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## **Gender and Secularisation in Early Yugoslav Socialism: The Struggle for Minds, Hearts and Souls**

**Abstract:** *This article places gender analysis at the core of the Yugoslav Communist Party's secularisation project. By examining how a particular understanding of gender informed secularisation, I argue that gender was crucial for the Party, its activists, and also for the religious authorities. They all understood women as particularly prone to religious influences, creating patronising policies to suit their needs. The Party considered women to be a threat to the socialist modernisation project; the Party activists singled out religious women often to demonstrate their own modernity; while different religious organisations targeted women to ensure the continuation of religious practices. Targeting women speaks a volume about views on men's religiosity and agency. Secularisation project entrenched imagined class and gender hierarchies, in which peasant women were marked as the most backward group in the country. Nevertheless, despite the Party's efforts, the secularisation of countryside was not successful, particularly regarding women's church attendance amongst the Catholic population, or regarding people's use of priests' services during life-cycle events such as births, weddings and funerals. Following the initial aggressive campaigns in the first decade after the war, the Party opted for a more gradual approach hoping that secularisation would be achieved with migration, urbanisation and industrialisation.*

**Keywords:** gender, secularisation, socialism, Yugoslavia, women

‘Tero, didn't I tell you yesterday already to knead and bake a cake in a big oval pan, a cake that will be consecrated and shared with all household members to eat on the day of Saint Blaise, so that Blaise will protect all the baptised children in the house and our cattle from a sore throat and neck?’

‘Dear granny, I am not against baking the cake for our household, because we all eat cakes happily, but why bring it to church and consecrate it? If it is baked well and tasty, it will be eaten with joy unconsecrated.’<sup>1</sup>

This brief exchange, perhaps fictional, between a religious grandmother and her grandson’s wife, was a typical trope for the first decade of Yugoslav socialism. Later in the text, we learn that Tera is a *pleasant* girl (another standard description), who has moved into her husband’s multigenerational household, but according to her new grandmother, she has been corrupted by the Red Cross course for women. On that course, she did not learn to heal with holy water and holy objects. Instead, Tera was introduced to *scientific* methods, and learned to shun prejudices and superstitions. The old woman (her age was emphasised several times) criticised Tera for rejecting traditional healing methods, traditional ways of delivering babies, and religious methods of disease prevention. Criticised for putting the people of the household at risk by not bringing the cake she had baked to church, Tera replied that she had learned how to treat and prevent a sore throat via medical means, and that her grandmother’s tradition pulled society back to *the dark past*. Criticised for not helping to craft a number of Christmas Eve amulets that would ‘help cranes carry their own children’s fever to the Turkish children’, Tera responded that these are all bad traditions, and that she believes only what the health care professionals have proved. Nevertheless, Tera was reconciliatory in explaining that her husband’s grandmother had grown up within the old belief system and traditions, and was forced to live alongside them in the old system. However, for Tera’s generation, ‘they have an opportunity to improve their life by learning and acquiring the knowledge they gain on the courses.’ Only when Tera’s grandmother insisted that such knowledge was pitiable, was Tera brave enough to criticise the poor hygiene caused by the old traditions, which even lead to the death of children. She ended by saying that their aunt who had followed all the traditions had given birth to eleven children, eight of whom had died, and that this only benefited the priests who earn money for every funeral and who encouraged such traditions. The grandmother, however, had not been won over, and the article finished with her lamenting for the good old times.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that the next article in the same issue consisted of the Society of Advanced Peasant Women describing a group of women who had ‘liberated themselves from superstitions, unfounded beliefs and the influence of the clergy’.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ilakovac, Marija, “Dijalog o kolaču sv. Blaža [Dialogue about the Saint Blaies Cake]”, *Žena u borbi*, 3, March 1955, pp. 6–7. (hereafter: Ilakovac, M., “Dijalog o kolaču...”)

<sup>2</sup> Ilakovac, M., “Dijalog o kolaču...”

<sup>3</sup> Kolenko, Marija, “Rad Društva ‘naprednih seljanki’ u Velikom Bukovcu [Activities of the Society of Advanced Peasant Women in Veliki Bukovac]”, *Žena u borbi* 3, March 1955, p. 7.

Similar storylines appeared in many Yugoslav newspapers and magazines. In sum, they embodied the struggle between old and new: folk traditions and religious feelings were marked as backward, old and abnormal; whilst young socialists were deemed progressive, devoted to science and knowledge. The articles provided a space for building common ground on which the new socialist state challenged the old religious authorities. Understandings of gender, together with categories such as age and class, were crucial here. The anonymous grandmother could stand for all old women, perceived as the keepers of traditions, superstitions and religiosity. She was almost unredeemable, a long-time victim of the nasty religious and capitalist authorities, unable to accept a better life due to her age, and also gender. Old men were rarely mentioned. On the other side of the dichotomy lay an image of a young woman, eager to learn, bring socialism to her household, and show gratitude to the new state that had allowed for these changes. She knew that the Church with its priests, as well as the religiosity and superstitions (the difference between them elided) of the ignorant people were the enemy, and she was preparing herself to face them.

The described article and many similar texts were products of socialist modernity and the idea that *conscious* people should spearhead the movement for the removal of religion, not only from public life but also through activities such as education, legislation and the removal of sacred objects.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I examine how a particular understanding of gender informed this process and the Communist Party's policies towards religion and religious communities in Yugoslav socialism. I focus on the issue of socialist modernity, looking at how gender was crucial for the Party, its activists, and also for the religious authorities. The analysis of legislation and state policies newly established after the Second World War will show how the Party forced religious communities to adapt whilst evidencing differences and similarities in their approaches towards different religious communities. Finally, this article explores the struggle for the souls and minds of religious women, as they were thought to be one of the most critical threats to the socialist project. It looks at how the Party activists engaged in such a struggle, trying to bring modernity to other women, but ultimately, crafting their own sense of identity. The article limits itself to describing attempts at secularisation in the Christian communities alone, as policies towards Muslim communities were qualitatively different, and have been explored elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Finally, all analytical categories used in this article, such as gender, modernity and secularism should not be seen as fixed categories with some universal values. Rather, they

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<sup>4</sup> Also see: Luehrmann, Sonja, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic*, *New Anthropologies of Europe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. (hereafter: Luehrmann, S., *Secularism Soviet Style...*)

<sup>5</sup> They were more aggressive, entailing the veil lifting campaign, and a significantly different discourse was employed to justify the actions of the Party. See: Simic, Ivan, *Soviet Influences on Postwar Yugoslav Gender Policies*, New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018.

should be seen as rooted in this particular historical context, always changing and being articulated through various discourses and practices.

### Changes After the Second World War

Yugoslav communists' approach towards the various religious organisations shared many similarities, driven by their view on religion and modernity. They saw religion as a remnant of the old world, now supposed to be separate from the state so as to prevent any interference by religious organisations to changing society in accordance with socialist norms. Led by the belief that reason has to overcome superstition, communists believed that religion would eventually disappear. Just as in the Soviet Union,<sup>6</sup> the Yugoslav Constitution did guarantee religious freedoms, but the communists and the religious organisations had different understandings of what this meant. For communists, religious freedoms were to be exercised in a private sphere by those who had not yet accepted socialist modernity (i.e. non-communists), and the readiness of the religious organisations to comply with this understanding determined the Party's politics towards them during the early socialist period.

Differences in how the religious organisations were approached depended on their readiness to collaborate with the Party, not oppose state politics, and contribute usefully to foreign politics. They ultimately also depended on their perceived level of threat to the new regime.<sup>7</sup> Several burning issues marked the Party's relationship with the Catholic Church. The Party leaders were not pleased with the role of the Church leadership in the Holocaust and genocide against the Jews, Roma and Serbian population in Croatia, nor with the Church's connections with pro-Ustashe guerrillas that still roamed in the countryside,<sup>8</sup> the Church's organisational dependence on the Vatican, and the resistance of the Catholic Church to all policies that might diminish the Church's authority.<sup>9</sup> The trial of Archbishop Stepinac in 1946, who was mostly accused for his collaboration with the fascist Ustashe regime, was only the culmination of the conflict. The Catholic Church did not accept the measures taken against the Ustashe clergy and did not respond positively to Josip Broz Tito's call for the Church

<sup>6</sup> See: Luehrmann, S., *Secularism Soviet Style...*; Smolkin-Rothrock, Victoria, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. (hereafter: Smolkin-Rothrock, V., *A Sacred Space...*)

<sup>7</sup> Buchenau, Klaus, *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien, 1945–1991: ein serbisch-kroatischer Vergleich*, Balkanologische Veröffentlichungen, Bd. 40, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004. (hereafter: Buchenau, K., *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus...*)

<sup>8</sup> Medved, Ivan, "Prilog istraživanjima o djelovanju 'križara' u Slavoniji u razdoblju 1945.–1950.," *Scrinia Slavonica*, no. 4, 2004, pp. 489–96. (hereafter: Medved, I., "Prilog istraživanjima...")

<sup>9</sup> Akmadža, Miroslav, "The Position of The Catholic Church in Croatia 1945–1970," *Review of Croatian History*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1945–70. (hereafter: Akmadža, M., "The Position of The Catholic Church...")

to be more national and less loyal to the Vatican. Furthermore, the Catholic Church, as the largest landowner, was the most vocal opponent to the agrarian reform, which saw its possessions given to the landless peasants. The Catholic Church also heavily opposed any separation from the state, new family laws, the Constitution, secular education, and any interference from the Party.<sup>10</sup> The Catholic Church was seen as a serious threat to the new order, more so than the Serbian Orthodox Church that had suffered heavily during the war. The Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community were also major landholders, and they also lost land and income after the communist takeover. Orthodox priests were prosecuted for their war collaboration or crimes, whilst the directives on religious education in school, the Party's interference in the selection of religious leaders, and political pressure on the lower clergy were similar for all. The Party's relations with the Islamic Community were slightly better. The Islamic Community of Yugoslavia was reorganised in 1947, led by Reis-ul-Ulema Ibrahim Ef. Fejić, who was particularly satisfied that the Islamic Community was no longer discriminated against by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Importantly for the Party, the Islamic Community did not receive donations from abroad. Instead, they were heavily subsidised by the state in return for support, whilst the Party installed several loyal people in the organisation's apparatus.<sup>11</sup>

Besides all these policies that heavily threatened the dominant positions of the religious organisations in Yugoslav society, the traditional religious organisations were also challenged by new gender policies introduced by the Party. Socialist Yugoslavia, like all other socialist countries in Eastern Europe, launched a series of broad social interventions that targeted the old gender regimes. The new legal framework set the most obvious challenge immediately after the war, and it has received significant scholarly attention.<sup>12</sup> To summarise briefly, in 1945 and 1946, Yugoslav communists introduced a constitution that resembled the Soviet one,<sup>13</sup> guaranteeing political, social

<sup>10</sup> Akmadža, M., "The Position of The Catholic Church...", p. 91; Buchenau, K., *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus...*

<sup>11</sup> Radić, Radmila, "Islamska verska zajednica 1945–1970. godine", *Forum Bosnae*, no. 32, 2005, pp. 99–134.

<sup>12</sup> Gudac-Dodić, Vera, *Žena u socijalizmu: položaj žene u Srbiji u drugoj polovini 20. veka*, Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2006; Gudac-Dodić, Vera, "Divorce in Serbia", *Tokovi istorije* 1–2, 2008, pp. 137–48. (hereafter: Gudac-Dodić, V., "Divorce in Serbia"...); Cvejić-Jančić, Olga, "Brak i razvod između prošlosti i budućnosti", *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta* 43, no. 2, 2009, pp. 63–88; Habul, Udjejna, "Institut razvoda braka u historiji Bosne i Hercegovine", *Godišnjak Fakulteta političkih nauka*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 457–71; Resetar, Branka and Berdica, Josip, "Divorce in Croatia: The Principles of No-Fault Divorce, Parental Responsibility, Parental Education, and Children's Rights", *Family Court Review* 51, no. 4, 2013, p. 568; Simić, Ivan, "Soviet Model for Yugoslav Post-War Legal Transformation: Divorce Panic and Specialist Debate", *Annual for Social History* 2, 2015, pp. 83–101. (hereafter: Simić, I., "Soviet Model...")

<sup>13</sup> Jovanović, Miroslav, "Preslikana ili samobitna društvena izgradnja: komparativna analiza ustava FNRJ (1946) i 'Staljinskog' ustava SSSR-a (1936)", *Tokovi istorije* 1–2, 2008, pp. 280–90.

and civil rights to women for the first time.<sup>14</sup> In 1946, Yugoslav communists passed a new law on family relations, rendering civil marriage the only valid kind, and taking marital relations out of the Churches' jurisdictions.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, before the Second World War all marital relations were the responsibility of the religious communities, with the small exception of an area in Vojvodina in which an old Hungarian civil law was valid, and where civil marriage and divorce existed.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, there were several very distinctive practices and traditions, and inter-religious marriage was a rarity. With the one law in 1946, Yugoslav communists replaced several ecclesiastical laws and practices, creating a universal situation across the entire country. Women were proclaimed equal in marriage, with equal rights and responsibilities, whilst divorce became easier and possible for a wide variety of reasons not recognised by the religious authorities.<sup>17</sup> This law and the Constitution were only a pretext for later attempts to change gender relations as well, which was intrinsic to the communist revolution. However, the changes that communists tried to introduce regarding gender relations were rarely explored in relation to people's religious beliefs. The literature on the Churches' attempts to counter communist social interventions is even scarcer.<sup>18</sup> Some attention was devoted to the Muslim communities, who were targeted by an aggressive veil lifting campaign.<sup>19</sup> However, there is a significant gap between how understandings of gender informed Yugoslav communists' modernisation project, and the secularisation that was a part of it.

<sup>14</sup> Prokop, Ana, *Ravnopravnost žene, brak i porodica: po Ustavu Federativne Narodne Republike Jugoslavije [Equality of Women, Marriage and Family: According to the Constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia]* Zagreb: Antifašistički front žena Hrvatske, 1946.

<sup>15</sup> "Osnovni zakon o braku [The Basic Marital Law]," *Službeni list Federativne Narodne Republike Jugoslavije [The Official Gazette of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia]*, no. 29, April 9, 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Gudac-Dodić, V., "Divorce in Serbia"...

<sup>17</sup> See: Simić, I., "Soviet Model..."

<sup>18</sup> Jadranka Rebeka Anić's work is an exception as she has explored some of these issues in the case of the Catholic Church: Anić, Rebeka, *Die Frauen in der Kirche Kroatiens im 20. Jahrhundert*, Theologische Frauenforschung in Europa 18, Münster; Wien: Lit, 2004; She has also explored how the Catholic Church viewed the communist gender programme: Jadranka Rebeka Anić, "Gender, Gender 'Ideology' and Cultural War: Local Consequences of a Global Idea – Croatian Example," *Feminist Theology* 24, no. 1, September 2015, pp. 7–22.

<sup>19</sup> Achkoska, Violeta, "Lifting the Veils from Muslim Women in the Republic of Macedonia Following the Second World War," in *Gender Relations in South Eastern Europe: Historical Perspectives on Womanhood and Manhood in 19th and 20th Century*, ed. Miroslav Jovanović and Slobodan Naumović, Belgrade; Graz: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju; Institut für Geschichte der Universität Graz, 2002, pp. 183–95.

## (Mis)understanding People's Religious Feelings

As regards the people's religious feelings, Yugoslav communists found their ideological premise in the classics of Marxism, and in their Stalinist interpretation. Religion was viewed as a superstructure that would disappear. As a part of that superstructure, the Church should be attacked, but the religious feelings of the populations should not be offended as that could prove to be counter-effective, leading to a backlash.<sup>20</sup> Following on from such a premise, the Stalinist interpretation of why religion still exists in a socialist society postulates that whilst religion has become obsolete, it still exists in people's lives due to their backwardness and unreadiness to accept modern science.<sup>21</sup> This hypothesis was followed by the idea that women had greater difficulties than men in accepting the new modern socialist society, as exemplified in the story about Tera's grandmother. However, the roots of such ideas could be found in the immediate months following the October revolution. The Bolshevik media fostered a specific discourse marking women as 'backward', and in this case, it is particularly important that women in rural areas were considered to be even more backward.<sup>22</sup> In the hierarchy of places, the countryside was *lagging behind* the cities; in the class hierarchy, peasants were lagging behind workers; whilst in the gender hierarchy, women were lagging behind men. When applied to religious feelings, the logical conclusion would be that peasant women were the most prone to resist the secularisation project.

Just as in the Soviet Union, Yugoslav communists construed discourse about peasant women in negative terms. Women were considered to be the people most liable to be influenced by state enemies – in this case, by the hostile priests. The image of a religious 'baba' (an old woman – the same as in the Soviet Union<sup>23</sup>), prone to superstitions, prejudice, and unwilling to change, was well established. Religious women were supposedly a danger to the revolution, even though precisely these women had often helped the Partisan guerrilla army during their four-years of warfare against the occupiers. Also, the vast majority of new postwar communists originated from the countryside. Although concerns about peasant women's religiosity could have been derived from personal experiences, they were more likely caused by accepting the well

<sup>20</sup> Marks, Karl, Engels, Fridrih, and Lenjin, Vladimir Iljič, *Za religijata: zbornik na statii i pisma*, Skopje: Kultura, 1952.

<sup>21</sup> The way a Stalinist interpretation found its way into and around Yugoslavia can be seen in: Karpov, G. G. *Pravoslavna crkva u Sovjetskom Savezu*, Biblioteka Društva za kulturnu saradnju Jugoslavije sa SSSR (Belgrade: Biblioteka Društva za kulturnu saradnju Jugoslavije sa SSSR, 1947) It was translated and published in significant numbers months after its release in the Soviet Union.

<sup>22</sup> Wood, Elizabeth A., *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997. (hereafter: Wood, E. A., *The Baba and the Comrade...*); Gorsuch, Anne E., "'A Woman Is Not a Man': The Culture of Gender and Generation in Soviet Russia, 1921–1928", *Slavic Review* 55, no. 3, October 1, 1996, pp. 636–60.

<sup>23</sup> See: Wood, E. A., *The Baba and the Comrade...*

established negative image of peasant women. Peasant women were depicted as those whose allegiance to God instead of the Party would be the hardest to break. It was up to the *advanced* Party members to lead them onto the proper path.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, as Engels had theorised that religion entrenches patriarchal order, the destruction of that order depended on winning over people in relation to their religiosity. Intervening in gender relations was, therefore, at the core of the communist secularisation process as theorised by Marxist classics, Soviet revolutionaries, and Stalinists.<sup>25</sup>

The problem for the Communist Party, however, was that the Party organisation in the countryside was weak despite almost half of the members in its ranks being from the countryside by mid-1948.<sup>26</sup> These people were often no more ‘elevated’ in their socialist consciousness than other peasants, and amongst other problems, many communists who completed the Party’s ideological school to become leaders were not keen to return to their villages.<sup>27</sup> In the countryside, the Party was even weaker amongst women. The peasant women’s support for the Partisan army did not translate into postwar political activities in the countryside. The peasant women who became notable Party members moved to the cities and pursued careers in the state apparatus. Few remained in the underdeveloped rural areas. Yet, the Party’s women’s section – the Antifascist Women’s Front (AFŽ) – still had a network of activists all over the country. They usually had one or several active women in the villages, who obtained the teaching and propaganda material from more urban offices, to which they reported. It was precisely these women who struggled the most to bring socialist modernity to the countryside. Their attempts to introduce socialism were often met with contempt, whilst many of their political activities were sabotaged by men, even by communists. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms impeded many actions aiming to allow the participation of women in the public sphere.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> On how leading male communists contributed to such discourse, see: Pucar-Stari, Đuro, “Govor na Drugom kongresu Antifašističkog fronta žena Bosne i Hercegovine [Speech at the Second Congress of the Antifascist Front of Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina],” July 12, 1947, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 35, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Bebel, August, *Woman and Socialism*, New York, NY: New York Labor News, 1904; Brodsky Farnsworth, Beatrice, “Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai,” *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 2, April 1976, pp. 292–316; Wood, E. A., *The Baba and the Comrade...*

<sup>26</sup> “Ideološko-vaspitni rad komunista na selu [Ideological-Educational Work of Communists in the Countryside],” *Borba*, January 13, 1949.

<sup>27</sup> “Zapisnik sjednice biroa CK KPH održane dana 21. VI. 1951. g. [Minutes of the Meeting of the Bureau of the CK KPH held on 21. VI 1951],” in *Zapisnici politbiroa Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske 1945–1952*, vol. 2, Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2006, pp. 761–64.

<sup>28</sup> See for example: “Stenografski zapisnik sastanka Komisije za rad među ženama održanog u Glavnom odboru Socijalističkog saveza radnog naroda Hrvatske [Proceedings from the Committee for Work Amongst Women held in the Head Committee of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Croatia],” March 12, 1953, Collection 142, SSRN, Box 111, The Archives of Yugoslavia.



Socialist modernity, however, also entailed the idea that *backward* peasant women can, and should, be saved from the influence of reactionaries. Tasked to work with these women, the AFŽ had to assume the leading role, with its network of activists showing the path. As the attitude taken towards religion was an important marker of this socialist modernity, this process was crucial for the activists themselves – in reinforcing their identity of being modern socialist women who have shunned prejudices, accepted all the Party’s policies, and have engaged in helping those who remain *backward*. Many of these activists were peasant women themselves. Becoming a new socialist person, as argued by Sonja Luehrmann, was inseparably tied to helping others on the same route.<sup>29</sup> Finally, this was closely related to Lenin’s explanation that the state should be separated from and indifferent to religion, whilst the Party must fight against ignorance and for those who are still lacking socialist consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Struggle for Minds, Hearts and Souls**

The Communist Party, which viewed itself as the vanguard of the working class, aimed to assume absolute political, ideological, cultural and moral authority.<sup>31</sup> Once communists had defeated organised religion in economic and political terms by confiscating possessions and cutting religious influence in the political arena, religion remained an ideological opponent, and an enemy in a fight for influence over the people’s everyday life. The influence of churches was banished from the education young people received as the Party was quick to establish control over schools. Private schools, including religious schools, were promptly closed. Yugoslav communists intended to make a clear break with the pre-war education system, creating new curricula and rendering schools secular. Public elementary education became mandatory, whilst during the first few years after the war, religious education was permitted as an elective subject, but it was soon removed from schools altogether.<sup>32</sup> In considering religiosity to be a product of backwardness and inadequate education, communists anticipated that the problem would at least be solved for future generations.

Winning over the support of religious adults was perceived to be a more difficult task, delegated to the local Party cells and the mass organisations such as the AFŽ. The Party’s internal reports were full of anxieties about the various Churches’ influence pertaining to all denominations. These anxieties often came from the rank-and-file, who tried to adhere to the ideological teachings, often more zealously than the more highly-ranked Party members. Violent physical attacks on priests and even murders

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<sup>29</sup> Luehrmann, S., *Secularism Soviet Style...*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Smolkin-Rothrock, V., *A Sacred Space...*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>31</sup> *Program i statut Komunističke partije Jugoslavije [The Programme and Statute of The Communist Party of Yugoslavia]*, Belgrade: Borba, 1948, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Akmadža, M., “The Position of The Catholic Church...”, pp. 99–102.

were not uncommon. For example, the minutes from the meetings of the Central Committee of the Croatian branch of the Party reveal that the local communists often acted alone in their attacks on priests. However, they were often under pressure to deliver election results, to recruit enough workers for industry, to bring enough new members to the People's Front, or merely to show that they had accepted and understood the Party line themselves. Punishments, however, were lenient, often consisting of expulsion from the Party when a priest was killed or seriously injured.<sup>33</sup> Violence also erupted when Party members attempted to disrupt public social activities. The Party made sure that religious activities such as processions were obstructed, and it was up to the local Party activists to ensure that religious activities were confined to within the churches. The atmosphere of violence encompassed much of the countryside, and often related to other campaigns launched by the Party such as the collectivisation of agriculture. According to internal reports, violence against priests was often directed, planned and executed by the local Party cells. Violence, however, was not limited to one side only. The AFŽ activists were also targeted, particularly by the Croatian Ustashe guerrillas. On occasion, they simply threatened activist women to cease their activities,<sup>34</sup> whilst, for example, in Pakrac a local AFŽ leader was murdered for her anti-religious activities.<sup>35</sup>

The Party-controlled media played an important role in the struggle. The Party drastically reduced the publishing activities of the religious organisations, assuming absolute control over public space. In following the Soviet model, Yugoslav communists eagerly disseminated messages stating that religiosity was not compatible with modernity and progress, creating a space for conflict, in which the Party saw itself as the vanguard of the working class, tasked with liberating the masses from the old regimes, prejudices and habits.<sup>36</sup> The press disseminated a discourse that viewed organised churches as enemies of the state, the Party and the people. The magazines aimed at women and published by the AFŽ were equally radical. They regularly featured articles on the Church – mostly the Catholic Church – accusing it of collaborating with the Ustashe regime, or of trying to preserve its vast landholdings, and of all kinds of hostile activities. Priests were accused of directly fostering genocide and brutal killing methods, and of spreading hatred. The Church was also accused of

<sup>33</sup> “Zapisnik sa sjednice biroa CK KPH održane 4. VII. 1947. godine u Zagrebu [Minutes of the Meeting of the Bureau of the CK KPH held on 4. VII 1947 in Zagreb],” in *Zapisnici politbiroa Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske 1945–1952*, vol. 1, Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2005, pp. 376–81.

<sup>34</sup> Medved, I., “Prilog istraživanjima...”, pp. 495–96.

<sup>35</sup> “Zapisnik sa sastanka okružnih tajnica AFŽ-a u Glavnom odboru AFŽ-a za Hrvatsku [Minutes from the Meeting of Regional Secretaries of the AFŽ in the Head Committee of the AFŽ for Croatia],” June 13, 1946, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 35, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example: “Naši novi zakoni [Our New Laws],” *Žena danas* 41–42, May 1946, p. 14. (hereafter: “Naši novi zakoni”...)

abusing people's religious feelings, whilst proclamations of various miracles were described as mocking religiosity.<sup>37</sup>

Gender equality was another arena in which the communist press made its case against the Church.<sup>38</sup> The AFŽ's magazines wrote extensively about the new legal, social and economic rights for women. New laws were presented as protecting women and families, and as a struggle against the Church's influences, which oppressed women.<sup>39</sup> For example, one text added that the new Constitution guaranteed rapid development and liberation, not least because of the rule that the land belongs to those who farm it, that the state is separated from the Church, and that the state determines what counts as family and marriage.<sup>40</sup> The Catholic Church was accused of trying to prevent gender equality by abusing women's feelings in order to prevent them from voting for the new Constitution. They argued that behind all Church activities lay an attempt to avoid the agrarian reform and to protect war criminals.<sup>41</sup> The press also featured the suffering of the landless peasant women who were abused whilst working for the landowners, whilst the Church was trying to keep the peasant women in such a position.<sup>42</sup>

The Party activists were aware that the press was only one tool, and that they would have to pursue a more direct approach with many people. On the other hand, when cut off from the press, the religious organisations had to become more active as well. Winning over women, and particularly peasant women, became a battlefield in which the Party and religious communities fought for the support of minds, hearts and souls. Both sides believed that women were more religious than men, and thus directed their activities at them. The idea was also internalised by women in the Party leadership. For example, Anka Berus wrote reports claiming that clerical reactionaries hoped to find support amongst women, but that such efforts had only been successful in certain cases in Croatia. She repeated phrases from the press stating that priests

<sup>37</sup> Marinić, Tatjana, "Ne možemo zaboraviti mučenje i ubijanje dece [We Cannot Forget the Torture and the Killing of Children]," *Žena danas* 38–39, January 1946, p. 19,20; Mimica, Blaženka, "Mi nemamo ništa protiv crkve, mi ne branimo svećenicima vjerski rad, ali mi tražimo da oni budu narodni svećenici i da služe narodu" – Tito [We Are Not Against the Church, We Do Not Forbid Religious Work to The Priest, But We Demand That They Be the People's Priests and to Serve the People – Tito]," *Žena danas* 46, September 1946, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>38</sup> As Joan Scott argues, gender equality is often brought into the discussion about secularism in the West as well, often as a way to fuel Islamophobia, see: Wallach Scott, Joan, *Sex and Secularism*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> "Naši novi zakoni"...

<sup>40</sup> Šolak, Marija, "Naš narodni Ustav potvrđuje ženama građanska, ekonomska i socijalna prava [Our People's Constitution Confirms Civil, Economic and Social Rights to Women]," *Žena u borbi*, no. 22, 1946, pp. 7–8.

<sup>41</sup> Mimica, Blaženka, "Ništa nas neće odvratiti od narodnog pokreta [Nothing Will Turn Us Away from The People's Movement]," *Žena danas* 36, November 1945, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Mimica, Blaženka, "Zemlja postaje vlasništvo onih koji je obraduju [The Land Becomes the Property of Those Who Farm It]," *Žena danas* 40, March 1946, pp. 5,6.

were trying to abuse women's religious feelings to separate them from the Party, and to prevent them from participating in the reconstruction of the country, therein forcing them to abstain in the elections, and to reject the Constitution and equality. Berus also explained that priests threatened women with hell if they joined the AFŽ.<sup>43</sup>

There is no way to measure the religiosity of peasant women, as no such surveys were completed. It was always an assumption, heavily ingrained in stereotypes that women were more irrational, emotional and prone to succumb to external influences than men. Women were also supposedly less resistant to the Church's appeals to participate in Church rituals and to protect traditions.<sup>44</sup> As noted by Luehrmann for the Soviet case, the emphasis on the religiosity of peasant women could entail an intention to marginalise the importance of the phenomena the communists aimed to eradicate. She also argues that marginality served as a protection, as peasant women had the least to lose. For example, if a *baba* baptised a child, the parents could blame her old age and superstitions, thus retaining their social status whilst privately agreeing with the decision.<sup>45</sup> From the scattered reports, it seems that this was also the case in Yugoslavia. At least some in the Party organisation were aware of men's religiosity, but the Central Committee of the Croatian Branch of the Party explained that the children of communists were only christened when the communists were away, in order to 'demoralise and compromise them'.<sup>46</sup> From such a clumsy explanation, the only possible inference was that their wives or mothers conspired with the priests.

Religious life-cycle events created particular anxiety for the Party activists. They were well aware that events such as births, christenings, weddings, *Slavas* for the Orthodox believers, and funerals involved priests and rituals. The removal of priests and of certain traditions created tensions even for those who aimed to be loyal to Party discipline. In the press, women were often accused of pushing for a christening, a church marriage, and a funeral with a priest, yet the internal Party reports show that it was often male communists who insisted on them.<sup>47</sup> The Party bodies suggested that all these events in their secular form should become more formal, festive, and generally more meaningful if the people are going to accept them without the religious

<sup>43</sup> Berus, Anka, "O radnim zadacima žena Hrvatske [On the Work Objectives of the Women of Croatia]," 1946, 2, KDAŽH, box 1, Hrvatski državni arhiv.

<sup>44</sup> The same assumptions were held by the Soviets, see: Anderson, John, "Out of the Kitchen, out of the Temple: Religion, Atheism and Women in the Soviet Union", in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 212.

<sup>45</sup> Luehrmann, S., *Secularism Soviet Style...*, p. 204.

<sup>46</sup> "Zapisnik sjednice biroa CK KP Hrvatske održane 5. oktobra 1951 g. [Minutes of The Meeting of The Bureau of the CK KP of Croatia on 5 October 1951]," in *Zapisnici politbiroa Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske 1945–1952*, vol. 2, Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2006, pp. 846–52.

<sup>47</sup> For example: "Zapisnik sa sjednice biroa CK KPH održane 1. VIII. 1947. godine u Zagrebu [Minutes of the Meeting of the Bureau of the CK KPH held on 1. VIII 1947 in Zagreb]," in *Zapisnici politbiroa Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske 1945–1952*, vol. 1, Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2005, pp. 382–89.

institutions. In the cities, much effort was invested in *replacing* Christmas celebrations with New Year, and Easter with Mayday. These new socialist holidays also had to have an original festive tone, celebrating life and human endeavours. The AFŽ instructed its activists to promote the celebration of the New Year's tree, in which children would receive presents, as a replacement for Christmas.<sup>48</sup>

Church attendance played an essential role on all sides of the debate. For the local Party leaders, it was a defining point of the level of modernity in the countryside. For the AFŽ activists, it was essential to show that the number of women attending services had decreased so as to demonstrate the organisation's success and the need for its existence. It was also a crucial marker of to what extent the local population, but also the Party members, had accepted the Party line. Church attendance was a visible marker of adherence or disloyalty to the new regime, and was easily comparable with the crowd present at People's Council's meetings for example. As church attendance was always more than just religious activity, the communist authorities were also aware that they had to compare it with the audience at their *cultural* events. This was a particular problem in the areas with a predominantly Catholic population that proved to be more inclined to go to church on Sundays.<sup>49</sup>

The priests naturally used their services to raise concerns relevant to the Church and to exert influence over their flock. This was often considered to be hostile to the Party and the AFŽ. Local reports indicated a variety of 'rumours' spread by the priests, such as that a new war was imminent, or that there was a famine in the nearby collective farms, and these rumours were supposedly targeted at women.<sup>50</sup> The Party leaders also assumed that it was women who further spread the rumours, careless of the consequences.<sup>51</sup> The AFŽ in rural areas often carefully counted the number of women attending church on Sundays and reported the figures to the urban offices. Urban offices then, ascribed church attendance to a "low cultural level amongst women," and called upon their activists in rural areas to be more proactive with other women, for instance in organising different activities that would counter going to church. The reports, however, suggest that their actions were often in vain. For example, if they scheduled a Party meeting at the time of a service or confirmation,

<sup>48</sup> "Godišnji izvještaj o radu Glavnog odbora i organizacije AFŽ-a u Hrvatskoj [Annual Report on the Activities of the Head Committee and Organisation of the AFŽ in Croatia]," January 14, 1949, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 15, The Archives of Yugoslavia. (hereafter: "Godišnji izvještaj o radu Glavnog odbora i organizacije AFŽ-a u Hrvatskoj")

<sup>49</sup> "INFORMACIJA o radu organizacije Narodne omladine sa ženskom omladinom [Information about the Activities of the People's Youth Organisation with Female Youth]," 1951, Collection 114 SSOJ, box 69, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>50</sup> "Plenum Glavnog odbora AFŽ-a za Hrvatsku [Plenum of The Head Council of The AFŽ For Croatia]," May 15, 1947, KDAŽH, box 1, Hrvatski državni arhiv.

<sup>51</sup> Crvenkovski, Krsto, "Društveni položaj žene u NRM i rad partiskih i masovnih organizacija [Social Position of Women in the NRM and the Activity of the Party and Mass Organisations]," April 4, 1952, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 13, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

nobody would come, not even the local Party members.<sup>52</sup> Attempts to prove that the miracles staged by the priests were fake were often met with contempt, as they followed people's disapproval of unpaid work on Sundays undertaken for the People's Front on public projects – therein also demonstrating broader concerns.<sup>53</sup> Without repressive means, and the AFŽ certainly had none, the regional offices could only suggest further educational methods. Nevertheless, when the local women activists attempted to make use of more aggressive methods such as targeting women who were wearing a cross, they were reprimanded and told to stop such practices.<sup>54</sup>

Josip Broz Tito, in his meetings with the local AFŽ activists, and speeches published in the press for women, gave an official tone to the idea that the AFŽ had to work with peasant women to create a *new woman* who would not be prone to religious, reactionary influences.<sup>55</sup> Tito instructed activists to work with the local women, to recruit them for their efforts in developing the country, whilst explaining that they can still attend church if they want. The local AFŽ activists conducted various activities with peasant women, but they were often improvised, lacking coherence and sustainable support from the urban centres. One of the most common activities all over the country were reading groups, in which the women who gathered would read popular AFŽ magazines, the daily news, or important articles by the Party leaders. The format of these gatherings depended on the local activists, and the time of year, occurring more regularly during the winter months. The AFŽ magazines made sure that anti-clerical articles were published in simplified language, and the magazines often featured articles relating to popular science and nature, believing that this would be an effective tool challenging stereotypes and organised religion. The reading groups were also supposed to ensure that the texts were understood correctly and accepted by the participants. If they had only learned to read recently, the teacher was supposed to read aloud. The AFŽ leadership believed that women would be able to oppose religious influences once they had become equipped with knowledge, with one activist comparing a book to a wartime machine gun.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> "Izveštaj glavnog odbora AFŽ-a Bosne i Hercegovine [Report of the Head Committee of the AFŽ of Bosnia and Hercegovina]," 1947, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 2, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>53</sup> "Izveštaj Glavnog odbora AFŽ-a NR Makedonije za 1948 godinu [Report of the Head Committee of the AFŽ in NR Macedonia for 1948]," December 1948, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 15, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>54</sup> "Zapisnik sa sastanka sekretara oblasnih komiteta i zaduženih za agitaciju i propagandu [Minutes of The Meeting of Secretaries of The Regional Committees Tasked with Agitation and Propaganda]," July 2, 1949, Collection 114 SSOJ, box 76, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>55</sup> "Organizacije AFŽ-a imaju veliku dužnost, jer AFŽ predstavlja jedan od jačih stubova naše narodne vlasti – Tito [The AFŽ Organisations Have A Great Duty, Because the AFŽ Is One of The Stronger Pillars of Our People's Government – Tito]," *Žena danas* 46, September 1946, pp. 1, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Begović, Božana, "Diskusija sa Plenarnog sastanka Glavnog odbora AFŽ [Discussion from the Plenary Session of the AFŽ Head Council]," October 6, 1946, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 35, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

It soon became clear that the Party would have to fight the Church over levels of participation in social activities, as the priests were not passive either. Traditionally being centres of rural life, the local churches quickly adapted to the increased number of social events organised by the Party, for example by hosting their own courses for women teaching them traditional crafts. Various local churches organised gatherings for children where they could play, imitating large communist educational projects.<sup>57</sup> The AFŽ activists reported that if there was no Party activity, church attendance and the events organised in front of the churches were the only social activity available for the villagers. For example, in the remote villages of Dalmatia and Kodrun in Croatia, people would gather in front of the church every Sunday to dance the *kolo*. Even if the church had no priest in-residence, people would gather, and after he had shown up all the people would go to the service. The priests also organised choir groups, lectures, sports activities, and shows,<sup>58</sup> adapting to the methods that the Party employed. In the Party reports, religious women were particularly blamed for helping priests to arrange such activities.<sup>59</sup>

The activities of the local AFŽ women had to follow principles developed in the urban centres, which were often detached from the countryside. They believed that cities have a transformative character, and so they organised excursions to larger industrial places, holding the view that coming into contact with industry would have a profound impact on rural women, changing their cultural norms as well. The activists organised lectures, either talking themselves – based on the material sent from the urban offices – or if they were luckier, by bringing with them ‘more advanced’ she-comrades, who would patronisingly talk to the rural women about their backwardness. They never considered that this approach might strengthen the position of the local priests who aimed to entrench the already existing social order, not seeking to change it or blame the local population. They also never considered whether the pamphlets written and printed in Zagreb were suitable, for example, for rural Dalmatia, or whether a mass held by a local priest would resonate more with the local population. Nevertheless, many local activists possessed the freedom to try other forms of approaching peasant women. Some attempted collective visits to the cinema, and communal listening to radio stations if they were lucky enough to have a radio, whilst some tried to make use of traditional gatherings such as *posela* and *prela*.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> “Izveštaj sa terena NR Slovenija [A Field Report from Slovenia],” December 25, 1947, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 12, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>58</sup> Medved, Ivan, “Katolička Crkva na području Narodnog odbora Slavonski Brod u dokumentima kotarskog komiteta SKJ (KPH) Slavonski Brod 1945.–1960.,” *Scrinia Slavonica*, no. 6, 2006, p. 753. (Medved, I., “Katolička Crkva...”)

<sup>59</sup> Medved, I., “Katolička Crkva...”, p. 758.

<sup>60</sup> Bogdanović, Nada, “Izveštaj o radu organizacije Antifašističkog fronta žena Narodne Republike Srbije od plenuma Centralnog odbora AFŽ-a do danas [Report on the Activities of The Antifascist

The priests and their supposed influence were blamed for all sorts of things. The activities of the priests were blamed for poor political results when the local Party activists had to show that enough people voted in the local elections. In such cases, the priests were accused of keeping women away from voting, of organising events during the elections, or of spreading propaganda against the Party.<sup>61</sup> In all these cases, it was assumed that the clergy had hostile intentions, and as one report put it, the clergy aims for women because they have a *low level of socialist consciousness*.<sup>62</sup> The clergy was also blamed when women resisted joining collective farms. The socialist transformation of the countryside, for which collectivisation was a crucial element, was particularly damaging to the Church, which supposedly turned to propaganda in order to prevent peasant women from participating in the collectivisation process. According to reports, some priests openly preached to women that their souls would not be saved if they joined the collective farms. The Catholic Church was also convenient to blame for the deficit of women recruits for industry in Slovenia.<sup>63</sup> The AFŽ activists proclaimed that they had intensified their struggle against priests so as to counter the priests' activities, but their efforts were often fruitless.<sup>64</sup>

Particular anxieties relating to motherhood and parenting were present in the Party. It seems that many Catholic priests, indeed, attempted to persuade mothers to send their children to religious education classes at school, whilst some of the priests were quite successful in maintaining attendance.<sup>65</sup> The Party leaders were concerned that Catholic priests could *manipulate* children in remote areas, where the Party and the AFŽ were not vigilant. Local activists were instructed to exert an influence on mothers who were *forcing* their children to attend religious education classes.<sup>66</sup> However, even these women were considered to be devoid of agency, with the Party explaining that they were under the influence of the reactionary clergy.<sup>67</sup> The activists often helplessly observed local priests who would organise sports activities, bringing

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Front of Women of the People's Republic of Serbia from the Plenum of the Central Council of the AFŽ Until This Day],” 1946, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 13, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>61</sup> Medved, I., “Katolička Crkva...”, p. 751.

<sup>62</sup> Bučan, Anka, “Diskusija sa Plenarnog sastanka Glavnog odbora AFŽ [Discussion from The Plenary Session of the AFŽ Head Council]”, October 6, 1946, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 35, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>63</sup> “Izveštaj Centralnog odbora AFŽ-a Jugoslavije [Report of the Central Committee of the AFŽ Yugoslavia],” 1947, Collection 142, SSRN, Box 1, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>64</sup> “Pred II. Kongres žena Hrvatske [Prior To the 2nd Congress of Women of Croatia],” *Žena u borbi*, no. 6, June 1949, pp. 1–2.

<sup>65</sup> “Godišnji izvještaj o radu Glavnog odbora i organizacije AFŽ-a u Hrvatskoj”...

<sup>66</sup> “Zapisnik sa sastanka sa tajnicama i rukovodiocima org.sekcija gradskih odbora AFŽ-a [Minutes of the Meeting with Secretaries and Organisers of the Org. Sections of The City Councils Of the AFŽ],” March 3, 1949, KDAŽH, box 1, Hrvatski državni arhiv.

<sup>67</sup> Tomšič, Vida, “O ulozi AFŽ u vaspitanju socijalističkog čoveka [On the Role of The AFŽ In Education of a Socialist Man],” *Žena danas* 68–69, March 1950, pp. 23–24.



with them sought-after sports equipment and trying to recruit these children for their religious education classes. Furthermore, according to the internal reports, they also *pressurised* the children into bringing their friends. Finally, the strongest accusation made was that the priests used every opportunity to turn children against the Party, even by tearing apart banners and flags.<sup>68</sup> The Pioneer Organisation was called upon to be vigilant, but their reach was limited in the countryside despite the large investments in the Pioneer press, and the explicit directive to counter clerical influences.<sup>69</sup> The priests' propaganda was also blamed for the troubles the AFŽ activists had in enrolling enough children for free summer vacations. For example, a local Party cell reported that an old woman, under the influence of the priests, spread rumours that children were being cooked into soups, therein creating troubles in recruiting children.<sup>70</sup>

The biggest problem for the Party was probably that the relationship between the priests, and their congregation was often private. For example, the priests visited houses for *Slava* in the Orthodox case, whilst confessions in Catholic churches also avoided the Party's gaze. This troubled the AFŽ activists as such devotion was not public, but rather less visible and more difficult to control. In their reports, the women's *primitiveness* was particularly blamed for such practices, as it undermined socialist modernity even further. Some in the Party leadership were stricter regarding the religiosity of its members. For example, the Montenegro leadership expelled many from the Party for expressing their religiosity. However, women were rarely expelled as they were less frequently members, yet the Party still reported that many women were visiting the Church and going to confession. Finally, it was often local women who visited public meetings and heavily opposed speeches in which the local Party members tried to *unmask* the hostile activities of the priests demonstrating priests' *culpabilities*.<sup>71</sup> However, as one internal report from Slovenia claimed, peasant women were more eagerly hostile towards capitalists and kulaks, than towards the priests.<sup>72</sup> Popular support was certainly missing.

<sup>68</sup> "Godišnji izvještaj o radu Glavnog odbora i organizacije AFŽ-a u Hrvatskoj"...

<sup>69</sup> Tomašević, Stana, "Poboljšanje rada Pionirske organizacije [Improving the Work of the Pioneer Organisation]," September 1946, Collection 114 – SSOJ, Box 27, The Archives of Yugoslavia; "Pionirska štampa [The Pioneer Press]," May 1948, Collection 507, CK SKJ, Ideološka komisija (VIII), box 26, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>70</sup> Medved, I., "Katolička Crkva..." , p. 752.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example: Medved, I., "Katolička Crkva..." , p. 750.

<sup>72</sup> "Godišnji izveštaj o radu za 1948 godinu [Annual Activity Report for 1948]," December 28, 1948, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 13, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

## Relaxation and the Move to a Gradual Approach

The Party's assault on people's religiosity decreased after the early 1950s. In the countryside, a more relaxed and gradual approach towards secularisation came with the end to aggressive collectivisation, which had failed to bring about the socialist transformation of the countryside as imagined by the communists. The socialist transformation of the countryside, then, had to be achieved gradually through the general improvement of living conditions, but also through mass migration to the urban areas. Furthermore, the Party organisations never had enough strength in radically influencing the rural areas. The AFŽ never had enough resources to fulfil its mission of 'saving' all women from clerical influences, and their failure in this drew criticism from those in the top political positions.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, not even all the AFŽ activists were enthusiastic about the anti-religious agenda, and so skipped meetings during religious holidays.<sup>74</sup>

It seems that after the early 1950s, the Party focused more on urban areas, and on controlling their own members' religiosity. In 1952 Krsto Crvenkovski called upon the Party members to fight religion with facts and science, rather than by beating priests and shutting down churches.<sup>75</sup> Josip Broz Tito repeated this call the following year. In 1953, the Law on the Juridical Status of the Religious Communities was passed confirming the separation of the Church from the state, and preventing the abuse of religion for political purposes.<sup>76</sup> The Law, however, entailed more regulated relations between the state and the various religious organisations.

This change was particularly visible in the tone taken towards religion in magazines aimed at women. Religion was, of course, still described as being the "opium of the masses",<sup>77</sup> but it was acknowledged that even in a socialist society, it was not easy to simply remove religion and superstition. In an article entitled 'We must not allow the priests to make our children stupid', the author assumed that education and science have to encompass the largest masses of the population, and that knowledge about human evolution and society would lead to a decrease in religious influences over time. They became aware that it was not possible to eliminate religion via campaigns. The Party authors were forced to acknowledge that many traditions

<sup>73</sup> Broz Tito, Josip, "Borba komunista Jugoslavije za socijalističku demokratiju [Struggle of the Communists of Yugoslavia for Socialist Democracy]", *Komunist*, no. 5–6, December 1952, pp. 9–97.

<sup>74</sup> "Izveštaj sa I rajona [Report from the First Raion]," April 1952, Collection 141 AFŽ, box 13, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>75</sup> "Zapisnik od XIV Plenum na CK na NMM [The Minutes of the XIV Plenum of the CK NMM]," May 23, 1952, Collection 114 – SSOJ, Box 360, The Archives of Yugoslavia.

<sup>76</sup> Klaus Buchenau, "What Went Wrong? Church–State Relations in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Nationalities Papers* 33, no. 4, December 2005, pp. 547–67.

<sup>77</sup> Bojović, S., "Baba Dona ili lekar [Granny Dona or a Doctor]," *Žena danas* 76, October 1950, p. 20.

had survived the assault of the early postwar years, and that the countryside had not changed as planned.<sup>78</sup> The Church, however, continued to be explained in terms of being “an institution of the capitalist rulers for stupefying and for keeping backward and enslaved broad working masses”.<sup>79</sup> They recognised that even some honest people still attended churches, but only out of their ignorance and traditions, aspects that should gradually disappear. The new socialist state holidays would also enter into their houses over time, and so no rash action was needed. The Party was ready to retreat away from violent means and move towards taking a more educational approach to secularising the population. Once again, outside of schools, the educational approach was directed towards women, in the form of numerous articles and films that often depicted the disastrous consequences of their religiosity. However, the process was far from successful, and even the secularising of the Party membership was only relatively fruitful. For example, as shown by Klaus Buchenau, in the late 1960s a third of the Party members admitted that they had had church weddings.<sup>80</sup>

Still, over the following decades, the religiosity of the rural populations continued to be presented in gendered terms. Peasant women were marked as overly religious, superstitious and unchanging in magazines, and more importantly, in the ever-increasing Yugoslav cinematography. This image of women had not changed following one of the early films *The Final Days* (*Poslednji dani*), released in 1951, in which only women visited churches in which the evil priests served.<sup>81</sup> The same tropes were repeated decades later. One late Yugoslav film named *The Appearance of a Holy Lady in the Village of Grabovica* (*Ukazanje Gospe u selu Grabovica*) tells the story of a local teacher’s struggle to educate children in one remote village, in which a local priest tries to exert his influence over them. The plot begins with the aftermath of a rumour that the school will face closure due to a lack of students. This excites the hopes of a priest that he might regain an old building, confiscated after the Second World War and used as part of the school. Just as in the postwar magazines, the priest uses sports to entice more pupils to religious classes – he is opposed to the secular education, is ambitious to expand the church land, and he would stop at nothing to bring more believers to the Church. The people are generally uninterested in religion, except for the old women, and women who are experiencing some form of crisis. However, by the end of the film it appears that the rumour about the school closure was false, and so the church remains empty and the priest’s plot to regain the school’s building fails. However, at the end of the film, the Holy Lady does appear,

<sup>78</sup> “Vaspitanje majke kao prvog vaspitača [Education of Mothers as The First Educators],” *Radnica* 3, March 1950, p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> Marinić, Tatjana, “Ne dopustimo da nam popovi zaglupljuju decu [We Must Not Allow Priests to Make Our Children Stupid],” *Žena danas*, no. 97, July 1952, p. 14.

<sup>80</sup> Buchenau, K., *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus...*, p. 145.

<sup>81</sup> Pogačić, Vladimir, *Poslednji dan [The Last Day]*, Avala film, 1951.

illustrating an even more interesting picture of the Church's greed and corruption. The priest never really cared about the Holy Lady, and in the final scene, after saving her child, the teacher leads the other children away from the church. One reading of the film could be that the Holy Lady had decided to protect a child, but also secular education.<sup>82</sup> In any case, all the elements of the early AFŽ reports are present. The priest took a proactive role with the children, using a variety of means to entice them to attend religious education (catechesis), he craves for more land and buildings, he abuses the trust of local people in trouble, he spreads rumours, and he is not even interested in the safety of a baby. The role of the AFŽ agitators is here assumed by a local teacher – a strong woman, who loves all the children and would do anything for their education and for them to have a better life. The victory of the teacher, however, came hard achieved, and as part of the Party's secularisation project, it was only fleeting as the countryside remained unchanged.

## Conclusions

Understandings of gender played a crucial role in how the Party envisioned the secularisation of the general population. Combined with the imagined class hierarchy, they fostered a specific discourse in which peasant women were construed as the most backward group in the country, and as a potential threat to the socialist order. The Party assumed that the people in the countryside were more religious than those in the cities, that women were more religious than men, and that older women were more religious than younger ones. These postulations were taken for granted, as the Party relied on Marxist theory and readings of the Marxist classics via its Stalinist interpretation, rather than on its own experiences of engaging with the countryside. Furthermore, these ideas remained unchanged until the end of the socialist period.

The secularisation of the countryside, therefore, depended on gender stereotypes rendering the entire process narrow and easy to avoid. Only rarely did a few communists at Party meetings suggest that men and even Party members were also religious, often hiding behind women's public religiosity. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that peasant women were supposed to have been targeted as a priority, the Party struggled to find ways to approach them. Its women's section the AFŽ was tasked with working with peasant women, but from their reports, it became clear that the activists were losing the battle for souls and minds to the clergy. Particularly in the predominantly Catholic areas, the Party activists struggled to break women's church attendance, or from their using priests' services during life-cycle events such as births, weddings and funerals. The Party's attempts to introduce socialist meanings

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<sup>82</sup> Čengiđ, Bahrudin Bato, *Ukazanje Gospe u selu Grabovica [The Appearance of a Holy Lady in the Village of Grabovica]*, Televizija Sarajevo, 1985.

and forms to these occasions did not hold ground. After the dissolution of the AFŽ in 1953, and also after accepting a more lenient approach that entailed less physical violence towards the priests and more education of the population, the secularisation of the countryside was left to unwind more gradually. The data from the following decades shows that the secularisation project, in the way the Party leaders imagined it, failed. Ultimately, it shows the limits of the Party's organising in the countryside, and how the assumptions made about gendered religiosity remained unchanged.

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## Резиме

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### **Род и секуларизација раног југословенског социјализма: борба за ум, срца и душе**

У раду се анализира родна компонента секуларизације у раном југословенском социјализму. Испитујући како је схватање рода условило секуларизацију коју је спроводила Комунистичка партија Југославије, чланак указује на начине на који је род био кључан за партију, њене активисте, али и за религијске институције. Сви они су сматрали да су жене посебно склоне утицајима религије, спроводећи патронизујуће политике. Партија је сматрала да су религиозне жене претња за социјалистички пројекат модернизације, партијски активисти су често спроводили насилну секуларизацију да покажу сопствену модерност, док су религијске организације циљале жене како би се наставиле религијске праксе. Посебне политике према женама указују и на то како су ове групе виделе мушкарце, њихову религиозност и агенсност. Пројекат секуларизације је на тај начин утврдио замишљене класне и родне хијерархије, у којима су сељанке означене као најназаднија група становништва. Ипак, упркос напорима партије, секуларизација села није била успешна, посебно када се узме у обзир посећивање цркви међу католицима, или када се посматра улога свештеника у обредима попут рођења, венчања и сахрана. Након почетних агресивних кампања у првој деценији након рата, суочена са неуспехом, Партија се одлучила за постепени приступ, очекујући да ће се секуларизација десити са миграцијама, урбанизацијом и индустријализацијом.

**Кључне речи:** родно питање, секуларизација, социјализам, Југославије, жене