Yugoslavia's Churches Squeezed between East and West during the Cold War

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YUGOSLAVIA’S CHURCHES SQUEEZED BETWEEN EAST AND WEST DURING THE COLD WAR

By Paul Mojzes

Abstract

Yugoslavia’s faithful adherence to the Soviet Bloc ended in 1948 when the famous Stalin-Tito split gradually sent Yugoslavia onto its own separate socialist path and subsequently led to the policy of active non-alignment between the military blocs. This ideological policy change delineates two very distinct stages for the position of the churches.

From 1945 to 1948 Yugoslavia was under strong Soviet influence and followed a Stalinist model of suppression of all religions. The Serbian Orthodox Church was able to maintain its traditional affinity to the Russian Orthodox Church but of little benefit to either Church. The Catholics and Protestants were under an even stricter surveillance because of their traditional ties to churches and cultures of the West. The government treated harshly all religious communities. It sought to ensure that foreign ecclesial leaders had a minimal influence on Yugoslavia’s churches, except to assure the flow of some relief aid from the West and its churches.

The second period, from 1948 until the end of the Cold War in 1990 brought about changes that gradually improved the conditions for the churches caused by various factors, one of them being Tito’s regime successful attempt to distance itself from the Soviet bloc. Controls over church life gradually diminished. Due to the government’s need to find a new openness to the West and then create a novel balancing act between East and West, the Catholic and Protestant churches were gradually permitted to repair their ruptured relationships with headquarters. The Orthodox were able to orient themselves toward the Greek Orthodox Church and maintain relationships with both the Constantinopolitan and Moscow Patriarchates and join the World Council of Churches. The Catholics restored their very close relationship with the Vatican and gradually opened themselves to more liberal theological trends from the West. Protestants, a tiny minority of the country’s population, had historically been Western oriented and most developed close relationships with the Council of European Churches and W.C.C. as well as with their churches of origin.

Neither the government nor any church leaders joined the Prague Christian Peace Conference or other initiatives from Socialist countries. Only individuals occasionally attended as observers, mostly as a precaution, just in case the government decided to make a sudden turn to the East. That fear was unfounded. Ecumenical efforts among the Churches within the Yugoslav federation were only lukewarm and did not prevent the wars for Yugoslavia’s disintegration in the 1990s.

Two clearly distinct stages can be discerned regarding to role of Yugoslavia’s churches during the Cold War. The first was between 1945 and 1948 during which time Yugoslavia was a close ally of the Soviet Union and therefore belonged to the East. The dramatic break between Stalin and Tito marks the beginning of the second stage (1948-1990), which can further be subdivided into two periods, from 1948 to 1953 and from 1953 to 1990 as detailed below. Yugoslavia first had

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1 This paper was presented at the International Research Conference held at the Slovak Lutheran Theological Faculty in Bratislava, Slovakia, “Christian World Community and the Cold War,” September 5-8, 2011. The conference was hosted by Bishop Emeritus, Prof. Julius Filo. The paper along with the other presentations will appear in a book to be published in Bratislava. A fairly large number of scholars are involved in planning and carrying out a major project on the mutual impact between the world-wide Christian community and the cold war. The initial stages of the project are facilitated by a group of scholars under the leadership of Dr. Risto Lehtonen of Helsinki, Finland.

to gradually discover for itself a new role of balancing between the two blocs that eventually resulted in becoming one of the leading proponents of active peaceful non-alliance, having become a critic of great power bloc politics. This political shift helped the churches to carve out more liberty for deciding their own destiny, while the state at first received a more genuine but passive support for its foreign policy. By the 1970s and 1980s Yugoslavia’s religious communities had enjoyed greater autonomy than churches in other socialist countries.³ Yet, simultaneously, the major religious communities became de facto the only organized alternative to the Communist Party and increasingly stimulated the rise of ethnic nationalism, which ultimately led to Yugoslavia’s demise. The expectation was that Yugoslavia will have the earliest and smoothest transition to a democratic Western-like system should the socialist system collapse. Instead, the bloody wars of the 1990s disintegrated Yugoslavia and catapulted some of the large historic churches into social prominence while marginalizing others.

**Anchored to the Soviet Union, 1945-1948**

On V-Day, May 8, 1945, unlike in the rest of Europe, the fighting between the Allied and Axis forces in Yugoslavia had not ended. It would be another two weeks before the actual fighting would cease. But the violence continued because for the next three to eight years the winners would undertake a bloody revenge by means of mass murders (both politicide and genocide), massacres, imprisonment, torture, and other means of terrorizing the population, including the religious communities. The territories of the pre-World War II Yugoslavia, which had been partitioned into some ten occupational zones by the Axis, had now fallen into the hands of the Partisans, a Communist-led guerilla movement commanded by Josip Broz-Tito, and the allied Red Army that assisted the Partisans in driving the Nazis out of northern Yugoslavia, the rest having already been liberated by the Partisans. At the meeting in Crimea between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin prior to the end of the war it was agreed that the Soviet Union and the Western Allies would share a 50-50 influence in Yugoslavia, but that did not happen. Control of the land was not merely nine-tenths of the law—it was all of the law. Yugoslavia immediately became a Soviet ally, which, at first, Tito and his immediate circle turned into the most eager satellite of the USSR. From 1945 to 1948 the Communists of Yugoslavia were fervently following the Soviet path into socialism, which meant the radical curtailment of individual human rights, and a bitter hostility toward all religions. A Constitution adopted in 1946 was a slavish copy of the 1936 Stalin Constitution which proclaimed all the traditional freedoms of conscience, speech, assembly, and religious belief, without the slightest intention of implementing them.

Some of the persecution of churches and clergy appeared justifiable. During World War II a number of religious leaders and followers did cooperate with the Nazis, the Fascists, and their domestic collaborators,⁴ much of it due to an inordinate fear of Communism that was nurtured by certain politicians and religious leaders. During the war in Yugoslavia there was not only armed resistance to the occupying forces which caused a brutal bloodbath, but also a civil war between nationalistic and communist militaries and paramilitaries, contributing to a horrendous loss of lives—over a million were killed.⁵ The civil war assumed also religious dimensions as Catholic Croats sometimes allied with Muslims fought Orthodox Serbs. Those Serbs who lived in Croatia

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⁵ The numbers are controversial to this day with some estimating as many as 1,700,000 dead, but these figures were inflated. A more conservative estimate of about 1,100,000 is more likely.
and Bosnia & Herzegovina did become the greatest victims by brutal exterminations and religious persecution. A certain number of Croat Catholic clergy actively cooperated in forcible conversions of the Orthodox Serbs and/or their killing; ethnoreligious hostilities reached epic proportions. This is not the place to revisit these tragic events but only to mention them as a background for the inhumanities that were continued after the end of the war.  

The two nationalist armed forces, the Croat Ustaše, who were outright Axis collaborators, and the Serb Četniks, who were supporters of the Royal Yugoslav government in exile in London but occasionally collaborated with the Italians and Germans, fought each other as well as the Communist-led Partisans. Catholic clergy had been sympathetic to Italians and Germans due to their centuries-long links with these cultures and some of the clergy militantly supported the Ustaše because the latter declared an Independent State of Croatia which they wanted to make homogenously Croat and religiously Catholic. As some of them had blood on their hands, either literally or symbolically, it is not surprising that Tito’s government tried and sentenced some of them or simply executed them during the post-war period. The Četniks were strongly anti-Communist. Sometimes they fought the occupying forces and the Ustaše while at other times entered into limited arrangements with the enemy. Many of the Orthodox clergy were sympathizers and supporters of the Četniks, so they too perished or suffered long imprisonments. Among Yugoslavia’s Protestants (mostly Lutherans and Reformed), most of whom were Germans and Hungarians, there had also been a few who actively supported the Nazis. They, too, either fled the country at the end of the war or were executed. Many German Catholic and Protestant clergy were tortured and executed during the genocide of ethnic Germans, mostly during 1944-1945 but some also as late as 1948 and even later. The best known of these victims was the Lutheran Bishop of Zagreb, Phillip Popp, who was tried and executed in 1945.

It was convenient for the Communist government to paint the picture of the enemies with broad brush strokes, namely to implicate the vast majority of religious people of somehow being against “the people” and the persecutions encompassed nearly all of the clergy who were being painted as reactionary enemies. Catholics in particular were accused of cooperating with the Vatican and Western anti-Communist government, apparently with some justification as the Vatican and the United States secretly collaborated on toppling Tito’s regime with the papal nuncio and domestic Catholic priests spying on behalf of the USA. The severe anti-religious propaganda and persecution lasted throughout the first period of the cold war, especially while Yugoslavia was a close ally of the Soviet Union until the so-called Stalin-Tito break in the spring and summer of 1948. Tito’s attempt to suppress and coopt the churches was mutually reinforced by Western anti-Communism and efforts to undermine Tito’s regime. Upon the rupture with the Soviet Union the alliance between the Vatican and the US weakened as the US government favored working with the maverick Tito while the Vatican continued its inflexible anti-Communist stance.

No improvement in church-state relations took place after Tito’s expulsion from the Cominform as the Yugoslav government was strenuously trying to prove its dogmatic Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist position, seeking to prove that it was actually the Soviets and the other Cominform countries that have strayed from the true path. Thus in the next four to five years very

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7 The Muslims, who were the third largest religious community in the former Yugoslavia, are not covered in this paper due to our self-selected perimeters. It should suffice to say that their role further complicated the situation. It should also be mentioned that about 90 percent of Yugoslavia’s approximately 80,000 Jews perished in the Holocaust.
little substantive change took place other than a very abrupt change in foreign policy forcing the
churches to cut off whatever ties they may have had with Christians in the East bloc. Generally that
affected mostly the Orthodox Church and to a lesser degree some Protestants (such as the
Hungarian Reformed Church) as well as Catholic contacts with co-religionists in other socialist
countries.

During the period from 1945 to 1948, in addition to the overt persecution of churches, there
was also an attempt to coopt them. The cooptation was simplest in regard to the Serbian Orthodox
Church (hereafter SOC). Being an autocephalous church, the headquarters of the Church was in the
country, specifically in the capital of Belgrade. During WWII the Nazis placed Patriarch Gavrilo
V (Dožić) first under house arrest in some monasteries in Serbia and then in 1944 incarcerated him
in Dachau. Nevertheless, upon his return to Belgrade after the war he was accused of collaborating
with the Nazis. He was under constant government pressure until his death in 1950. Gavrilo
nurtured broad pro-Russian sympathies shared over centuries by many Serb clergy and people.
Due to the centuries-long Orthodox tradition of \textit{symphonia} between church and state it was easier
for the Yugoslav government to find accommodation with SOC.

That was not the case with the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter RCC). Traditionally anti-
Communist and never quite “at home” in multiethnic Yugoslavia, the RCC and its various religious
orders opposed the Communist take-over and resolutely resisted attempts at becoming
domesticated, namely to proclaim a Croatian or Slovenian Catholic Church independent of the
Vatican. The pope, the head of the RCC lived outside of the reach of Yugoslavia’s government.
Consequently the country’s RCC hierarchy and priests could always explain their behavior as
having been ordered by the Church’s supreme leader. Tito’s attempts to cut that cord were
unsuccessful and he resorted to making communications between Rome and local Catholics
difficult or impossible. In respect to the RCC the Yugoslav government and SOC shared their fear
and antipathy.

The Protestants were the easiest to control. Having been less than one percent of the total
population with a membership consisting mostly of national minorities, especially Germans and
Hungarians who had become tainted during WWII as both of their home countries had invaded
Yugoslavia, it was easiest to intimidate them and silence them. The so called neo-Protestants (e.g.
Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Nazarenes, and similar) were
in any case apolitical and generally sectarian in their attitude toward society and apocalyptic in
regard to the future. The only reason why the government feared them (other than the endemic
paranoia) was that each of them had sister churches in the West and had been supported in the past
by missionaries and money. An end was put to that abruptly, forbidding, except in rare cases, visits
from abroad by co-religionists, and importation of literature and finances, thereby even further
marginalizing an already weak and among themselves divided movement.

Prior to the Stalin-Tito schism, the Soviet government had plans of making use of the
religious communities. Stalin had to make a concession to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)
who had proven very patriotic during WWII (the war the Russians call the Great Patriotic War) that
he permitted the reestablishment of the Moscow patriarchate and permitted Metropolitan Sergey
to ascend to that position. Months later he died and was succeeded by Patriarch Alexey who also
had to adhere to the supervision and use of church personnel by the KGB and the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs. In line with this, the ROC would organize a variety of assemblies and conferences
at which the visiting church leaders of other countries were to be manipulated for Soviet purposes.

Thus at the beginning of 1945 the SOC received an invitation to send representatives to the
first convened All-Russian Church Council since 1918. A number of SOC hierarchs, many of whom
had been theological students in Russia prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, responded enthusiastically to their experiences in the USSR, freely mixing praise for ROC and Stalin. Fairly soon, however, some of the Serbian hierarchs, such as Metropolitan Josif, started to feel manipulated. When Soviet hegemony was too enthusiastically promoted by the visiting ROC Metropolitan Sergey (Larin) at a SOC Synod meeting in April 1945, Serbs politely declined to be involved politically in the manner of ROC, warning them that Serbs may end up resenting the Russians even more than they did the Germans. The SOC signed some ROC ideological anti-Catholic declarations, but did not publicize this at home. They had explained to the Russians that for centuries the Orthodox of the Balkans had struggled with Rome but they prefer to move slowly but surely with concrete political measures rather than be involved in an ideological attack. The Serbs stated that they did not oppose sharp anti-Catholic attacks, which the Russians were trying to impose upon them, but preferred concrete steps at home. Metropolitan Sergey, upon return to Moscow, reported to the Soviet government that the SOC bishops are very reactionary and unwilling to provide unrestricted support to the Soviet line. The forcible turnover of the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church to the Moscow Patriarchate by the SOC in 1945 did not contribute to good feelings by SOC toward ROC.

It did not take long for the Yugoslav Communists to discover that they were not being treated as partners by the Soviets, but that colonialist subservience was being expected. Tensions mounted, words and letters were exchanged, and by 1948 the alienation caused a rupture. Contrary to some Western anti-Communists who thought this was just clever Communist conspiracy to trick the West, the rupture was deep and permanent. Only after Stalin’s death, in 1956, did Khrushchev and Bulganin go to Belgrade to try to repair the breach, but the Soviet and Yugoslav communists were never really able to trust one another, despite their ideologically kinship.

Now suddenly the SOC hierarchy that had to be goaded to become friendlier to ROC was being accused by the Yugoslav government of being too friendly to the Soviets. When Patriarch Gavrilo intended to travel to an All-Slavic Congress to which all heads of churches had been invited the Patriarch had been warned that if he were to travel to Moscow, he may never be able to return to his post. Now, the Yugoslav government impeded any and all communications between the two churches and persecuted those who were under the suspicion of being friendly with Russians. SOC was now forced to re-orient itself and seek new contacts. The re-orientation would be undertaken during the second major phase of Yugoslavia’s churches being torn between East and West. The Orthodox reluctantly, the Catholics and Protestants gladly turned westward to help themselves and the country find new allies.

Cutting Loose from the East, 1948-1953

The purges and persecutions of the immediate post-war period were not yet over when another bloody purge ensued. Unlike the first wave that swept many innocents along with the few guilty religious persons, this purge rarely affected religious people, as it was directed to those Communists who displayed greater sympathies and allegiance to the Soviet Union and Stalin than to the maverick Tito. The purge was of relevance for the churches only in that the internal conditions of oppression and pressure for uniformity did not change as the regime greatly feared a coup d’état or a Soviet invasion in order to bring Yugoslavia back into the bloc. In order to demonstrate their Communist “orthodoxy” this period still displayed all features of Stalinism

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10 Ibid., 471.
despite having become anti-Stalin. The continuation of the harsh repression could work only in the short term because Tito and his followers had to demonstrate why they were right and the Soviets were wrong; it had become a contest of two types of dogmatic Marxism. In the long run the Yugoslavs would have to discover a different type of Marxism, distinct from Stalinism, a process in which some of the dissidents like Milovan Dijas, Vladimir Dedijer, and some of the Marxist philosophers have discovered "the early Marx" that slowly opened a way for a more humane, flexible, and open system, which would eventually benefit the churches. However, that time had not come yet.

The rupture with the East was institutional, based on a change in power relations but not ideological. While the independence of Yugoslavia from the rest of the socialist bloc ushered in a very different international position of Yugoslavia in the world, gradually attracting the West to help solidify this rupture in order to weaken the Eastern bloc and possibly induce other socialist countries to break away from the Soviet Union, it did not change the ideological underpinnings of the Yugoslav socio-economic system. Domestically Yugoslavia continued to want to build a socialist society evolving toward a future Communist society along Marxist-Leninist (but not Stalinist) lines. The government desired to assist the process of "withering away" of religion, which often took very violent turns and almost always was repressive and controlling in nature. It was at this point where the title of this paper, of Yugoslavia’s churches being squeezed between East and West, became a reality. Namely, the new geopolitical situation of Yugoslavia made it possible for the churches to orient themselves to the West, as most of them deeply desired. Yet at home the Eastern socialist model was still in place, at first, as harsh as in the Soviet Union, but then gradually relaxing to the point where it became much more tolerant and flexible, which it would become from the 1960s onward. The government carried out a land reform that had stripped most of the real estate from the churches, but unlike the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav government did not expropriate the places of worship, though quite a few of them had been destroyed during the previous period. Also all schools, except a few that had the exclusive mission to train clergy, were made into public schools and no religious education or church related activities were to be permitted on school premises. The several Orthodox and Catholic theological schools and seminaries were separated from the university and made subject to close government supervision.

One thing seems clear: very few Christians regretted the break with the East and no churches showed any desire to lean eastwardly. They sensed that if the government was to reconcile with the Soviet Bloc the situation of the churches would turn for the worse.

During this period Yugoslavia was in a no-man’s land: rejected by the East, not trusted by the West, and unknown elsewhere. The SOC gradually began to re-orient itself toward the Greek Orthodox Church, even as Patriarch Gavrilj still tried to correspond secretly with the ROC, but his attempts were stymied by the Soviet government. Having begun to enjoy greater liberties after the Tito-Stalin break, the SOC, of its own accord, became more wary of the ROC as they became aware of the extent of the KGB’s influence among the hierarchs. As the separation of church and state made it difficult for SOC to receive financial support from the state, it was increasingly forced to activate contacts with the Anglicans and Western Protestant Churches. Indeed, relief (mostly food, medicine, and clothing as well as financing for special projects) continued to flow from the West, much of it organized by the churches. Patriarch Vikentije II (Prodanov), the chief hierarch from 1950 to 1958, cultivated the close relationships with the Orthodox Church of Greece and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul. Some of the talented students were being sent to Athens and Salonika for their theological education (such as Amfilohije Radović, Atanasije Jeftić, Artmije

11 Ibid., 747.
Radosavljević, and Irinej Bulović, all of whom subsequently became bishops). Although Greece, after the end of their civil war from 1946 to 1949, increasingly turned westward and eventually joined both NATO and the European Union, there remained among Greek Orthodox hierarchs and theologians those with anti-Western and anti-ecumenical attitudes which continue to this day to influence a segment of the Orthodox in Yugoslavia. This caused serious internal tensions within SOC, which on the one hand started to develop positive interconfessional contacts with Protestants and later, after Vatican II even with Catholics, which were strenuously opposed by Orthodox “fundamentalists” or “traditionalists” who were led by Justin Popović. Dr. Justin Popović, who was unofficially restricted to the west Serbian monastery of Cēlije, attracted a number of prominent intellectuals and future theologians whom he urged to study in Athens. He himself became violently anti-ecumenical and attacked all Orthodox ecumenical activities saying that ecumenism was the greatest heresy in Christian history as it comprises all other heresies that ever existed.

The Roman Catholic Church was the clearest target of attacks by the government. A major reason for it had been the close cooperation of many of its prelates with the leadership of the “Independent State of Croatia,” a puppet government of Germany and Italy. During WWII the ethnoreligious relationships between Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats had deteriorated into a massive bloodshed that has not been properly dealt with to this day. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia, while multiethnic, nevertheless had a considerable prevalence of Serbs in its membership who retained the memory of the massacres and concentration camps and considered the Catholic clergy, even up to Pius XII, as complicit in the genocide. Some of the Catholic bishops, for instance Ivan Šarić, Archbishop of Sarajevo, had been accused of being very open supporters of the Ustaše, but the most controversial figure was the Primate of Croatian bishops, Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac. Tito seemed at first to try to induce him to separate the Catholic Church from the pope. When Stepinac would not yield and continued with his anti-Communist views he was brought to a public show trial in 1946 and sentenced to sixteen years in prison, of which the first five he was incarcerated in a prison and the rest, until his death in 1960, restricted to his native village. Many believe him to have been a close collaborator of Ante Pavelić, the head of the Independent State of Croatia and supporter of forcible conversions and persecution of Serbs, while others consider him to be a martyr and innocent victim of Communist persecution. He had been secretly elevated by the pope to the rank of cardinal, upon which Tito’s government broke off diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Stepinac was posthumously beatified by Pope John Paul II and is a much admired spiritual figure of the Croats. During the later years under Communism (1970s and 1980s), expressions of piety at Stepinac’s grave in the Cathedral at Zagreb became a means of political dissent by Croats. Regardless of the truth about Stepinac, his unwillingness to cooperate caused the government to crack down on the RCC. Having murdered several hundred priests in the immediate post-war period and incarcerated hundreds of others, the government tried to isolate the RCC from contacts with the Vatican and other Catholics world-wide. That isolation was not airtight, especially when an increasing number of Western travellers were permitted to visit.

Another Communist practice from the East was adopted in order to weaken the loyalty of the priests to the hierarchy. As the clergy had no medical, social, or other pension security, the government offered to provide it under the condition that the priests unionize. At first even some of the Catholic clergy, particularly in Istria and Bosnia, started unionizing but the Catholic bishops threatened to excommunicate any priest wishing to unionize and gradually dissolved the unions.  

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12 Perica, Balkan Idols, 27.
Some Orthodox clergy had organized unions already in the 19th century and showed greater openness to government pressure for two reasons. One was that most parish priests were married and had families that needed social security and the other was that a number of Orthodox priests had joined the Partisans during the war and were sympathetic to the Communists. One such priest, Vlada Zečević, became a member of the Parliament and another, Milan Smiljanić, was the head of Udruženje Pravoslavnog Sveštenstva (the Union of Orthodox Clergy) that had good relations with the government but were not totally cut off from the hierarchy. The union was dissolved in 1990.

The change was most positive for the minority Protestants. Their contacts with denominational and ecumenical headquarters had been severely impeded during the previous period and now the constraints were gradually relaxing. High level visitors from abroad were intermittently permitted into the country as the government estimated the advantage to itself with contacts with the West and the relief aid that attended many of these visits. The government was still extremely cautious, as they feared the presence of intelligence officers from East and West. They came to realize that most of the church visitors were not in the employ of intelligence services and the greater damage could be reports about the still dire situation in the country and of religious persecutions. The efforts of the government to impress foreign ecclesiastical leaders and journalists did pay off because there were some very positive reports; for instance, when a group of representatives of religious periodicals from the USA issued a very positive report of their trip, stating that they saw no evidence of religious persecution. The visitors were either naïve or skillfully manipulated, because the positive impression was not the whole truth. Even internal travel of pastors from one part of the country (the north) where the surveillance was more relaxed to the less developed regions (the south) where the local communist officials were overly eager to restrict religion frequently ended in denials of entry or expulsions and harsh treatment of local congregations. Some of the more successful pastors or priests were incarcerated for long terms (e.g. the Methodist pastor Ceko Cekov) and a few were murdered (e.g. Rev. Asen Palankov, another Methodist pastor from Macedonia) by the UDBA (Uprava državne besbednosti – department of state security). Worship services were regularly spied upon and clergy were frequently interrogated by the secret service regarding paranoid suspicions. But a process was underway that would gradually bring about some qualitative changes into the position of the churches.

Relaxation of State Controls Brings Gradual Expansion of Freedoms, 1953-1990

While the conditions for the work of the churches had greatly improved from 1953 to the end of the period there was no major turning point, not even the death of Tito in 1980, which would justify an additional periodization. A joke vividly describes the main thrust of the development. At a meeting of the heads of states, the American president’s limo comes to a fork in the road. The chauffeur asks which way to turn to which the US President says, “to the right, of course.” When the Soviet limo reaches the same intersection the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union instructs his chauffeur to “turn left, of course.” When Tito’s limo reaches the same intersection and the chauffeur inquires what to do, Tito says, “signal left, but turn right.”

Having decisively cut loose of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia gradually but surely improved its relationships with the West, but also tried to walk a tightrope attempting to benefit economically

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from the willingness of the West but even of the Soviets to provide financial and military aid. The Communist Party’s ideological stance did not quite permit the country to openly adhere to NATO or other Western alliances and yet the refused to be part of the Warsaw Pact, so eventually Tito and his inner circle found a creative solution in organizing the non-aligned movement together with such statesmen as Nehru, Sukarno, Nasser, Haile Selassie, and others. There seems to be no evidence that the churches in any way contributed to this orientation. It seems that almost all initiatives to the changing social relationship regarding the churches were initiated by the government, and even more so by the Marxist intellectuals who were influenced by West European social democrats. New research into the Marxian corpus as well as additional discoveries of the horrors of the Gulag and related atrocities resulted in a re-examination of the traditional Marxist-Leninist dogmas and began a process of creative renewal that brought about worker’s self-management, greater decentralization, more personal freedom, a measure of humanistic critical thinking, and increasing contacts with intellectuals from around the world. Church leaders were also gradually permitted not merely to receive guests from the West but to travel abroad (still restricted until the 1970s). After the 1970s Yugoslavia basically gave passports to whoever asked and permitted emigration, attendance at conferences and assemblies, and even the visit of clergy to immigrant communities for liturgical and pastoral purposes.

Developments in churches of the East had practically no impact in Yugoslavia. While SOC joined the WCC reluctantly in 1966 and the other major non-Catholic churches joined international denominational or ecumenical agencies, it is notable that unlike their colleagues from the East (e.g. Milan Opočensky and Béla Harmáti) none had ever staffed in any significant way one of these organizations. Joseph Hromádka and his circle in Czechoslovakia, or Albert Bereczky and other Reformed and Lutheran clergy who cooperated closely with Hungary’s government, or “the church in socialism” of the German Democratic Republic had no followers in Yugoslavia. The Prague Christian Peace Conference was not joined by any of Yugoslavia’s churches. A few individual observers from a few churches attended some meetings, but confided to this author that the only reason they are there is “just in case” if the Yugoslav government were to turn East, they would have some idea of what lies in store for them. When the Moscow Patriarchate organized some of their Peace Assemblies the situation was the same—individuals, usually not high in the hierarchy of the Orthodox, Muslim, and some Protestant churches attended but kept a very low profile, indicating skepticism that the process is manipulated by the KGB. Furthermore there was practically no interest in liberation theology or introducing Marxist categories into theological inquiry. The Jesuit, Tomo Vereš, wrote about a constructive but critical dialogue with Marx. The Franciscan theologian, Marko Oršolić, toyed with the idea of editing a book that would deal with “theology of the Second World,” modeled after third world liberation theology, but the “second world” collapsed before he could implement the idea. Only the Catholic Archbishop of Split, Franjo Franić, having attended a conference of Latin American bishops, showed some interest in disseminating their ideas, but he himself tended to remain critical of Yugoslavia’s government despite some acceptance of a few premises of liberation theology.

Some religious leaders were reputed to have too friendly relationships with the government. The foremost of these would have been Patriarch German, who was patriarch from 1958 to 1990. It is reputed that, after the death of Vikentije, there was no clear choice of who would become the next patriarch and that the government pressured the church to select

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18 Pronounced “Gherman.”
German. Actually German was one of the best educated of the bishops who adroitly negotiated with the government to improve the conditions for the SOC, including the building of a new campus for the Belgrade Orthodox Theological School (with the financial assistance of the western Churches), as well as the continuation of building in Belgrade one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world, the Cathedral of Saint Sava, and the creation of new dioceses in Western Europe, North and South America, and Australia. However, his reputation as the “red patriarch” caused a schism in 1963 with some of the SOC parishes in North America. A schism of greater consequence was the breakaway of the Macedonian Orthodox Church which first claimed autonomy and then autocephaly (encouraged by Tito). This schism still lasts till today, with no other Orthodox Church in the world canonically approving of Macedonian autocephaly. A similar but smaller schism occurred in Montenegro.

Among the Catholic bishops, only the bishop of Maribor in Slovenia, Vekoslav Grmič (from 1968 to 1980), was openly friendly to socialism and was therefore dubbed “the red bishop.” He was a prolific author who was progressive in his theology and believed that theology should engage the reality of its context. He was removed from his diocese by John Paul II, but continued to hold the title of bishop and taught at the Ljubljana Roman Catholic theological school. Together, with another theologian Janez Janžekovič, he wrote sympathetically about liberation theology and was greatly influenced by Hans Küng, thus frequently sparking controversy with other more conservative bishops.

Among the Protestants the sole clergyman who was nicknamed “red,” was bishop Juro Struharik of the Slovak Lutheran Church in Novi Sad. Part of the reason for his reputation was that he became an announcer of the Slovak program on Radio Novi Sad and that he negotiated with the government. His negotiations, however, greatly benefited the church as he received permission for the repair of churches, more freedom of activities, printing of religious literature, and joining the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva.

The event that made the greatest impact on all churches and on the social and governmental perception of the churches was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). When the Catholic Church, a conservative and rigid institution, showed that it is able to carry out aggiornamento and re-examine itself, it forced the rest of the world to pay attention. Vatican II changed the Catholic relationship with nearly all non-Catholics, including the Orthodox, the Protestants, the Jews, the followers of other world religions, and even with agnostics and atheists by proposing dialogue rather than proselytism. The Yugoslav government permitted the Catholic bishops from the country to attend the Council. In the meantime, the archbishop of Zagreb, Cardinal Franjo Šeper, had become the Prefect of the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, one of the closest collaborators of Pope Paul VI, who eventually authored a number of very conservative declarations and statements. The bishops from Yugoslavia were not noted for their pioneering of bold reforms. But unlike in some other Eastern European countries, Vatican II was not bypassed or opposed but gradually gained acceptance, especially through the publication of a Catholic weekly named Glas Koncila (The Voice of the Council).

While the bishops, other than Franič and Grmič, were not in the forefront of Catholic reforms in the country, two groups of priests became the promoters of change. In Zagreb a group of three priests, Vjekoslav Bajsić, Josip Turčinović, and Tomislav Šagi-Bunić, started a journal and publishing house Kršanska Sadašnjost (Christian Contemporaneity) and promoted liberal Catholic

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19 The anecdote is that Aleksandar Ranković, the top Serbian Communist allegedly brought Bishop German to the session of the Holy Synod and told them that “this is your new Patriarch.” This seems to be a story circulated by the enemies of German.
views both by their own lectures and writing, as well as by translating the best of Western European Catholic theologians, thereby up-dating the intellectual level in parts of the church. A journal named Crkva u svijetu (Church in the World) published in Split vigorously promoted creative domestic theology especially through its editor, the priest Drago Šimundža and the lawyer/sociologist Jakov Jukić (pseudonym of Željko Mardešić), who were among the most progressive and perceptive Catholic intellectuals. Another interesting Catholic thinker, the above mentioned Jesuit Tomo Vereš, had creatively interpreted Marx for the benefit of both Marxists and Christians. It would be this loosely associated group of Catholic intellectuals, for which there was really no equivalent among other religious communities, who responded to initiatives of a truly remarkable crop of Marxist sociologists and philosophers who were re-examining and re-interpreting Marxism, Marxist attitudes toward religion, and promoted dialogue between Marxists and Christians.

At a 1960 meeting of Yugoslavia’s Marxist philosophers at Bled in Slovenia a conflict broke out between the dogmatic Marxist-Leninist and the humanistic Marxists who believed that it is the task of Marxists not only to criticize capitalists societies but all social reality, including socialist developments. The humanists Marxists won decisively and Tito decided not to intervene. From that point onward an energetic and creative discourse began, a part of which became critical of the traditional negative critique of religion, pointing out that religion is not merely “the opiate of the people” but also a cry against the oppressive social realities. They did not pioneer in the international Christian-Marxist dialogue—this was done by Giulio Girardi, Roger Garaudy, Erich Kellner, Milan Mahovec, Adam Schaf, and others—but it was a fairly widely practiced domestic dialogue in which the Marxists were the more active partner. It was people like Esad Ćimić, Branko Bošnjak, Zdenko Roter, Marko Kerševan, Srđan Vrcan and many others who provided the conditions for a much more positive view of religions, particularly of Vatican II Catholicism. The partners in that dialogue tended to be Catholic clergy and intellectuals. The other religious communities did not seem to have a suitably educated intelligentsia to respond to these dramatic new developments. It was this changed intellectual milieu that gradually influenced government authorities that were in charge of monitoring and controlling religious communities to relax their oppressive hold and provide much greater freedom, which included opening of additional theological educational institutions, publishing of periodicals and books, more opportunities of international contacts and travel, less pressure on average people against attending worship services and ceremonies, permission to carry out some youth work and limited social services, and so forth.

The post Vatican II atmosphere also provided new ecumenical opportunities particularly between the Orthodox and Catholics. The two Catholic theological schools in Zagreb and Ljubljana began annual meetings with the Orthodox Theological School in Belgrade at which papers were being read and discussions held—perhaps not enthusiastically, but nevertheless a positive interaction taking into account the many historical barriers to such meetings. (These meetings stopped at once with the outbreak of the wars of the 1990s.) For a while the prospect for a positive development of religion in the context of a liberalizing society seemed promising. From the middle of the 1960s to 1990, the standard of living improved, the government became less intrusive and
controlling, many of the strictures over religious institutions had become relaxed, religious publishing began to be permitted, and the government press became freer to include critical reviews of shortcomings in society. The greater freedoms were used by many churches to advance their own agenda. Regrettably, the agenda of SOC and RCC often turned out to be very nationalistic—a development the government greatly feared—with good reasons.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the SOC used various means to present itself as the sole true guardian of the interests of the Serbs throughout the country. The focus was primarily upon Kosovo where the national interests of ethnic Albanians (who had become the majority population in the province) and the Serbs became ever more conflictual and violent, particularly after Tito’s death in 1980. The government, at first, tried to keep it under cover but the SOC kept spreading the alarm that a form of genocide was being carried out by the Albanians and that soon the Serbs may lose what they considered to be the cradle of their civilization. After a few years, the general Serb public became very alarmed. The next step was the claim by SOC that Tito’s government covered up the genocide over Serbs in WWII and they began publicizing the horrors of that period along with excavating the mass graves and pointing out that the Croats and their RCC never apologized for these crimes against humanity.24 Serbian nationalism that had been lying dormant for decades dramatically increased, being stoked by a variety of ecclesiastic/nationalist anniversaries (such as the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo) attended by massive crowds. By the middle 1980s Serbian nationalism had found a leader, Slobodan Milošević, himself neither a religious person nor a nationalist, to manipulate their grievances that would explode in a war by 1990. While SOC never avidly embraced Milošević, it benefited from the traditional symbiosis of nationalism and Orthodoxy with many heretofore atheists or agnostic Communists rushing back to the church of their ancestors. The 1980s also brought about an increase of contacts between SOC and ROC as the Serbs sought to reinforce their traditional ties with the Russians due to Serbdom’s increased stresses and conflicts.

A similar process of ethnoreligiosity in Croatia actually preceded and exceeded the Serbian developments. The RCC very skillfully replaced secular Croatian nationalists by using a series of anniversaries and pilgrimages to harness the rising Croatian nationalism that Tito tried to suppress and they guided it into the church. The national Eucharistic Congress, anniversary of the conversion of Croats to Christianity, the massive Marian pilgrimages to Marianske Bistrice near Zagreb, and the Marian apparitions in Medjugorje, Herzegovina, all brought hundreds of thousands of participants, mostly Croats from home and abroad, all accompanied by the presence of Croatian national flags and anthem, hymns, and insignia.25 Copying the successful Polish model, and with the active assistance of Pope John Paul II, the RCC in Croatia organized a nine-year-long jubilee, “the Great Novena” (1975-1984) which drew hundreds of thousands and even millions of people to religious festivals that became nationalist manifestations. Toward the end of the 1980s the discovery of mass graves of Croat (and other) collaborationist troops that were exterminated by the Partisans after World War II gave Croats their own martyrs in addition to Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, whose cult became a rallying symbol against the Communist state. The symbiosis of the Catholic Church and Croatdom was complete.

Protestants did not have a comparable process, though there had been already national identification in churches like the Slovak Lutheran and Hungarian Reformed, but nowhere near the Orthodox and Catholics (and Muslims). What did take place is that many Protestants (and Jews)

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24 Details of this process as well as a thorough survey of all Balkan genocides is available in my book, Balkan Genocides: The Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century.

also got caught up in the nationalist wave mostly by sympathizing with the ethnic majority of their place of residence. Thus a number of Protestant churches also became institutionally split up (e.g. Baptists and Jews of Croatia and Serbia, and Methodists of Macedonia and Serbia). Not many succeeded in distancing themselves from the nationalist passions and only a few were to become peacemakers when the wars broke out.²⁶

In the process of national stratification, the religious communities welcomed the rush back to religion due to the rising tensions and crisis in society and by the 1990s the identification of nation and religion was complete. It did not mean that suddenly all these people had become profoundly religious and pious. A new phenomenon occurred, called “belonging without believing.”²⁷

By the end of the 1980s when Communism in Europe began collapsing, Yugoslavia seemed to be poised for the quickest and easiest transition into post-Communism and a Europe without bloc divisions. Contrary to expectation the ethnoreligious tensions in Yugoslavia increased to the point of armed escalation and a series of wars (including genocides) which fragmented Yugoslavia into seven independent mini-countries.²⁸ That process is beyond the scope of our present inquiry as it took place after the end of the cold war, marked by the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

²⁶ Among the notable individuals working for reconciliation were Peter Kuzmić and Miroslav Volf of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, Miroslav Kiš and Radiša Antić of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the late Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski of the United Methodist Church, Katarina Kruhonja, Marko Oršolić, Ivo Marković, Petar Andjelković, Luka Markošić, Željko Marković-aka Jakov Jukić- of RCC, Radovan Bigović and the late Jovan Nikolić of SOC, and other less well known peace activists.
²⁷ Dino Abazović, Religion u tranziciji [Religion in transition]. (Sarajevo: Rabic, 2010), 11. Also an interview with Abazović in Sarajevo, May 28, 2011.
²⁸ For a detailed analysis of the factors contributing to the outbreak of the war see Paul Mojzes, Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans (New York: Continuum, 1994), esp. 125-151.
