unrelated to World War II, as it was selected because the town had been destroyed by Serbs during the Yugoslav Wars (Kolsto, 2011, pp. 47-48). By combining crimes committed against Serbs during World War II and crimes committed against Croats in the Yugoslav Wars, he effectively merged two distant places in history and contrasted one crime with a different one, showing again that the present and the past stays connected in the minds of those who remember both Croatian, but also Serbian attrocities.

Commented [TW5]: nice detail

During the masses that Cardinal Bozanić held in Jasenovac, he condemned both fascism and communism and emphasized that "the Church had nothing to apologize for." He also spoke about the "victims of communism" and the crimes of the socialist regime. Many criticized this visit and the Cardinal's remarks, arguing that to mention both Bleiburg and Jasenovac in the same speech was effectively equivalent to mourning both the victims and their perpetrators. Experts on the Holocaust, such as Goldstein, harshly criticized Bozanić for not walking up to the Flower Monument and kneeling at

the crypt containing the victims' remains, stating that "those who have not walked up to the monument have not truly been in Jasenovac" (RTV, 2009).

The controversies over Jasenovac memorializations are still ongoing – in 2016, Jewish and Serbian organizations announced that they would boycott the official commemoration at the site of the Jasenovac death camp, because the government was downplaying the crimes committed by the Ustaša regime, and both Jewish and Serbian organizations held separate commemorations. This boycott would continue until 2020 (Kremenović, 2016). These commemorations show not only a different way of remembering past crimes, but also a different way of remembering Jasenovac and the history of World War II. While the boycott ended in 2020, the accusations of Holocaust revisionism in Croatia continue to this day. This was not the only controversy from 2016, however. During the same year, the Zagreb County Court overturned Stepinac's conviction of collaboration from 1946, stating that the original conviction only served as "revenge against Stepinac" (BBC, 2016). This was another step in the rehabilitation of individuals whom both the Catholic Church and broader Croatian society consider to have been falsely accused, and it will likely not be the last example of such actions.

7.2. The Serbian Orthodox Church After Yugoslavia

Shortly before the Catholic Church in Croatia began commemorating Bleiburg, the Serbian Orthodox Church established its Jasenovac Committee of the Synod of Bishops in 2003 and stated that its goal was to properly address the tragedy of World War II. This Committee, however, immediately shifted its focus away from the Holocaust as a whole and concentrated specifically on Jasenovac and the victims of the Ustaša genocide. It emphasized that "the Nazis killed Serbs and Jews equally," and it soon began to receive criticism from various directions. This committee was criticized primarily for the "Croatization" of Holocaust remembrance, diverting the focus from the Holocaust and placing it directly on Jasenovac. As Yilmaz writes, this shared sense of competitive victimhood not only impacts intergroup relations negatively, but it also undermines mutual understanding between groups in the process (2004, pp. 8-9).

Some Serbian authors, such as Dinko Davidov and Vasilije Krestić, propagated the idea that Jasenovac was by far the most horrific concentration camp, and the notion of Ustaša violence continues to be used to isolate Jasenovac as a unique site of suffering that was unparalleled during the Holocaust (Subotić, 2019b, p. 98). This, along with the Church's insistence on the sainthood of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (while disregarding and excusing his writings), shows that the Church often uses the memory of the Holocaust, both generally and specifically in the territory of Croatia, as a case of exclusive Serbian victimhood. Doing so not only erases the memory of other groups who suffered, most notably, in the case of Jasenovac, the Jews and Roma, but also demonstrates that the Church believes the Serbian people endured the greatest suffering and that, therefore, any actions they take afterward are acts of defense intended to prevent further harm.

It's important to recognize that while the Orthodox Church may have had valid reasons to initiate this commission (and it was praised by various organizations focused on securitization during the initial years of its work), its efforts have continuously been utilized by the Serbian government both to enhance its international relations, to equate its suffering with that of the Jews (in an effort to improve its relationship with Israel), and to downplay its role in crimes committed by Serbia in other countries, particularly during the Yugoslav Wars (Subotić, 2019b, p. 100). In Byford's writings on Holocaust memorialization in Serbia, particularly regarding the Jasenovac Committee, he states that the Committee's primary goal is to preserve the memory of specifically Serbian suffering. In doing so, and by equating Jasenovac with Kosovo, as the Committee did in 2003, the memory of the camp becomes strictly associated with Serbian victimhood (2011, p. 61). Although the Committee technically intended to focus on Holocaust education, it largely uses the Holocaust to compare Serbian and Jewish suffering. This is evident in Patriarch Pavle's message to Israeli leadership on the 50th anniversary of Yad Vashem, in which he stated that the Nazis "killed Serbs and Jews equally" and emphasized that their remains lie together in shared graves (Projekat Rastko, 2003).

By equating Serbian suffering with that of the Jews, not only is the global and total nature of the Holocaust diminished and overlooked, but the entire memory of the

Holocaust in Serbia becomes centered around the Jasenovac camp (Byford, 2011, p. 62). Both the Serbian government and the Orthodox Church frequently emphasize the brutality of the Ustaše's methods, and this is reflected in Orthodox religious art, which often portrays the Jasenovac Martyrs (officially recognized by the Church in 2003) at the moment of their deaths, highlighting the horrific ways in which they were killed. In doing so, the memory of the perpetrators' sadism becomes the defining feature of the camp's legacy, rather than the lives of the victims themselves. By focusing on their deaths, the Church contributes to a "gradation of suffering," measuring atrocity by the number of victims or the cruelty of the methods used. This not only shifts the focus away from the victims but also inadvertently humanizes the Nazis. For example, when contrasting the gruesome killings in Jasenovac with the gas chambers in Auschwitz, the Nazis are portrayed as almost more humane (Byford, 2011, p. 63). Through its engagement with both Holocaust memory and the legacy of Jasenovac in this manner, Jasenovac becomes framed not as part of the broader Holocaust, but rather as a uniquely Serbian tragedy, and essentially, the Serbian equivalent of the Holocaust (Byford, 2011, p. 64).

The reimagining of the Holocaust through the lens of Jasenovac, and the emphasis on the brutality and suffering that occurred there, was particularly evident in an exhibition held at the United Nations Headquarters in 2018, organized by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main author and lead curator of the exhibition was the aforementioned Gideon Greif. The exhibition contained several historiographical inaccuracies. Jasenovac was directly compared to Nazi camps in multiple displays, with claims that Jasenovac was far worse than the Nazi camps. Additionally, numerous photographs depicting the bodies of victims, some of which were not even taken at Jasenovac, were presented alongside the assertion that approximately 700,000 people were killed at the camp (Kužnar & Pavlaković, 2023, p. 68). This exhibition stands as one of the clearest examples of Serbian revisionism regarding Jasenovac to date. Although the Serbian Orthodox Church was not officially involved in the exhibition, the similarities between the Serbian government's official narrative and the approach taken by the Jasenovac Committee to memorialize the camp are evident.

7.3. The Stepinac Commission

While this thesis presents several disagreements between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church regarding the memory of World War II and its aftermath, it is also important to note that, in recent years, there were attempts at reconciliation between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church regarding the crimes committed during World War II, and specifically, concerning the works and the person of Alojzije Stepinac. In 2017, a joint commission between the two churches was established at the request of Pope Francis, who halted the process of Stepinac's canonization and requested that the Catholic Church engage in dialogue on this topic with the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church had openly objected to the potential canonization of Stepinac, so this was a move aimed at initiating discussion and potential collaboration between the two churches. Some of the highest-ranking personnel from both churches attended six meetings that were coordinated in order to reach a mutual agreement. While this was a preliminary step toward possible reconciliation, it is notable that they encountered multiple obstacles during the meetings, and that both churches were unable to form a unified stance, primarily due to the fact that they hold opposing views on both the Independent State of Croatia and, more specifically, Stepinac (Cvetković, 2017) However, multiple members of the clergy who were involved in the Commission stated that it was a step in the right direction towards healing.

8. The Conclusion – Thesis Findings

This thesis aimed to understand how the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church engage in memory politics surrounding Jasenovac, and how these narratives further contribute to mutual competitive victimhood. Findings show that both Churches shaped narratives of suffering that align with broader nationalistic discourses and that both institutions have used Jasenovac as a symbol of moral superiority, victimhood, and political legitimacy. Furthermore, relations between Serbs

and Croats have often been both shaped by and reflected in the actions and narratives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia. While the Serbian Orthodox Church functions as a national church, the Catholic Church in Croatia, though universal by nature, has adopted distinct regional characteristics and has long been engaged with the history, memory, and politics of Croatian society.

This thesis has offered an overview of the significance these institutions hold within their respective societies and has shown the impact they have on shaping collective memory and public understanding of key historical events. To claim they hold absolute power over public opinion or policy would be inaccurate; yet, to ignore the enduring influence they have exercised for centuries, and continue to exercise, would be equally misleading. As previously mentioned, and as Ramet notes, religious institutions are political by nature. They not only strive for influence in political and public life but also participate in shaping historical memory by interpreting political events through religious language and imagery, making them feel more intimate and meaningful to their believers.

A key finding of this research is that Jasenovac continues to serve as a powerful and recurring motif in the religious narratives of both Churches. By understanding Jasenovac not only as a site of unimaginable atrocities but also as a symbol of conflict, trauma, and unresolved suffering, we gain deeper insight into the ongoing tensions between Serbs and Croats, as well as into what both communities seek from their religious institutions - to be acknowledged, understood, and heard. The competitive victimhood explored in previous chapters, visible not only in narratives of World War II but also in interpretations of events before and after, should not be viewed solely as a struggle for political influence or recognition. It also reflects a profound, unhealed wound and a plea for understanding and dialogue, one that, until recently, has remained largely unaddressed by either Church.

Both of these religious institutions have instrumentalized Jasenovac and, in the case of the Catholic Church, Bleiburg, to emphasize their own community's suffering at the hands of the other and to absolve themselves of any perceived wrongdoing. They have often appropriated the memory of victims for political propaganda, thereby

disrespecting those same victims in the process. By exploiting painful historical memories in this way, these institutions have contributed to deepening resentment and perpetuating cycles of blame and hostility. As a result, Jasenovac has assumed a central place in the collective memory of both peoples, not merely as a historical site of horror, but as a symbol of a past that refuses to pass - one that remains embedded in present-day interpretations and identities.

While Jasenovac and Bleiburg are often presented as singular focal points of suffering, they symbolize much broader histories of trauma and violence. Consequently, they are rarely allowed to be remembered simply as they were; instead, they are burdened with representing entire narratives of national victimhood and moral legitimacy. This dynamic opens important avenues for future research, particularly concerning how earlier conflicts have shaped those that followed. In the Yugoslav context, it would be especially valuable to examine how the memory of World War II was mobilized in the lead-up to the Yugoslav Wars, and how unresolved trauma contributed to renewed violence. While this thesis offers only a limited overview of the Yugoslav Wars and the role of both Churches during the conflict, it would be tremendously important to explore how these two institutions may have contributed to the violence during that tumultuous period in their history.

There are several notable limitations to this thesis. First, due to time and resource constraints, it primarily relies on secondary sources such as existing literature, public statements, and church documents. While ethnographic fieldwork could provide a deeper understanding, it would need to be conducted with great care, given the sensitivity of the topic. Second, the thesis focuses mainly on how high-ranking clergy and official church bodies interpret Jasenovac. Although the broader societal impact of these narratives is discussed, it would be valuable to explore how they are received, internalized, or contested by ordinary believers. Additionally, while the topic of reconciliation is briefly touched upon, the thesis centers on the framework of memory politics. A more explicit focus on reconciliation could offer further insights into the role of religious institutions in post-conflict healing and dialogue.

Finally, as this thesis demonstrates, the lack of genuine dialogue and cooperation between the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church has hindered healing and reconciliation for decades. Rather than fostering understanding and forgiveness, these institutions have too often used the memory of war to justify or propagate further hostility. Even after the end of the Yugoslav Wars, both Churches did little to promote healing, at least until very recently. These findings reaffirm the importance of understanding cultural memory not as a passive reflection of the past, but as an active process shaped by institutions. While the historical dynamics explored in this thesis, as well as its conclusions, suggest that there is currently limited space for reconciliation between these two communities, it is important to emphasize that, just as these institutions have contributed to division, they also hold the power to promote connection and forgiveness. As the Stepinac Commission has already shown, this will not be an easy process; nonetheless, it is essential not to deny these communities their potential for healing, for beneath all the unresolved conflict and trauma between these two communities lies a shared history, and, with it, potentially, a shared capacity to forgive.

9. *The Bibliography*

1. Assmann, J., & Czaplicka, J. (1995). Collective memory and cultural identity. *New German Critique, 65*, 125–133.

2. Barisic, S. (2017). Srpska pravoslavna crkva i Jugoslavija. *YU Historija*.

3. BBC. (2016). Croatia overturns conviction of WW2 'collaborator' Cardinal Stepinac. *BBC News*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36866939

4. Bencic Kuznar, A., & Pavlakovic, V. (2023). Exhibiting Jasenovac: Controversies, manipulations and politics of memory. *Heritage, Memory and Conflict, 3*, 65–69.

5. Bernhard, M., & Kubik, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Twenty years after communism: The politics of memory and commemoration*. Oxford University Press.

6. Biondich, M. (2006). Controversies surrounding the Catholic Church in wartime Croatia, 1941–45. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 7*(4), 429–457.

7. Biondich, M. (2007). Radical Catholicism and fascism in Croatia, 1918–1945. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 8*(2), 383–399.

8. Borba. (2022). Spomenik „Kameni cvet“ u Jasenovcu u katastrofalnom stanju: Zatire se sjećanje na stradanje Srba u Hrvatskoj! *Borba*. Retrieved from https://borba.me/spomenik-kameni-cvet-u-jasenovcu-u-katastrofalnom-stanju-zatire-se-sjecanje-na-stradanje-srba-u-hrvatskoj/

9. Byford, J. (2007). When I say “the Holocaust,” I mean “Jasenovac”: Remembrance of the Holocaust in contemporary Serbia. *East European Jewish Affairs, 37*(1), 51–74.

10. Byford, J. (2006). Distinguishing ‘anti-Judaism’ from ‘antisemitism’: Recent championing of Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. *Religion, State and Society, 34*(1), 7–31.

11. Constitution of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia. (1946). Retrieved from https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Yugoslavia_(1946)

12. Cvetković, Lj. (2017). Škripi li nešto u mešovitoj komisiji o Stepincu? *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. Retrieved from https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mesovita-komisija-stepinac/28455682.html

13. Dizdar, Z. (2005). Prilog istraživanju problema Bleiburga i križnih putova (u povodu 60. obljetnice). *Senjski zbornik, 32*, 117–196.

14. Fogu, C., & Kansteiner, W. (2006). The politics of memory and the poetics of history. In C. Fogu, W. Kansteiner, & R. N. Lebow (Eds.), *The politics of memory in postwar Europe* (pp. 284–310). Duke University Press.

15. Gitman, E. (2006). A question of judgement: Dr. Alojzije Stepinac and the Jews. *Review of Croatian History, 2*(1), 47–72.

16. Goldstein, S., & Goldstein, I. (2011). *Jasenovac i Bleiburg nisu isto*. Novi Liber.

17. Gopin, M. (2000). *Between Eden and Armageddon: The future of world religions, violence, and peacemaking*. Oxford University Press.

18. Grozdanov, Z., & Sekulić, B. (2020). Christ's ethnonationalist crucifixion: Sacralization of ethnonationalist agendas within Croatian Catholicism and Serbian Orthodoxy—Cases and effects. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 40*(9), Article 2.

19. Hodgkin, K., & Radstone, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Contested pasts: The politics of memory*. Routledge.

20. Huyssen, A. (1994). Monument and memory in a postmodern age. In J. E. Young (Ed.), *The art of memory: Holocaust memorials in history* (pp. 9–17). Prestel.

21. Israeli, R. (2015). *The death camps of Croatia: Visions and revisions, 1941–1945*. Transaction Publishers.

22. Kolstø, P. (2011). The Croatian Catholic Church and the long road to Jasenovac. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society, 24*(1), 37–56.

23. Korb, A. (2010). Understanding Ustaša violence. *Journal of Genocide Research*, *12*(1–2), 1–18.

24. Kremenović, M. (2016). Bojkot hrvatske državne komemoracije u Jasenovcu. *Politika*. Retrieved from https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/353608/bojkot-hrvatske-drzavne-komemoracije-u-jasenovcu

25. Lampe, R. J., & Allcock, B. J. (2025). Serbia in World War II. *Britannica*. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/place/Serbia/Serbia-in-World-

War-II

26. Milekić, S. (2016). Croatian Jews outraged by concentration camp film. *Balkan Transitional Justice*. Retrieved from https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/05/croatian-jews-outraged-by-holocaust-denial-film-04-05-2016/

27. Miloševski, N., & Mišić, A. (2025). *Jasenovac: Trajna opomena*. Museum of Genocide Victims.

28. Morozova, N. M., Kolobova, S. A., Korshunov, D. S., Mitrović, M., & Zhiganova, A. V. (2022). Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian national identity. In I. Savchenko (Ed.), *Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times* (Vol. 125, pp. 675–683). European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences. European Publisher.

29. N1. (2018). Građani najviše veruju vojsci, crkvi, policiji i - Republičkom geodetskom zavodu. *N1*. Retrieved from https://n1info.rs/vesti/a445004-Gradjani-najvise-veruju-vojsci-crkvi-policiji-i-Republickom-geodetskom-zavodu/

30. Nielsen, C. A. (2018). Collective and competitive victimhood as identity in the former Yugoslavia. In N. Adler (Ed.), *Understanding the age of transitional justice: Crimes, courts, commissions, and chronicling* (pp. 175–193). Rutgers University Press.

31. Odak, S., & Benčić, A. (2016). Jasenovac—A past that does not pass: The presence of Jasenovac in Croatian and Serbian collective memory of conflict. *East European Politics and Societies, 30*(4), 805–829.

32. Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social memory studies: From "collective memory" to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices. *Annual Review of Sociology, 24*, 105–140.

33. Oršanić, I. (Ed.). (1939). *Hrvatska smotra: Nacionalni, socijalni i književni mjesečnik* (God.VII). Redakcioni odbor.

34. Perica, V. (2002). *Balkan idols: Religion and nationalism in Yugoslav states*. Oxford University Press.

35. Perica, V. (2010). Religion and ethnic nationalism: The making of the "Church of the Croats." In D. Gavrilović (Ed.), *Proceedings of the International Scientific Meeting "The shared history – Nations, states and diasporas of the former Yugoslavia"* (pp. 9–28). Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation; Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation; Faculty for European Legal and Political Studies.

36. Projekat Rastko (2003). *Yad Vashem*. Retrieved from: https://www.rastko.rs/rastko-iz/istorija/holokaust/vesti/2003-09-17-ad_vashem_eng.html

37. Radio Slobodna Evropa. (2009). Bozanić 24. septembra u Jasenovcu. *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* Retrieved from: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/1759801.html

38. Radonić, L. (2018). Introduction: The Holocaust/genocide template in Eastern Europe. *Journal of Genocide Research, 20*(4), 483–489.

39. Ramet, P. Sabrina (2006). *The Three Yugoslavias - State-Building and Legitimation 1918-2005.* Indiana University Press.

40. Ramet, S. (2005). The politics of the Serbian Orthodox Church. *ResearchGate*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290939893

41. Retchkiman, G. (2020). The Ustaše and the Roman Catholic Church in the Independent State of Croatia. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 40*(1), Article 9.

42. RTV. (2009). Goldštajnove kritike Bozanićeve posete Jasenovcu. *RTV*. Retrieved from https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/region/goldstajnove-kritike-bozaniceve-posete jasenovcu_150501.html

43. RTV. (2010). Ustaški simboli u Blajburgu. *RTV*. Retrieved from https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/region/ustaski-simboli-u-blajburgu_189329.html

44. RTVBN. (2019). Sramotna knjiga o Jasenovcu. *RTVBN*. Retrieved from https://www.rtvbn.com/3937332/sramotna-knjiga-o-logoru-jasenovac

45. Saggau, E. H. (2024). Outline of a Serbian Orthodox doctrine of righteous war. *Religions, 15*(12), 1473.

46. Smith, Rogers M. 2003. *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

47. Sokol, S. (2022). Israeli historian accused of whitewashing Srebrenica now faces allegations of Holocaust distortion. *Haaretz*. Retrieved from https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-05-11/ty-article/.premium/israeli-accused-of-whitewashing-srebrenica-now-accused-of-holocaust-distortion/00000180-d636-d572-aba5-debe9ad80000

48. Schmidt, J. (2013). Poetry after Auschwitz – What Adorno didn't say. *Persistent Enlightenment*. Retrieved from

https://persistentenlightenment.com/2013/05/21/poetry-after-auschwitz-what-adorno-didnt-say/

49. Sindbæk, T. (2009). The fall and rise of a national hero: Interpretations of Draža Mihailović and the Chetniks in Yugoslavia and Serbia since 1945. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 17*(1), 47–59.

50. Spomenik Database. (n.d.). Jasenovac. *Spomenik Database*. Retrieved from https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/jasenovec

51. Srna. (2025). The breakthrough of Jasenovac camp inmates. *Srna*. Retrieved from https://srna.rs/en/novost/1294893/the-breakthrough-of-jasenovac-camp-inmates

52. Subotić, J. (2019a). The Church, the nation, and the state: The Serbian Orthodox Church after communism. In S. P. Ramet (Ed.), *Orthodox churches and politics in Southeastern Europe* (pp. 85–110). Palgrave Macmillan.

53. Subotić, J. (2019b). *Yellow star, red star: Holocaust remembrance after communism*. Cornell University Press.

54. Ćulibrk, J. (n.d.). The Serbian Orthodox Church and Jasenovac. *Jasenovac Committee*. Retrieved from https://www.jasenovac-info.com/clanci/?lang=en&s=c100206

55. Timotijević, Đ. (2023). Legal standing of churches and religious communities in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. *Весник правне историје / Herald of Legal History, 3*(2).

56. Tomasevich, J. (2001). *War and revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and collaboration*. Stanford University Press.

57. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (2005). A map showing the location of four of the concentration camps that made up the Jasenovac camp system. *USHMM Collections*. Retrieved from https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1139839

58. Ustav Kraljevine Srbije. (1888). *Ustav Kraljevine Srbije proglašen 22. decembra 1888. godine na Velikoj narodnoj skupštini držanoj u Beogradu meseca decembra 1888. godine*. Beograd. Retrieved from https://ius.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/USTAV-KRALjEVINE-SRBIJE-1888.pdf

59. Veković, M. (2024). *Religija i politika u Srbiji: Između teorije i praske*. Čigoja štampa.

60. Velikonja, M. (2003). *Religious separation and political intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Texas A&M University Press.

61. Verovšek, P. J. (2016). Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: The politics of memory as a research paradigm. *Politics, Groups, and Identities, 4*(3), 529–543.

62. Vesic, I., & Peno, V. (2020). Stepping out of the "enclave": Public activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the quest to regain social authority in the 1980s. *Istraživanja: Journal of Historical Researches, 31*, 254–278.

63. Velikonja, M. (2003). *Religious separation and political intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Texas A&M University Press.

64. Wikimedija. (n.d.). Map of Independent State of Croatia (as of 1941). *Wikimedia Commons*. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maps_of_the_Independent_State_of_Croatia#/media/File:Ndh_1941.png

65. Yeomans, R. (2014). *Visions of annihilation: The Ustasha regime and the cultural politics of fascism, 1941–1945*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

66. Yilmaz, I. (2025). *Intergroup emotions and competitive victimhoods: Turkey's ethnic, religious and political emigrant groups in Australia*. Palgrave Studies in Political Psychology. Palgrave Macmillan Singapore.

67. Young, J. E. (Ed.). (1994). *The art of memory: Holocaust memorials in history*. Prestel.

68. Zavčar, I. (2020). The Catholic movement in Croatia during the 20th century. *Oikonomia*. Retrieved from https://www.oikonomia.it/index.php/it/2020/febbraio-2020?view=article&id=1112:the-catholic-movement-in-croatia-during-the-20th-century&catid=116:febbraio-2020