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Book review: *Stepinac and the Holocaust in NDH*, by Predrag Ilic, Albatros plus, Belgrade 2018, 308 pages.

With the “Stepinac and the Holocaust in NDH”, its author, PhD Predrag Ilic, continues his scientific work on the topic of the Roman Catholic Church activities in Croatia before and during the Second World War. In addition to this, Ilic is preparing two more books about Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac.

Motivation for writing this monograph came with the knowledge that in spite of the large number of scientific works on Aloysius Stepinac, the Independent State of Croatia’s genocide of Serbs Jews and Roma, there are very few scientific papers dealing individually with one of these topics. Right away author dissociate himself from intention to diminish crimes against other national communities: “in connection with this crime separation by narrowing down the topic, I want to emphasize that I am aware that this is a kind of violence against the extremely complex and terrible reality of the Independent State of Croatia, and the triple genocide that has taken place in it.” The author stated in his book that he didn’t initially set out to research the Stepinac’s attitude toward the Jewish people, but it was the result of the circumstances and availability of scientific literature. The author is also not claiming the exclusivity or originality of the sources being used, and that is openly said several times. Regarding his primary scientific sources Predrag Ilic focused on the Croatian state and Catholic press of the time. This made future research of the Holocaust in Independent State of Croatia and the character of Aloysius Stepinac much accessible, because this monograph provides systematic chronology of newspaper articles that can not be found in Serbia.

Book content is arranged into six chapters. In addition to *Introduction* and *Conclusion*, the Chapters are: *Stepinac and the Jews (1934 - 1941)*; *Stepinac and the beginning of the Holocaust in Independent State of Croatia (1941)*; *The archbishop’s stand for the Jews, with continued antisemitism of the Catholic press and the glorification of Ante Pavelic and the Independent State of Croatia (1942)*; *Stepinac and the Jews in the last years of the Independent State of Croatia (1943 - 1945): helping the community on the verge of annihilation, with old admonitions and accusations towards it.*

In *Introduction*, Predrag Ilic pays special attention to familiarizing the reader with the book’s main theme. For scholars this can only be a proof of the author’s

approach seriousness, and indisputable help for all readers not familiar with Aloysius Stepinac and his historical role. Right at the beginning, he gives a very comprehensive overview of the literature about Aloysius Stepinac, dividing it into one that is utterly affirmative about him and the literature presenting him as the spiritual father of the villain Ustasha order in the Independent State of Croatia. The authors of the first group of books are understandably predominantly Croatian historians, both the theological and civil ones. Although there is no fundamental difference between these two groups. Those who see Stepinac as war criminal are more numerous and nationally heterogeneous. This division of literature with diametrically opposite conclusions about Stepinac, is not accidentally highlighted immediately at the beginning. In the sea of “biased” books on Stepinac, the author states his intention to produce a factual book that is guided by scientific impartiality and objectiveness. To fulfill this purpose book contains about 600 footnotes and references confirming numerous facts. After listing numerous encyclopedias and monographs quoted in the book, the author switches to presenting the newspapers as a very important scientific source for determining the facts about Archbishop Stepinac conduct, his political views and attitudes toward the Jewish people. What kind of newspapers Predrag Ilic used for research? These are clerical official and semi-official newspapers and journals, which were at the time under the direct or indirect control of Archbishop Stepinac and the Catholic Church in Croatia. The majority of editors of these newspapers have been appointed or dismissed of their duties personally by Archbishop Stepinac. And in cases where the issue formally depended on civil authorities, the written evidence of Stepinac decisive influence is presented. Continuing the introduction, the author decided to introduce the reader further more into the matter by giving him the extensive biography of Aloysius Stepinac, as well as the history of antisemitism in former Yugoslavia and Europe, although the main theme of the book is the relation between Stepinac and the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia in which tens of thousands Jewish people brutally perished.

In the first Chapter of the book (*Stepinac and the Jews*), the author examines the political views of Archbishop Stepinac toward the Jews from the moment of his appointment as the Archbishop of Zagreb (May 1934) until the beginning of the April War in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941. Here can be clearly seen that the persecution of Jews that founded its monstrous form in the genocidal Independent State of Croatia didn't arise *ex nihilo*, but instead it had a serious prehistory in Croatia civil and clerical antisemitism from the 1930s. Independent State of

Croatia represents the continuity of that antisemitism. Taking into consideration the burden of various controversies being placed on this topic, and the existing extensive archival and other scientific material related to it, Predrag Ilic decided to approach the matter of Archbishop Stepinac historical role by quoting him and his cleric associates wherever it is possible. Since a large number of books about Aloysius Stepinac state with decisiveness that he was “a great friend and protector of the Jews,” the author tends to quote all of his available statements and attitudes. His political views and thoughts were usually expressed in various sermons and preachings, or taken from his private diary. Author’s conclusions and comments are given at the end of chapters, leaving the reader with a lot of freedom to form personal attitude about Stepinac “friendship” toward the Jewish people. Taking into consideration relatively small number of his personal statements and attitudes in this matter, author tries to supplement the corpus of necessary data by quoting the press, directed and controlled by Aloysius Stepinac himself. Articles from the *Catholic List*, confiscated brochures with title *Who Owns in Russia* and *The Jewish Masonry*, *Sunday* from Zagreb, and especially the *Croatian Guard* newspapers. Many sermon done by Stepinac, records from his private diary, and the aforementioned newsletters share the same political views: the Bolshevik revolution is Jewish misdoing, Jews are closely connected with the Communists and the Freemasons, Jews and the Masons are the cause of increase in the number abortions and suicides, and the spread of religious cults in Croatia; the creation of the Jew country in Palestine is going to be a disaster for the Christian sanctuaries located there, the Jews have broken a sacred contract with God and have caused the murder of his Son, anti-Semitic regulations enforced through out of Europe are not bad by themselves. The author finished this chapter with the conclusion that even though Stepinac never gave full - scale, integral and comprehensive speech specifically about the Jews or about the political and religious attitude of the Catholic Church towards them, when we carefully summarize everything that he wrote and declared about them in various occasions, it can be freely said that he was persuaded Roman Catholic anti-Judaism believer and modern political antisemite.

The second Chapter of the book (*Stepinac and the beginning of the Holocaust in Independent State of Croatia in 1941.*) starts with a brief historic overview of Kingdom of Yugoslavia collapse after the April War 1941 and the circumstances surrounding the creation of the infamous Ustasha’s State - Independent State of Croatia. This events indicate a significant change of the political and social circumstances in which the Roman Catholic Church functioned, as it become the

dominant religious organization in structure of the new Croatian country. The Archbishop of Zagreb become the single most important religious figure, making his responsibility bigger (at least moral responsibility) for numerous crimes. This is followed by a chronology of anti-Semitic legal regulations depriving Jews of all Human and Civil rights in Croatia. A systematic terror has been then established according to the instructions from Nazi Germany. Then follows the analysis about Archbishop's Stepinac and the Catholic press approval at the beginning of the persecutions. At the end of the chapter, Stepinac's letters and sermons are examined, the ones used by his supporters in the scientific and historical defense of his character. The great thing for the reader at this point is the opportunity to read all the analyzed documents, because they are quoted in full.

In the third Chapter, (*The archbishop's stand for the Jews, with continued antisemitism of the Catholic press and the glorification of Ante Pavelic and the Independent State of Croatia*) the author analyzes few situations in which Aloysius Stepinac stood up for Croatian Jews in the late mature phase of the "final solution" of Jewish question in the Independent State of Croatia. Predrag Ilic used the tried-and-tested methodology from the previous chapters. We first read about continuation of the anti-Semitic campaign of Ustasha and Catholic newspapers (glorification of Independent State of Croatia and Ante Pavelic), and the persecution of Jews in 1942. Only afterwards, when the reader forms the complete picture of life and death circumstances of that time, the author starts with the analysis of the Archbishop Stepinac behavior, that is, of changes that are reflected in the advocacy for some Jews in the Independent State of Croatia. The visit of the So - Called International Commission to Jasenovac concentration camp was analyzed as Vatican's attempt to exaggerate Archbishop Stepinac and the Croatian branch of the Roman Catholic Church concern for Jews.

In the fourth Chapter, the author points out the extremely harmonious relations between the Ustasha state lead by Pavelic and the Church led by Stepinac during 1943, despite the continuous genocide happening all over the country. Stepinac's new attempts to help "remnants of the remnants" of the Jewish community in the Independent State of Croatia during the last great hunt of Jews in May 1943 were also analyzed.

When we talk about Conclusions, we get a somewhat divided impression. As if the author of the book tried more to discredit affirmative writings about Stepinac, specially the claims that he was a "protector of Jews" from Croatian scientific and

church literature. Therefore, the conclusions are more about what Stepinac wasn't (a friend and protector of the Jews), instead what he was - the spiritual leader of the criminal and genocidal Independent State of Croatia. Although the author is extremely careful and refrained from giving negative qualifications in his conclusions, he systematically and accurately overwhelms the reader with a huge number of very strong arguments against Stepinac, so that there is no alternative to an objective reader but to regard Stepinac as a criminal. In fact, the work of bringing arguments is done so well, like in the Court of Law, that the author's stronger conclusions or suggestions are not necessary in forming attitudes with the reader.

After 300 pages of a high-quality and well-founded insight into the anti-Semitic thinking of Stepinac, any further question of his historical role is done. Attempts of serious affirmative writings about Sepinac seem futile. For example, Predrag Ilic in one place lists dozens of brutal legal measures against the Jews (arrests, confiscation or plunder of property, destruction of synagogues, murders, deportation to camps, introduction of forced labor, relocation to ghettos, etc.). Then the author quotes dozens and a dozens of articles from the newspapers under the direct control of Stepinac, with blood - chilling hatred towards non-Croats. All of this is opposed to one letter (used by the followers of Stepinac as evidence of his love for the Jews), in which Stepinac expresses dissatisfaction because of the obligation of the Jews converted to Catholics to wear the embroidered sign of recognition on their clothes!?! Similar situation is the request of Stepinac that all prisoners in the concentration camps receive a Christmas gift. Tackling these, more than trivial matters such as wearing a sign of recognition or Christmas present at the time of the systematic extermination of hundreds of thousands of people in the most notorious ways can look absurdly. But we should recall that the author is guided by expressed methodological skepticism, and his intentions mentioned above to examine all the facts fairly.

In any case, this book is quite worth of reading because it brings systematized knowledge about issues that are unfortunately still current and subject of modern attempts of history rewritings. We are witnessing an increase in neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism throughout Europe and specially neighboring Croatia. These tendencies are something that must be addressed by Serbia's foreign and domestic politics in order to prevent future problems. This book is undisputed contribution in that direction.