

Zoran M. Jovanović, *Alojzije Stepinac između emocija i činjenica. O katoličkoj crkvi i njenom odnosu prema Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj na osnovu hrvatskih i vatikanskih izvora*. Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2025, 589.

The book by Prof. Dr. Zoran M. Jovanović, *Alojzije Stepinac između emocija i činjenica. O katoličkoj crkvi i njenom odnosu prema Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj na osnovu hrvatskih i vatikanskih izvora* [*Alojzije Stepinac between Emotions and Facts: On the Catholic Church and Its Relationship with the Independent State of Croatia Based on Croatian and Vatican Sources*], belongs to that relatively small corpus of scholarly works that reintroduce significant yet controversial, ideologically interpreted, consciously neglected, or tendentiously treated historical topics into the sphere of rational historical awareness. It restores them to their rightful place in historiography and helps liberate society from decades of politically imposed “knowledge” and ideologically motivated judgments—particularly those concerning a historical figure such as Alojzije Stepinac, an institution such as the Roman Catholic Church, and a quasi-state such as the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). This approach has allowed Professor Jovanović to move beyond the scope of the existing literature and offer readers reliable, source-based, and academically grounded answers.

In addition to the introductory and concluding sections, the list of sources and literature, and the index of names, Jovanović’s book consists of seven thematic and chronological chapters. In these, the author examines: aspects of Stepinac’s

activity prior to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia; his engagement in the service of the NDH; a critical assessment of the archival sources upon which Stepinac’s cult was built; his speeches and writings during the war years; his attitude toward others and his self-perception as a potential martyr; the mechanisms through which the cult of Alojzije Stepinac was constructed; and the appeals made by the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church to Pope Francis, urging that Stepinac’s entire “work” be critically examined before his canonization.

The chosen thematic and methodological approach enables the author to critically explore the complex and often controversial dimensions of Alojzije Stepinac’s life and activity during the years defined primarily by the existence of the NDH. It also provides readers with an opportunity to clearly perceive the specific political, ideological, religious, propagandistic, and organizational nature of an institution, as well as the role of the individual within history. The chronological framework of the study extends well beyond the period of the NDH, reaching back to the 1930s and examining Stepinac’s views and activities before its establishment, as well as the decades in which his cult was formed.

A significant segment of contemporary Croatian historiography elevates Alojzije Stepinac to the level of sa-

inthood, treating him uncritically, portraying him as sinless, endowing him with divine attributes, and representing him as a fighter against communist tyranny, Orthodox proselytism, occupation, and the “Serbianization” of the Croatian state—as a protector of the Croatian nation and its faith. The degree of exaggeration in such portrayals is reflected in statements that present Stepinac as a “defender” of Serbs and Jews during the Second World War—at a time when those peoples, partly due to the Church under his leadership, suffered genocide. In such writings, the historical context disappears entirely, and the portrait of Archbishop Stepinac is transferred from the realm of history into that of myth. It is precisely against these distorted interpretations of the past that Jovanović’s book positions itself.

In the introductory chapters, the author discusses the content, character, and significance of the historical sources—primarily of Croatian and Vatican provenance—on which his research is based. He points out the phenomenon of the “neglect,” “concealment,” and even “prohibition” of archival documents that undermine the “official version” of Stepinac’s role in history. He critically engages with the apologetic interpretations of Stepinac’s “life and work,” which were shaped without adequate access to archival materials and are marked by superficial judgments that glorify Stepinac’s “legacy” while nullifying all critical scholarship on the Catholic Church’s relationship with the NDH and its poli-

tical uses and abuses of the past. It is particularly noteworthy that Jovanović’s historical account rests primarily on archival materials from Croatian and Vatican repositories. These sections also offer a critical evaluation of the works of those Croatian historians who have sought to exonerate Stepinac’s wartime activity and to legitimize his beatification and subsequent attempts at canonization.

The chapter titled “On Certain Features of Stepinac’s Character before the Establishment of the NDH” examines Stepinac’s attitude toward Belgrade, the Serbian people, and the Yugoslav state prior to 1941. Jovanović convincingly demonstrates that during the interwar years, Stepinac used every opportunity to present himself as the defender of the “disenfranchised” Croatian people within the Yugoslav state. The book thoroughly reconstructs the historical process through which Stepinac came to view the Yugoslav state as the principal obstacle to the development of Catholicism among Croats, condemned everything he perceived as “Belgrade-oriented,” “Serbian,” or “Orthodox,” and identified the Serbs as the “sworn enemies” of Croatian identity and as the main barrier to the realization of an independent Croatia. He regarded Croats and Serbs as belonging to two irreconcilable “worlds” and described Orthodoxy (the “schism”) as the greatest curse of Europe. The author convincingly analyzes Stepinac’s attitude toward the Yugoslav state, his support for Catholic Action, his sympathies with the Ustaša program, and the

intensity of his connections with Ustaša leaders. Equal attention is devoted to the collapse of the Yugoslav state as a precondition for the fulfillment of Stepinac's aspirations.

The subsequent chapter reconstructs in detail the role Stepinac played within the NDH. It outlines the key features of "Croatian Catholicism," draws attention to the Church's efforts to interpret the emergence of the NDH as a "divine act," and examines the role of the Catholic press in inflaming national and religious hatred and hostility toward Serbs (the "schismatics") and Jews. Special attention is paid to Stepinac's relationship with the NDH, his efforts to secure Croatian acceptance of the Ustaša regime, his ties with Pavelić, and his tendency to portray the Roman Catholic Church as an inseparable part of the NDH. The author also analyzes Stepinac's attempts to construct his own cult. The study reveals the extent to which Stepinac was engaged in secular politics, the nature of his adherence to Vatican directives, and his attitude toward the NDH's racial legislation. Separate sections address his concept of "patriotism," the mass killings, expulsions, and forced conversions of Serbs, his relations with the Nazis, the "purification" of his wartime legacy, postwar efforts to present him as a protector of Serbs, Roma, and Jews, and his views on the Bosnian Muslims, described as the "flower of Croatianhood."

A dedicated chapter offers a critical examination of the archival materi-

al on which the cult of Stepinac was built. Particular attention is devoted to reconstructing and assessing the significance of Stepinac's wartime correspondence with the Vatican, focused largely on the Croatian episcopate's attitude toward the "Serbo-Orthodox." Jovanović's research convincingly demonstrates the extent to which the Vatican was informed about the terror perpetrated by the Ustaša authorities against the Serbs in the NDH, the falsifications of the truth about the genocide committed there, and the efforts of Roman Catholic prelates to minimize or obscure the Church's complicity. In parallel, Jovanović carefully examines the propaganda of the Croatian Catholic hierarchy, which sought to portray itself as the protector of Orthodox Serbs, thereby defending its own position and indirectly the character of the Ustaša regime. As this study shows, the atrocities against the Serbs were justified through untenable comparisons between the NDH and the former Yugoslav monarchy. Stepinac regarded the NDH regime as being "of good will" in addressing the existing problems, while depicting the Serbs as "haters" of the Roman Catholic Church and as the cause of the Ustaša authorities' brutality.

Within this section, Jovanović also analyzes Vatican documents—such as the "Survey Tables of Documents Concerning the Attitude of the Catholic Church toward Persecuted Orthodox and Non-Aryans"—demonstrating that some of the cited archival material remains inaccessible to researchers and that

neither Stepinac nor the Catholic Church displayed “sincerity” in presenting their treatment of the Orthodox population (through denial of suffering, expulsions, camp internments, forced conversions, and genocidal legislation). The blame was shifted to “irresponsible elements” and “individuals,” while the Church’s alleged defense of “human dignity” was glorified and Pius XII was expected to secure full rights for the Croatian people. Jovanović explains Stepinac’s role as military vicar, his granting of absolution to Ustaša perpetrators, and the content of the prayer book *Croatian Soldier*, which stirred Catholic sympathy for the NDH’s defense and thus directly justified crimes committed against Serbs, Jews, and Roma. In this and other chapters, Jovanović presents both the positions of the Catholic Church and those of Croatian historians, engaging in polemics when necessary and highlighting the contrast between authentic archival evidence and its tendentious misinterpretation.

The chapter “Thus Spoke and Wrote Alojzije Stepinac” offers a critical assessment of Stepinac’s public activity, including his stance toward Freemasonry and his claim that “over 200,000 Catholic souls” were converted to Orthodoxy under Serbian repression during the interwar years. Jovanović devotes special attention to Stepinac’s minimization of the NDH’s crimes against Serbs, Jews, and Roma, as well as to his attempts to distinguish between “good Jews,” whom the Ustaša regime—endor-

sed by the Catholic Church—was willing to spare, and others who were not. The author analyzes elements of racism in Stepinac’s statements, his views of the Jasenovac camp, and his consistent support for the NDH until the end of the war. The study invalidates claims by some Croatian historians that Stepinac was an “unsurpassed orator,” clarifies the Church’s main wartime positions, and examines the “personal tone” of Stepinac’s public pronouncements. Jovanović also explores Stepinac’s perception of both real and imagined opponents of the Church, his attitude toward the Yugoslav state, and his consistent minimization of Ustaša atrocities, particularly those committed in Jasenovac.

In another chapter, Jovanović examines Stepinac’s moral and psychological disposition and his desire to be perceived as a “martyr,” a “victim” of the regime, and a prelate willing to suffer for the Church and the Croatian nation. He critically evaluates the narratives of Stepinac’s “courage,” “wisdom,” and “patriotism,” his relations with the Ustaša authorities, and the Vatican’s interest in presenting him as a “great martyr” whose death in a communist country would symbolize the Church’s endurance under persecution.

The book concludes with chapters analyzing the mechanisms through which Stepinac’s cult was constructed and presenting the appeal of Serbian Patriarch Irinej to Pope Francis to reconsider the justification of Stepinac’s beatification. These sections include critical

perspectives by scholars and even by representatives of the Catholic Church on Stepinac's legacy. The constituent elements of the "cult of Alojzije Stepinac" are examined in their entirety, particularly his rejection of any notion that the Catholic Church in Croatia might be "separated" from the Vatican. In contrast to the propaganda, emotional appeals, and falsehoods propagated by Croatian historians and Catholic apologists, Jovanović presents verifiable evidence concerning the making of Stepinac's cult and the efforts to portray him as a symbol of the Croatian struggle for statehood—alongside claims that both communism and "Serbdom" were responsible for his suffering. These attempts to emphasize Stepinac's "exceptionalism" and to secure his beatification and canonization have often disregarded the truth conveyed by Catholic and Vatican sources, replacing it with deliberate falsification and exaggeration of Stepinac's supposed tolerance and virtue.

Jovanović's research is based on extensive archival material from the Archives of Yugoslavia, the Archdiocesan Archives of Belgrade and Ljubljana, and the State Archives of Serbia, supplemented by published documents primarily from the Vatican (fourteen volumes), a wide range of daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals (forty-nine titles), unpublished works (nineteen titles), and more than a thousand scholarly books and collections in several languages. The scope and depth of the research, especially in

terms of the literature consulted, are truly impressive.

This study enables Professor Jovanović to illuminate Stepinac's activities—and, by extension, the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to the NDH—from multiple perspectives, grounded in Croatian and Vatican sources. It stands in deliberate contrast to the ideologically driven interpretations dominant in much of Croatian historiography, offering instead verified knowledge founded on critically examined sources, periodicals, and scholarly works. The author's effort to establish—or at least approximate—the historical truth about a figure such as Alojzije Stepinac, and about the Church, state, and peoples of Yugoslavia and the NDH, merits the highest scholarly recognition. The revision of the historical image achieved in this book is not the product of imposed ideological, political, or religious motives, but of the genuine pursuit of scientific knowledge, which is by its nature never final. In this sense, the professional debate that the publication of this book will undoubtedly inspire can only further enrich our understanding of the past. It is to be expected that Jovanović's *Alojzije Stepinac između emocija i činjenica* will attract readers of diverse scholarly interests, stimulate new reflections on history, and encourage further research on this complex and contested topic.

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