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The Catholic Church and Anti-Fascist Resistance in Istria and the Kvarner Littoral During the Second World War

Abstract: The paper presents the role of local Catholic priests from Istria and the Kvarner Littoral in the fight against fascism and Nazism. The research is based on pertinent literature, archival sources and periodicals, offering a novel perspective on the origins of the anti-fascist spirit in the mentioned regions.

Keywords: Istria, Kvarner Littoral, Second World War, The Catholic Church, priests

For the history of Istria and the Kvarner Littoral between the wars and during and after the World War II, but also for the state of the Catholic Church and the clergy, it is extremely important to distinguish and understand the broader national, ideological and religious issues of that area, considering the complexity of the historical and geopolitical circumstances. The position of the Catholic Church in these regions was unique, which is why, for the purposes of this work and the proper interpretation of the events and the mentioned relations, it is necessary to look at the context of the interwar period beginning with the Treaty of London from 1915, which was fateful for these regions and that is why in the introduction we provide an overview of church- historical and state-political framework.

A brief historical context for Istria and the Kvarner Littoral

The end of the First World War and the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, including the former annexed territory of the Margraviate of Istria with the Associated Kvarner Islands (except the island of Krk)

marks the beginning of life under Italian authorities. The aforementioned lands became part of the Kingdom of Italy with the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920, while the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes ceded the then-city of Rijeka to Italy under the Treaty of Rome in 1924. At the time, the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs were subjected to a widespread and explicit campaign of denationalization and forced Italianization. During the Second World War, the region experienced a series of dramatic events, with 1943 being especially important for understanding the developments in Kvarner and Istria, owing partly to Italy's surrender and the accompanying public uprising.¹

At the end of the Second World War, there was a conflict between Italy and Yugoslavia over who would acquire Istria, but also the wider area of the Julian Territory, i.e. Julian Venice.² In June 1945, Yugoslavia, the USA, and the UK established the state-legal status of Istria by dividing it along the Morgan Line, placing Zone A under British-American administration and Zone B under Yugoslav military administration. Zone A included among other regions the western coast of Istria, from Novigrad to Trieste, as well as the isolated area around Pula, while Zone B included the rest of Istria. Both the Anglo-American and Yugoslav military occupations aimed to ensure respect and enforcement of existing laws until the Allies, Italy and Yugoslavia signed peace treaties.³

At that time, Istria was ecclesiastically divided into the Poreč-Pula Diocese, led by Bishop Raffaele Radossi in Poreč, and the Trieste-Kopar Diocese, led by Bishop Antonio Santin in Trieste, with both bishops being Italian. Following the ratification of the Lateran Treaties in 1929, "unsuitable" bishops who refused to adopt the anti-Slavic policy were forced to resign (for example, Alojzij Fogar in Trieste and Franc Borgia Sedej in Gorica). As relations between the Kingdom of Italy and the Holy See were governed by the 1929 Concordat, which granted the Church some advantages, the bishops relied on the new, post-war government to uphold the aforementioned legal sources. However, it quickly became evident that it did not follow the rules of the concordat, so they rose up to defend the Church's rights, which was described as nationalist

1 Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008*, (Zagreb: Znanje, 2008); Giacomo Scotti, *Krik iz fojbe*, (Rijeka: Adamić, 2008).

2 In the interwar period, it included the northeast of today's Italy, the Slovenian coast and hinterland, the area around Rijeka, and Istria with the islands of Cres and Lošinj.

3 Darko Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski: model povijesne prijelomnice (1943–1955)*, (Pula: C.A.S.H., 2001).

and fascist behavior. This influenced some historiographical sentiments about the Catholic hierarchy that emerged during communist rule.⁴

However, we also know that the Holy See forcefully criticized the formation and functioning of the totalitarian regimes of the time, Stalinist-communist and Nazi-fascist, as early as the 1930s. Hijacint Bošković, a Dominican professor in Senj and Rijeka, was a vocal opponent of fascism, Nazi-fascist, and totalitarianism. He was the first in Croatia to write on the concrete philosophical roots of fascism and Nazism. He also wrote a book about the philosophical and other sources of this “new paganism” called *Philosophical sources of fascist and national socialism*.⁵ As expected, that priest, a monk who may be considered anti-fascist, was not well greeted in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).

Position of national clergy

Although there are still different, even contradictory, assessments about the role of the Catholic Church in Croatia between the two world wars and during and immediately after the Second World War in national historiography, its role and significance in Istria and the Kvarner Littoral is completely clear.⁶ In this area, the Croatian clergy played a significant and indispensable anti-fascist role in the liberation of the mentioned regions from fascism and Nazism. During the interwar period, the clergy were among the first bastions of resistance against the rising totalitarian doctrines, which was unsurprising given that the Croatian populace, including most of the clergy, had inherited the centuries-old Glagolitic tradition. They were the ones who stood up to defend the national and other interests of almost the entire nationally Croatian population. Such a relationship and their point of view should not be surprising since anti-fascism in this region was not a matter of ideology, as local inhabitants and priests were among the first in Europe to experience the hor-

4 In this context, the most famous author is Viktor Novak, *Magnum Crimen, Pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj*, (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Hrvatske, 1948).

5 Hijacint Bošković OP, *Filozofski izvori fašizma i nacionalnog socijalizma*, ur. Petar Strčić, (Zagreb: Dom i svijet, 2000); Comp.: Petar Strčić, „Petar Hijacint Ante Bošković (1900–1947)“, *Dominikanci i Hrvati: osam stoljeća zajedništva (13.–21. stoljeće)*, ur. Franjo Šanjek, (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost; Dominikanska naklada Istina, 2008).

6 Compare with: Marko Medved, *Riječka Crkva u razdoblju fašizma. Nastanak biskupije i prvi talijanski upravitelji*, (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost; Pazin: Državni arhiv u Pazinu; Rijeka: Riječka nadbiskupija, 2015); Stipan Trogrlić, *Katolička crkva u Istri između otpora i potpore talijanskoj vlasti u Istri 1918–1943*, (Zagreb: Institut za društvene znanosti Ivo Pilar; Pazin: Državni arhiv u Pazinu, 2019); Elvis Orbanić, Milan Radošević, “The Role of the Holy See in the Trial against the Istrian Anti-Fascists in 1929“, *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 1–2/2022, 214–250.

rors of fascism in the early 1920s. The activities of the Croatian clergy in the Julian Territory in the interwar period have a wider international significance. The majority of Croatian clergy's postwar support for the People's Liberation Movement, led by the Communist Party of Croatia, stemmed from their interwar anti-fascist actions, including direct attacks by royal-fascist and D'Annunzio soldiers on Croatian and Slovenian priests during the 1920s and 1930s. The priests were persecuted, mistreated, and many were even transferred from their parishes. After fascists disrupted the Old Slavonic Christmas service in 1920, resulting in fatalities, Dr. Klement Kvirin Bonefačić,⁷ a priest from the Diocese of Krk, had to leave Lošinj and his hometown of Baška on Krk Island, eventually becoming the Bishop of Split.⁸ During the same period, the Franciscans on the islet of Košljun, where Maria Katarina Frankopan's tomb was desecrated, were treated poorly, with the Istrian clergy who stayed among the people being particularly targeted.

During the Second World War, tensions grew with Catholic Church clergy as the communist movement increasingly took control of and exploited the anti-fascist movement to achieve a communist revolution. The clergy in Istria, who had initially supported the movement for liberation from fascism and Nazism, now faced challenges. Thus, Bishop Josip Srebrnić (Srebrnič)⁹ of Krk, originally Slovenian, did not hide his awareness of these issues in his contacts with the National Liberation Movement (NOP) in 1944, a stance that led to difficulties for him following the end of the war and the establishment of the

7 Kvirin Klement Bonefačić was born in Baška in 1870, studied in Vienna, and was ordained in 1894. From 1923 he was the bishop of Split-Makarska, and in his work Split-Makarska Diocese from 1941 to the end of 1945, he described his experience of the war as well as the suffering of the believers. He died in 1957 in Baška. Bonefačić, Kvirin Klement. *Hrvatska enciklopedija*, mrežno izdanje. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2013. – 2024. Accessed: 11. 6. 2024 <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/bonefacic-kvirin-klement>.

8 Josip Tomašić, „Krvavi Božić u Baški 1920“, *Krčki zbornik. Godišnjak povijesnog društva otoka Krka* 76/1921, 285–323; Mile Vidović, *Kvirin Klement Bonefačić – biskup splitski i makarski za vrijeme komunističkog režima 1944–1954*, (Split: Crkva u svijetu, 2015); Slavko Kovačić, „Dr. Kvirin Klement Bonefačić biskup splitski i makarski. Uz 50. obljetnicu smrti“, *Vjesnik Nadbiskupije splitsko-makarske* 1/2007, 30–33.

9 Josip Srebrnić was born in 1876 in Solkan, Slovenia. After studying history and geography, he received his doctorate in philosophy and theology in 1907, and since 1923 he was teaching at the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana. In 1923, he became the bishop of Krk. After the war, he was the administrator of the Diocese of Rijeka, and he died in 1966 in Krk. Srebrnić, Josip. *Hrvatska enciklopedija*, mrežno izdanje. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2013. – 2024. Accessed: 11. 6. 2024 <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/srebrnic-josip>.

new order.¹⁰ With a dual PhD in science, history, and theology, and as one of the founders of the University of Ljubljana, he became the bishop of Krk when half of the Diocese was under Italian rule, with the rest falling under fascist administration in 1941. Bishop Srebrnić reacted very strongly against the fascist crime in Podhum on Grobinščina in July 1942, when almost a hundred inhabitants of that village were killed.¹¹ It was one of the worst crimes committed by the Italian fascists and the army in these parts, leading to J. Srebrnić's arrest and imprisonment in Rijeka prison for some time, yet the Holy See refused to remove him from his episcopal position and honor. However, after the war, the victors led by the KPH began to persecute Catholic priests, monks, and nuns in the region. Dr. J. Srebrnić stands out as the only bishop arrested and imprisoned twice in the same Rijeka prison, first by fascists during the war and then by anti-fascists after the war.¹²

The Italian fascist authorities maintained and constantly supplemented the list of priests who were undesirable and dangerous to the state. In the Diocese of Krk, approximately 20 priests and monks were arrested in 1941, including Karlo Hlača, pastor in Garica, and Petar Žic, pastor in Risika. The tragic fate of priest Ivan Žic, the secretary of Bishop J. Srebrnić, can be highlighted as he was arrested, imprisoned in Krk, Rijeka, and Trieste, and interned in Italy for refusing to hold the liturgy exclusively in Italian, as requested by the Italian authorities. An Italian priest saved him from an even worse outcome, and after the Second World War, he became a monsignor, canon, chancellor, and general vicar of the Krk Diocese, as well as a prominent church historian.¹³ Thus, it can be stated that the priests of the Istrian and Kvarner regions,

10 Svetozar Rittig writes about Srebrnić: „I have nothing new to say about Bishop Srebrnić. I had thought of going to Krk, but after my experiences and conversations with him in 1943 and 1945, as well as his current stance, I believe our views and paths are so far apart that any exchange of ideas would be pointless“ (Stipan Trogrlić, *Mons. Božo Milanović – istarski svećenik (1890 – 1980)*, (Zagreb; Pazin: Kršćanska sadašnjost; Državni arhiv u Pazinu, 2011), 283).

11 Toni Buterin, „Novi prinosi podhumskoj tragediji – o internaciji i stradanjima kroz sjećanja i uspomene“, *Grobnički zbornik* 11/2021, 66–83.

12 Franjo Velčić, „Krkčki biskup dr. Josip Srebrnić – prvi progonjeni biskup nakon Drugoga svjetskoga rata“, *Riječki teološki časopis* 1/2014, 89–120; „Krkčki biskup mons. Josip Srebrnić (1876–1966)“, *Zbornik radova sa znanstvenog skupa s međunarodnim sudjelovanjem povodom 50. obljetnice smrti*, ur. Marko Medved, Franjo Velčić, (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost; Teologija u Rijeci; Krčka biskupija, 2018).

13 Anton Božanić, *Svećenici i župe na području Krčke biskupije od 1900. godine do danas*, (Krk: Biskupija Krk, 2012).

as guardians of national consciousness, were among the first to face persecution, imprisonment, and fascist violence.

When analyzing the position and activities of the Catholic clergy in Istria, it is essential to consider the periodization. Initially, the majority of Croatian and Slovenian clergy were unequivocally supportive of the anti-fascist movement, with several priests physically present in September 1943 at the National Liberation Committee for Istria in Pazin, and later actively supporting the struggle for Istria's annexation to Croatia from 1945 to 1947, culminating in the Paris Peace Conference decisions. In contrast, the Italian clergy, particularly bishops Antonio Santin and Raffaele Radossi, remained passive or hostile toward the NOP. Tensions escalated after the murders of priests Miroslav Bulešić and Francesco Bonifacio in 1946, and these incidents, along with worsening social, economic, and religious conditions, gradually exacerbated relations over time. After diplomatic ties with the Vatican were severed, relations between the clergy and the state became particularly strained during the 1950s. The 1954 trial against six seminarians and professors in Rijeka led to their conviction and the closing of the Seminary in Rijeka. Only with the 1966 Protocol between Yugoslavia and the Vatican did relations begin to improve, eventually leading to fully restored diplomatic relations by 1970.

The priests in NOP

The anti-fascist spirit of most of the Croatian clergy of Istria and along the Kvarner coast continued throughout the Second World War. Some Catholic priests in the NDH had a variety of interactions with ruling institutions, leading to certain clergy collaborating in immoral and unethical ways, from subtle “flirtations” with the regime to explicitly supporting the Ustasha government. In Istria and the Kvarner Littoral, the situation was significantly different. During the Second World War, the clergy in Istria played a complex and significant role within the national and political context of the region, especially regarding tensions arising from Italian fascist occupation and oppression. Istrian priests, particularly those of Croatian and Slovenian nationality, were often connected to the anti-fascist and resistance movements, recognizing the importance of the struggle for national freedom and the integration of Istria with the rest of Croatia, which at that time was divided among various occupying forces. The clergy faced dual pressures: from Italian authorities and bishops like Bishop Antonio Santin, who often restricted open political and national activities by priests, and from a sense of duty to support local people in their resistance against fascism and Italianization. For example, despite prohibitions and risks,

some priests openly cooperated with the National Liberation Movement, while others found ways to support liberation goals through pastoral work and community service. The bishops' restrictions created a serious issue because priests were required to follow the Church hierarchy, yet many understood these orders through the lens of greater moral and national obligation, often acting in support of their people in the face of potential repression or sanctions. However, in the area of Istria and the Kvarner Littoral, unlike the rest of the Croatian territory, there were great efforts to get the clergy involved in the NOP as soon as possible, which intensified especially after the capitulation of Italy in the fall of 1943. Svetozar Rittig,¹⁴ former secretary to Josip Juraj Strossmayer and pastor of Zagreb's central St. Mark's parish, wrote articles and proclamations for the NOP until the end of the war, urging Catholic clergy to join the movement.¹⁵ He attended the 1946 Paris Peace Conference to defend Yugoslavia's western borders, including Istria and Rijeka, actively supported church educational institutions in Pazin and Rijeka, and openly engaged in public debates with certain Italian church circles.¹⁶

14 Svetozar Rittig (Ritig), Croatian historian and politician, born in Slavonski Brod in 1873 and died in Zagreb in 1961. He studied theology in Sarajevo, Đakovo and Vienna, where he received his doctorate in 1902. Until 1911, he taught church history at the Đakovo seminary, and then he was the secretary of the Zagreb ArchDiocese, a professor at the Faculty of Theology in Zagreb and editor of *Katolički list* (1912–13). He started his political activity in 1908, as a representative of the Croatian Party of Rights in the Croatian Parliament. In 1918, he was a member of the SHS National Council, and in 1919–20 a member of the Provisional People's Representation. After the establishment of the NDH, he retreated to Selca, where he came into contact with representatives of the anti-fascist movement. He was a member of ZAVNOH, 1944–54, president of the Commission for Religious Affairs, and in 1945 he was elected to the Constituent Assembly, then to the Federal Assembly and the Croatian Parliament. He was a member of the Yugoslav delegation at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1946, and in the same year he became a minister without portfolio in the government of the Republic of Croatia (until his retirement in 1954). Rittig, Svetozar. *Hrvatska enciklopedija, mrežno izdanje. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža*, 2013. – 2024. Accessed: 11. 6. 2024, [15 Margareta Matijević, *Između Partizana i pristojnosti – Život i doba Svetozara Rittiga \(1873 – 1961\)*, \(Zagreb; Slavonski Brod: Hrvatski institut za povijest – Podružnica za povijest Slavonije, Srijema i Baranje, 2019\).](https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/srebrnic-josip; Miroslav Akmadža, „Svetozar Rittig – svećenik ministar u komunističkoj vladi Hrvatske“, <i>Godišnjak Njemačke narodnosne zajednice</i> 1/2008.</p>
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16 In her comprehensive monograph, Margareta Matijević draws on state and church archives to provide detailed insights into the activities of anti-fascist priest Svetozar Rittig, addressing subjects including Istria, the role of the Catholic Church, and the Yugoslav-Italian border. See: Matijević, *Između Partizana i pristojnosti*, 213–254.

Istrian priests joined the National Liberation Struggle due to their national sentiments and closeness to the people, which is why they were often called “people’s priests”. During the 1943 uprising, members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Communist Party of Croatia frequently urged them for doing so. As proof of that thesis, we can certainly point out the conclusions from the Report sent to the *State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia* (ZAVNOH) in March 1944 by Dr. Oleg Mandić, a member of the Regional Assembly of Istria, who stated, among other things, that during the war, as many as 70% of the Istrian clergy were loyal to the NOP.¹⁷

Monsignor Josip Pavlišić, the post-war Archbishop of Rijeka-Senj and Metropolitan, was undoubtedly foremost among them.¹⁸ During the war, he served as a pastor in the Istrian village of Gologorica, near Pazin, and joined the NOP, notably signing the 1943 proclamation of the Regional Executive Regional Liberation Committee (NOO) of Istria for its union with Croatia and Yugoslavia. Monsignor Pavlišić actively participated in the NOP until the war’s end and remained steadfast in his post-war anti-fascist views throughout his life.¹⁹

It is important to highlight the significant contributions of Dr. Božo Milanović,²⁰ a prominent advocate for the national rights of Istrian Croats and for the liberation of Istria from fascism, along with its post-war connection to Croatia and Yugoslavia. By giving the Church in Istria regular pastoral and spiritual work, he opened up a wide range of activities for it that were unthink-

17 Petar Strčić, „Referat dra Olega Mandića ZAVNOH-u o putovanju Istrom (na početku 1944.)“, *Historijski zbornik* 21–22/1968.

18 Josip Pavlišić, born in Stari Pazin in 1914, and died in Rijeka in 2005. He completed theology in Gorica, where he was ordained a priest in 1938. At first he was a parish priest (Gologorica, Krbune), then a priest in the Pazin seminary, vicar general of the Diocese of Senj-Modruška and of the Croatian part of the Rijeka Apostolic Administration of the Diocese of Trieste. He was ordained bishop in 1952. When the Rijeka-Senj archDiocese was established in 1969, he was appointed auxiliary bishop, and from 1973 until his retirement in 1990, he was the archbishop of Rijeka. He collaborated with B. Milanović on the preservation of Croatian consciousness in Istria. Pavlišić, Josip. *Hrvatska enciklopedija, mrežno izdanje. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža*, 2013. – 2024. Accessed: 11. 6. 2024 <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/pavlisic-josip>.

19 Marko Medved, „Biskupi Viktor Burić i Josip Pavlišić u formiranju Riječko-senjske nadbiskupije i metropolije“, *Riječki teološki časopis* 2/2009, 311–337.

20 Božo Milanović was born in Kringa in 1890, studied theology, and received his doctorate in Vienna in 1918. He was a prominent fighter within the Croatian national revival in Istria, advocating for the gathering of Croats and Slovenes, about which he wrote several of his most significant works. He died in 1980 in Pazin. Milanović, Božo. *Hrvatska enciklopedija, mrežno izdanje. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža*, 2013. – 2024. Accessed: 9. 6. 2024 <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/milanovic-bozo>.

able in other parts of Yugoslavia at the time. The NOP also received a pledge from the Croatian clergy to support the NOP's achievements and future objectives. However, the agreement was not well received by A. Santini, the Bishop of Trieste-Kopar, and R. Radossi, the Bishop of Poreč-Pula. Even though approximately thirty priests in Pazin accepted the accord, they participated as civilians due to their bishops' prohibitions and expressed their support for the annexation of the contested areas to Yugoslavia in a memorandum. Milanović's involvement and activity were especially noticeable on a global level. He was undoubtedly one of the most deserving negotiators for the international demarcation of Istria after the war and a key figure in the 1946 and 1947 Paris Peace Conference decisions. In April 1946, he sent a letter to Marshal Tito, expressing gratitude for the assistance of 3 million dinars, which supported the Croatian seminary in Pazin.²¹ He was also awarded the Order of Merit for the People with a Silver Wreath.

However, in addition to the two mentioned, more prominent members of the Istrian clergy, there is a whole series of lesser known but very active Istrian local priests, anti-fascists who stood out with their involvement during the NOP, which certainly testifies to their number and importance. Below are the names of a few, their places of service, and, for some of them, the terrible death: Zvonimir Brumnić, parish priest in Tinjan,²² and Šime Milanović, parish priest in the village of Slum, who were shot by the Germans in Čićarija in 1943, were among the first victims of Romel's onslaught. Marko Zelko, the pastor of Kanfanar, was also killed by the German Nazis in 1944 for collaborating with partisans, while Šime Fručić, the priest of Grdoselo, was injured and died in a Trieste hospital the same year.²³

Considering that the Istrian clergy who remained with the people were the target of the fascist regime, it is not surprising that a large number of Istrian priests and people actively participated and supported both the NOP and NOB (National liberation struggle). Several parish administrators were detained, including Ferdo (Ferdinand) Šenk, Antun Cukarić from Savičenta, Leopold Jurca from Trviž, Franjo Križmanić from Brdo-Šušnjevići, and Franc Vroljih from Beram, along with parish priests Josip Aničić from Lanišće, Miro

21 Stipan Trogrlić, *Mons. Božo Milanović – istarski svećenik (1890 – 1980)*, (Zagreb; Pazin: Kršćanska sadašnjost; Državni arhiv u Pazinu, 2011), 231.

22 Aldo Sinković, „Političko, kulturno i društveno djelovanje svećenika Zvonimira Brumnića“, *Svećenik Zvonimir Brumnić – Život za druge*, ur. Antun Brumnić, (Split: Redak, 2019); Antun Brumnić, „Sjećanja na mog strica Zvonimira Brumnića“, *Svećenik Zvonimir Brumnić – Život za druge*.

23 Ivan Grah, *Istarska Crkva u ratnom vihoru (1943 – 1945)*, (Pazin: IKD Juraj Dobrila, 1998).

Zamlić from Kaštelir, Milivoj Barković from Kaščerga, chaplain Matija Fortuna from St. Katarine near Pićan, Ivan Gallo, pastor in Kaldir, Božo Jelovac, and many others.²⁴ The cooperation between the NOO and Istrian priests became most evident at lower levels,²⁵ particularly after Italy's capitulation in September 1943, when some priests actively participated in organizing the national uprising and in the national government's bodies. For example, the priest Kazimir Paić participated in the disarmament of the Italian Carabinieri station in Višnjan, and he was also active in the war operations during the liberation of Poreč.²⁶ We know that a priest from the small Istrian village of Ližnjan, named Ivan Ciceran, joined the local NOO.²⁷ During the Provisional Provincial NOO sessions on September 25 and 26, 1943, priests S. Štifanić, Z. Brumnić, K. Paić, and J. Pavlišić participated, with S. Štifanić also becoming a member of the Executive Board as a religious affairs officer.²⁸

Based on the aforementioned findings, the Catholic Church in Istria and the Kvarner Littoral was primarily anti-fascist, excluding the upper Italian hierarchical structure, with only a small number of priests supporting the Nazi-fascist Ustasha NDH. It is also known that, even in the pre-war period, the communists tried to cooperate with Catholic organizations, but also with individuals who showed anti-fascist tendencies.²⁹ A significant event took place in the village of Kras on the island of Krk, where the first People's Liberation Committee of the Kvarner Islands was founded in the parish office of St. Antun of Padua on Christmas Day 1942, with KPH members present and parish priest Tome Žuvić joining the committee.

Priests in Istrian Liburnia, such as Veprinac pastor Joakim (Aćim) Pilat, actively supported nationalist causes. Despite the bans, Pilat taught religion in Croatian, which led to his imprisonment in fascist and Nazi camps for supposed collaboration with partisans. Even after the Second World War, he

24 Ćiril Petešić, *Katoličko svećenstvo u NOB-u 1941–1945*, (Zagreb: Vjesnikova press agencija, 1982), 8–12.

25 Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 60.

26 Grah, *Istarska Crkva u ratnom vihoru*, 87–88.

27 Herman Buršić, „Ližnjan u borbi za slobodu i sjedinjenje s maticom zemljom“, *Prilozi o zavičaju svezak 4.*, ur. Josip Percan, (Pula: Čakavski sabor, katedra Pula, 1986).

28 Antun Giron, „Prilog proučavanju uloge svećenstva u NOP-u Istre“, *Narodi ostaju, režimi se mijenjaju: zbornik radova o 100. obljetnici rođenja mons. Bože Milanovića (1890. – 1980.) sa simpozija održanog u Zagrebu i Pazinu 11. – 13. listopada 1990.*, ur. Ilija Jakovljević, (Pazin: Josip Turčinović d. o. o.; Porečka i Pulska biskupija, 2010), 92–93.

29 Ćiril Petešić, *Katoličko svećenstvo u NOB-u 1941–1945*, (Zagreb: Vjesnikova press agencija, 1982), 8–12.

remained politically unsuited for the new popular administration. In a 1946 brochure, Pilat himself testifies about the time with the words:

“Our schools were abolished after the Italians arrived. In Veprinac, Glagolitsa was always used. They made us priests sing in Latin, but I didn’t agree. Croatian was always sung in the church where I served, and when it wasn’t allowed, it wasn’t performed at all [...] On April 28, 1944, I was arrested by the Germans and transferred from Rijeka to Trieste, and then to the German Dachau camp [...] They accused me of accepting partisans for accommodation and food [...] The Germans plundered not only the village dwellings in Veprinac, but also the parish apartment and church, stealing holy money and breaking the chalice. Thank God, we got rid of that evil.”³⁰

Also, one of the many priests of the Kvarner region who opposed the horrors of fascism and Nazism was from Cres, an Italian by father Placido Cortese (born Nikola Matej Cortese), who is now regarded as a righteous man among nations for his acts in the salvation of Jews. He died in prison, unconscious from the horrific torture, yet he did not betray anyone.³¹

However, already during the war, there were increasingly visible and open conflicts between the Church and the NOP, that is, some of its more “rigid” KPH members. Thus, in this area as well, although to a lesser extent, due to political interests and tactics already mentioned earlier, the first disagreements and minor conflicts were already visible during the fall of 1943. Priests Z. Brumnić and S. Štifanić,³² who were some of the most faithful supporters of the anti-fascist struggle a few months earlier, were just called out. The following year, B. Milanović faced accusations from the Istrian NOP leadership for anti-international activities, alleged cooperation, and contact with German occupation authorities, the NDH, and the Vatican.³³ This was the outcome of his efforts to publish a Croatian primer for Croatian schools in Trieste, through which he engaged other contacts with the NDH and the Vatican via intermediaries. As a result, he ulti-

30 Župnik Pilat primjer otpora totalitarizmima. Accessed: 13. 6. 2024, <https://ika.hkm.hr/novosti/zupnik-pilat-primjer-otpora-totalitarizmima/>.

31 Ljudevit Anton Maračić, *Creski Kolbe – Placido Cortese (1907 – 1944): mučenik kršćanske franjevac konventualacu prigodi 75. obljetnice smrti*, (Zagreb: Veritas – glasnik Sv. Antuna Padovanskoga, 2019).

32 Dražen Vlahov, „Izvještaji Jakova Blaževića, delegata ZAVNOH-a i CK KPH, iz Hrvatskog primorja i Istre u jesen 1943. godine“, *Vjesnik historijskih arhiva u Rijeci i Pazinu* 21/1977, 57; Anton Giron, „Izvještaj Zvonka Babića-Žulje o prilikama u Istri krajem listopada 1943. godine“, *Vjesnik historijskih arhiva u Rijeci i Pazinu* 26/1983, 163; Giron, „Prilog proučavanju uloge svećenstva u NOP-u Istre“, 95.

33 Stipan Trogrlić, „Katolička crkva u Istri i istarska ratna zbivanja 1943–1945 godine“, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 45/2013; Trogrlić, *Mons. Božo Milanović*, 113–115.

mately had to leave Istria for Trieste until the situation calmed down. However, besides the mentioned priests and many others, even the most active collaborators and supporters of the anti-fascist struggle, such as I. Gallo, M. Barković, L. Jurc, I. Ciceran, F. Šenk, and J. Pavlišić, faced various accusations and suspicions of hostile activities.³⁴ Despite the strained relations, cooperation existed and remained permanent throughout the war.

At the end of the war, the victors led by the KPH implemented an unfavorable stance against Catholic priests, monks and nuns on Croatian territory, which in many cases led to open hostility. This happened to a lesser extent in the area of Istria and the Kvarner Littoral.³⁵

Here, we shall mention one of the very few events that revealed the true status of postwar ties between the Catholic Church and the national government. The story revolves around the death of a young priest, Miroslav Bulešić, on August 24, 1947, while distributing Holy Confirmation in Lanišće, a small town in the region of Čićarija. During the war, this priest was appointed military chaplain to the 43rd Istrian Division.³⁶

The communist regime recognized its own interests in Croatian activities, especially amid disputes with Italy over national borders. The Church emphasized the Glagolitic character of seminaries in Rijeka and Pazin and their importance for forming native priests in territories recently subjected to Italianization. Evidence that Istria operated under different rules, and that relations between clergy and authorities were considerably better, is reflected in the fact that *Gore srca*,³⁷ the only religious publication in Croatia, was printed in Istria after the Second World War. Some priests, such as B. Milanović, actively contributed by preparing materials and advocating to international audiences for Istria's Croatian identity and its annexation to Yugoslavia during the negotiations that culminated in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty and Istria's incorporation.

Representatives of the Holy See in communist Yugoslavia, such as Marcone (who served from the NDH era until mid-1946) and later Hurley from the U.S., were a constant source of dissatisfaction for state authorities, with even devoted clergy like Rittig registering their criticism.³⁸ The challenges stemming

34 Trogrlić, „Katolička crkva u Istri“, 291.

35 Although there is a lack of historiographical works on this aspect, it is known that several priests were detained, with the most severe instance of communist hostility in the Diocese of Rijeka being the murder of Viktor Perkan in Jelšane in Slovenia.

36 Fabijan Veraja, *Miroslav Bulešić, svećenik i mučenik: znakoviti lik moderne povijesti Istre*, (Poreč: Porečka i Pulska biskupija, 2013).

37 Trogrlić, *Mons. Božo Milanović*, 226–230.

38 Matijević, *Između partizana i pristojnosti*, 383–384, 386.

from this situation significantly affected the lives and work of Croatian priests directly or indirectly involved with the National Liberation Movement (NOP). They found themselves caught between the call of their own conscience and loyalty to their bishops. The Istrian clergy “supported the NOP because they saw it as the only real force capable of ensuring the national liberation of Istrian Croats and the integration of Istria into the state union of their mother nation, but naturally, they could not subordinate themselves to the Communist Party of Croatia.”³⁹

Along with him, several other priests and theologians were killed in Istria by the new national government.⁴⁰ However, especially open attacks developed against the bishops and their activities under fascism and the German occupation. The Istrian clergy, that is, the Congregation of Priests of St. Paul for Istria, issued a statement condemning such “unworthy” treatment of church leaders.⁴¹ Therefore, despite the great merits of the Istrian clergy in the fight against fascism and Nazism, their role in preserving the Croatian entity in the area of Istria and the Kvarner Littoral was underestimated.

The context of their life and work before the Second World War, i.e. the experience of living in the fascist Kingdom of Italy, which ruled over part of the Croatian coast after the First World War, greatly contributed to the anti-fascist determination of a part of the Catholic clergy in the area of Istria and Rijeka, as well as the expansion of its authority during the Second World War. Without a doubt, the national grounds for the war for independence from Italian foreign domination, which attempted and largely succeeded in limiting Croatian national rights in religious life, encouraged clerical support for the resistance movement. Although their support for the NOP was diverse and pluralistic, there is unquestionably that it prevailed over the more negative aspects of the communist attitude toward the Church, which appeared in a greater amount in the years of the establishment of the new government. The Catholic clergy in this area were convinced that it is critical to assist those who solve the national question, even if it is an ideology that opposes God. This is supported by the Statement of Istria’s Slavic clergy, which was published in *Glas Istre* in mid-August 1945.⁴² Let us also add that we based our conclusions primarily

39 Giron, „Prilog proučavanju uloge svećenstva u NOP-u Istre“, 84–103.

40 State Archives in Pazin (HR-DAPA), Fund 397, Regional Committee of the United People’s Liberation Front for Istria, Report of the secretariat of the Regional People’s Committee for Istria on the personal data and eligibility of some Istrian priests, book 2.

41 HR-DAPA, 397, Regional Committee of the United People’s Liberation Front for Istria, Statement of the Congregation of Priests of St. Paul for Istria, book 2.

42 “Statement of the Slavic clergy of Istria“, *Glas Istre*, 11. 8. 1945, 2.

on the examination of Croatian priests, ignoring the question of whether and to what extent priests of Italian nationality in this geographical area supported the anti-fascist movement.⁴³

Instead of a conclusion

During this period, the Catholic Church faced numerous challenges. A critical examination is essential for accurately understanding the status of the Istrian and Kvarner regions after the Second World War, as well as the role and significance of the Catholic clergy in those areas.

The Catholic Church in Istria and the Kvarner coast undoubtedly participated in the anti-fascist struggle, and the Istrian and Kvarner clergy contributed significantly to the annexation of those areas to post-war Croatia, that is, Yugoslavia. This was largely helped by the experience of living in the fascist Kingdom of Italy, which restricted the use of Croatian language in Church contexts. In other words, the Croatian national reasons for the struggle for liberation from foreign rule encouraged the priests to support the NOP. We can also observe the historical continuity of anti-fascist thought, which peaked precisely at the time of the Second World War among the “ordinary” clergy involved in liberating these regions from Italian fascism and German Nazism. However, it should be noted that the new, popular government played and manipulated the same clergy after achieving its goals. In fact, although Istrian priests were staunch anti-fascists in terms of political orientation, they were also anti-communists, and their attitudes toward the NOP fluctuated and changed during the war. Thus, their multifaceted role can be observed in light of the circumstances that led them from allies and partners of the new, popular government to the position of “martyrs and victims” of the new, post-war regime.

Considering the above, this work contributes to a previously under-represented understanding of the anti-fascist commitment among a large part of the national clergy and their involvement in the Second World war struggle, which greatly shaped the lasting anti-fascist spirit of Istria and the Kvarner Littoral, highlighting topics for future research.

Summary

The Second World War was especially turbulent in Istria and Kvarner. On the one hand, it was a consequence of massive and extensive military oper-

43 Compare: Orietta Moscarda Oblak, “L’Elaborato sulle attività dei nemici a Fiume”, *Quaderni* 29/2018, 7–79.

ations, while it was also the result of the region's multinational and multicultural character, in which the Catholic Church played a substantial role. With this in mind, this article provides an overview of the role and activities of Catholic priests in Istria and the Kvarner coast during and soon following the Second World War, thereby evaluating the role of priests as anti-fascist fighters. Using this comparison, the study illustrates the Church in Istria and Kvarner's unique position in the anti-fascist struggle. The research is based on relevant literature, periodicals, and archival sources, which serve as a foundation for the previously mentioned analysis of the importance that a part of the "ordinary" or lower clergy had and played in the liberation of Istria and the Kvarner coast from Italian fascism and German Nazism. Considering all of the above, it can be said that the paper provides a more accurate and prominent picture of the anti-fascist commitment of a large part of the national clergy and their engagement in the anti-fascist struggle, which has greatly influenced the lasting anti-fascist spirit of the region.

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Резиме

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КАТОЛИЧКА ЦРКВА И АНТИФАШИСТИЧКИ ОТПОР У ИСТРИ И КВАРНЕРСКОМ ПРИМОРЈУ ТОКОМ ДРУГОГ СВЕТСКОГ РАТА

Апстракт: У раду је приказана улога народних (католичких) свештеника са подручја Истре и Кварнерског приморја који су дали допринос борби против фашизма и нацизма. Заснован на релевантној литератури, архивској грађи и периодици, овај рад пружа нови поглед на корене антифашистичког духа у поменутих крајевима.

Кључне речи: Истра, Кварнерско приморје, Други светски рат, католичка црква, свештеници

Период Другог светског рата био је посебно буран за подручје Истре и Кварнера. С једне стране, то је био резултат значајних и обимних војних операција које су се водиле док је, с друге стране, представљао последицу мултинационалног и мултикултуралног карактера тог подручја, при чему је улога Католичке цркве била далеко од занемарљиве. Имајући то у виду, рад пружа преглед улоге и активности католичких свештеника на подручју Истре и кварнерске обале током и непосредно након Другог светског рата, уз посебан нагласак на њихову антифашистичку делатност. Кроз такво поређење, рад уочава особности црквене улоге у Истри и Кварнеру током антифашистичке борбе. У својој анализи, ауторка се ослања на објављену литературу, периодичне публикације и архивске изворе који служе као основа за процену значаја дела „обичног“ или нижег свештенства у ослобађању Истре и кварнерске обале од италијанског фашизма и немачког нацизма. С обзиром на наведено, рад нуди нову, јаснију представу о посвећености великог дела националног свештенства и његовом ангажману у антифашистичкој борби, која је у великој мери обликовала трајни антифашистички дух овог региона.