

**FORGING BROTHERHOOD: EDUCATION AND INTER-ETHNIC
RELATIONS IN EARLY SOCIALIST CROATIA (1943-1952)**

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes Croat-Serb inter-ethnic relations in early socialist Croatia (1943-1952) through the lens of the Communist-led education system. Inter-ethnic relations in Yugoslavia suffered a devastating blow during the campaigns of genocide and revanchist mass murder of World War Two. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which came to power in 1945 on the wings of the Partisan resistance movement, had to find ways to definitively stop this cycle of violence, and assure the long-term stability of the new multiethnic state. In Croatia – as a federal subject of Yugoslavia – this primarily meant improving the relations between the Croat ethnic majority and the Serb ethnic minority. The Communist Party decided to use the education system in order to promote the ideals of inter-ethnic fraternity, as well the proclaimed national equality of Croats and Serbs in Croatia. In this thesis, I will determine the specific policies and reforms implemented by the Communist Party in the Croatian education system in order to promote inter-ethnic fraternization and the national equality of Serbs and Croats. Furthermore, I will analyze the reactions of the Croat and Serb populations of Croatia to the implementation of those policies by using studies of local-level events, and I will try to determine the possible sources of discontent among the two ethnic groups. Finally, I will trace the changes of Communist Party nationality policy in the education system during the given time period.

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Introduction

The modern history of Croatia was in many ways defined by the relations between its majority ethnic Croat population, and its significant Serb ethnic minority. These inter-ethnic relations ranged from active political cooperation in the period preceding the 1918 unification of Yugoslavia, to genocide during World War Two, and they ultimately ignited the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia itself in the early 1990s. In many ways, it is impossible to write a history of Croatia, or a history of Yugoslavia, without covering complex Croat-Serb ethnic relations. However, one period of these relations – the period of socialist Yugoslavia, and especially its early, formative years – has until now received very little academic attention; a surprising situation given its unparalleled impact on both later historical developments and modern public consciousness in the post-Yugoslav space.

This thesis will aim to explore inter-ethnic relations in early socialist Croatia – as a constituent republic of Yugoslavia – from the formation of the first Communist-led Croatian Partisan government in June 1943, to the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) in November 1952, which marked the KPJ's definitive break with Stalinism. However, an issue as complex as inter-ethnic relations has to be understood as inherently multifaceted. Due to the large amount of possible points of interest, and due to the inherent constraints of the MA thesis format, it was necessary for me to choose a specific area of Croat-Serb relations to focus on. The choice to put the spotlight on education policy in order to explore inter-ethnic relations should not come as a surprise; after all, the role of public education in molding younger generations according to ruling ideological trends is well understood, as is the fact that schools and curricula often become hot spots of ethnic conflict on many levels – from the local and personal to the social and institutional.

Early socialist Croatia was no different. The new Communist authorities saw the education system as an ideal platform for promoting elements of their nationality policy –

schools were firmly in the hands of the party-state, and any reforms that were to be introduced would be instantly noticeable to the public eye. Still, because of the important position schools held (and still hold) in public discourse, Communist education policies were bound to become a source of contention. Not all of the issues arising from these reforms were necessarily ethnic in origin – the question of religious education immediately comes to mind – but ethnic relations often played into them, both in the decision-making process of the Communist-led Ministry of Education, as well as “on the ground,” during the implementation of new policies in schools throughout the country.

The Communist Party (KPJ, and its Croatian branch, KPH), which emerged from the Second World War as Yugoslavia’s leading political force, actually spent most of the interwar period trying to appease Croatian nationalists, whom they saw as partners in the fight against the Serbian-dominated royal government.¹ The situation changed drastically during the war, however, as Croatian (and Bosnian) Serbs quickly formed the basis of the Communist-led Partisan resistance movement. This was mostly due to the genocidal policies of the Nazi-aligned Croatian *Ustaše* regime, whose persecution of Serbs resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths between 1941 and 1945. Wartime Serb Partisan cadres remained over-represented in Croatian Party and government structures for years, and sometimes even decades following the war’s end.

The Croatian Communist party leadership thus found itself in need of a compromise that would satisfy its massive Serb political base, without alienating the Croat demographic majority any further. The solution they came up with seemed simple, yet radical. On the one hand, the Communists wished to turn post-war Yugoslavia into a union of equals, of which Croatia would be one part. Fraternal relations between the various ethnic groups residing in Yugoslavia would be promoted as the basis of this new state, in contrast to the chauvinistic

¹See: Gordana Vlačić, *KPJ i nacionalno pitanje u Jugoslaviji: 1919-1929* (Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1974). Also: Ivan Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske: 1937-1941* (Zagreb: IHRPH, 1972).

rhetoric espoused by the wartime enemies of the KPJ, such as the *Ustaše*. And finally, on the level of Croatia itself, the Serbs would be elevated to the status of a “constituent nation,” equal in all ways to the Croats, thus effectively turning post-war Croatia into a bi-national state. The concepts of fraternity and national equality were to be implemented in all aspects of public life – including, notably for us, the education system.

Following up on all of this, I will attempt to answer two interrelated questions. First of all, how did the Croatian Communist authorities intend to promote their policies of ethnic fraternity and Croat-Serb national equality through the medium of education? And conversely, how did the relevant segments of the population – students, teachers, parents, or the wider community – react to these reforms? Could we possibly locate the sources of discontent, or notice clear differences between the reactions of Serbs and Croats?

It is my contention that the formal education system – i.e. schools and school-adjacent extracurricular activities – played a significant role in the Communists’ attempts to create fraternal relations between the Croats and Serbs in Croatia, and that school curricula were also used to promote Serb and Croat national equality in practice. Unlike some of the more reductionist perspectives on the early history of socialist Yugoslavia, however, I would argue that the implementation of the policies intended to promote fraternity and national equality were often met with active or passive resistance – both from the Croat and from the Serb communities, although usually for different reasons. Additionally, I would contend that the Communist party and state apparatuses tried to overcome this resistance by applying a mixture of repressive and conciliatory measures, both due to ideological and pragmatical reasons.

Previous research

Before going any further, we should establish the groundwork that has already been laid. As already mentioned, Croat-Serb relations in post-war Yugoslavia have not been researched to the extent one might expect from such a consequential topic. The issue of Croat-Serb

relations itself often gets reduced to the relations between Croatia and Serbia as federal units of Yugoslavia, or to the relations between the republican government in Zagreb and the federal Yugoslav government in Belgrade. A very good example of this phenomenon could be Jill Irvine's *The Croat Question*² which delves deep into the political background of the formation of the Croatian federal unit within Yugoslavia and the relations between the Communist Party of Croatia (KPH) and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), but spends a mere ten pages discussing the demands of the Serb population in Croatia. Many other books also dealt with issues surrounding the federal structure of Yugoslavia and Croatia's role in it, such as Sabrina Ramet's *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia*³ and *The Three Yugoslavias*⁴ – neither of which go into any significant detail on the topic of the status of Serbs *within* Croatia, or their relations with the Croat ethnic majority in the period before the 1960s. These were just three chosen examples, but similar issues plague most analyses of the political structure of Yugoslavia; in short, while the “Croatian question” in Yugoslavia is relatively well-researched, the “Serb question” in Croatia is often forgotten, at least until the period of the late 1980s.

An important outlier from this trend would be Max Bergholz's 2016 monograph, *Violence as a Generative Force*, which deals with issues of “ethnicized” violence in Yugoslavia during World War Two, as well as with its impact on inter-ethnic relations in the post-war period.⁵ Bergholz's argument is that violence – even if originally conducted by small minorities within the overall population – quickly led to ethnic homogenization and the formation of clear lines of separation, which later became very hard to overcome. In line with this, I will be using the ethnic categories of “Croat” and “Serb” throughout the thesis, while always having in mind

²Jill A. Irvine, *The Croat Question: Partisan Politics in the Formation of the Yugoslav Socialist State* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1993).

³Sabrina Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia 1962-1991* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

⁴Sabrina Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation 1918-2005* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁵Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

that these categories were, and are fluid; however, due to the aforementioned violence-induced “ethnicization” that occurred between 1941 and 1945, I feel relatively comfortable using those terms.

Bergholz’ book is based on a case study of inter-ethnic violence between Catholic Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Orthodox Serbs in the region of Kulen Vakuf at the border of modern-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; a region geographically very close to my area of interest. Bergholz’s point about the long-lasting impact of violence on ethnic self-perception and otherization brings up another important question: how to stop such vicious circles? I propose that the KPJ tried to find a solution to this conundrum through – among other things – the post-war education system. It will be the purpose of this thesis to ascertain just how successful that plan was in the short to mid-term, and what sorts of obstacles had to be overcome along the way.

More often than not, publications dealing with Croat-Serb relations have also been riddled with overt or subtle nationalist biases, making them rather unreliable. Čedomir Višnjić’s series of books⁶ on the recent history of Serbs in Croatia is one such case. Although they delve deep into various topics of interest – the economic situation of the Serb population in Croatia, Serb cultural institutions, the role of Serbs within the KPH, and nationalist opposition to Communist Party rule – Višnjić’s books were not written according to any sort of proper historiographic method, often missing adequate citations, and containing dubious claims informed by the author’s (openly stated) political biases.

Another example of overt nationalist bias can be found in Momčilo Diklić’s 2004 book, *Srpsko pitanje u Hrvatskoj: 1941-1950 (The Serb Question in Croatia: 1941-1950)*.⁷ In it, the author discusses the genocidal politics of the Croatian World War Two-era *Ustaše* puppet regime, the origins and evolution of the Serb resistance movement, and Communist attempts

⁶Čedomir Višnjić, *Partizansko ljetovanje: Hrvatska i Srbi 1945.-1950*. (Zagreb: SKD Prosvjeta, 2003). Also: Čedomir Višnjić, *Kordunaški proces: fragmenti iz historije nestajanja* (Zagreb: SKD Prosvjeta, 2004).

⁷Momčilo Diklić, *Srpsko pitanje u Hrvatskoj: 1941-1950* (Beograd: Udruženje Srba iz Hrvatske, 2004).

to solve the “Serb question” without giving in to Serb nationalist demands. Unlike Višnjić’s work, Diklić equipped his book with proper citations and source-based arguments. However, just like Višnjić, a certain nationalist bias seems obvious both from Diklić’s approach and vocabulary, as well as the selection of sources and secondary literature he decided to use in the book. An unfortunate result, to be sure, as it is one of a very small number of publications dealing with the topic of Serb national rights in socialist Croatia.

As sparse as the literature on the topic of Croat-Serb relations in socialist Yugoslavia is, the topic of Yugoslav education does not seem to have been covered in much depth, either. Most notably, we should mention Snježana Koren’s work on history education in Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1960.⁸ Koren’s book is a detailed analysis of Yugoslav history textbooks, curricula, and official school celebrations of historical anniversaries; all very relevant points for this thesis. Apart from Koren, research on the role of education in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav nation-building has also been done by Wolfgang Höpken. Most of his work remained out of my reach due to the language barrier, however, and Koren’s work seems to have surpassed the findings of some of his older, English-language articles, which I did find available.

Another important element of the social life of Croatian youth in the 1940s and 50s were official youth organizations – the Pioneers, Communist Youth (SKOJ), and later the People’s Youth of Yugoslavia/Croatia (NOJ/NOH). These Communist-dominated youth organizations were crucial in maintaining the “correct” ideological line among the Croatian student body, from elementary school upwards, and usually served as transmission belts between the Party leadership and the masses of Yugoslav youth. Several important works on this subject have been published in recent years, one of which will play a significant role in writing this thesis: *U vrtlogu komunizma: mladi Hrvatske 1945.-1954 (In the Whirlwind of*

⁸Snježana Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji (1945-1960)* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2012).

Communism: The Youth of Croatia 1945-1954) by Tatjana Šarić.⁹ However, Šarić's book does suffer from a glaring omission: while discussing the experiences of the post-war generation of Croatian youth, it barely mentions the experiences of Croatian Serbs. Once again, we can see the experiences of Serbs in Croatia being left out of the general narrative of Croatian 20th century history. This lack of information will have to be alleviated by primary sources.

Going a bit further, the role of education in other Communist, or “real-socialist” regimes in Europe has been well researched. It should come as no surprise that the Yugoslavs often looked up to the Soviet Union on questions of education and nationality policy in the pre-1948 period. Although Yugoslavia soon broke off from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, it remained influenced by it on matters of nationality. Taking a look at works such as Terry Martin's *The Affirmative Action Empire*,¹⁰ or Adrienne Lynn Edgar's *Tribal Nation*¹¹ should allow us to notice similarities and differences between the Yugoslav and Soviet policies regarding nationalities and nationalism, as well as the role of education in creating and maintaining national consciousness in socialist societies.

Structure outline

The thesis will be divided into three research chapters. The first chapter will begin by giving a brief overview of pre-war Communist positions on the national question in Yugoslavia, and the process of creating Partisan state structures during World War Two. Going back to the main research topic, the chapter will cover the “top-down” perspective: the policies implemented by the Communist government of Croatia (or the Croatian Partisan leadership before 1945) in order to promote inter-ethnic fraternization and the national equality of Serbs and Croats through the medium of Croatia's education system. This perspective will include

⁹Tatjana Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma: mladi Hrvatske 1945-1950* (Zagreb: HDA, 2017).

¹⁰Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹¹Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

legislative acts, changes in the school curricula, as well as the relevant discussions and decisions made by the leaderships of the Croatian and federal Yugoslav Communist Parties.

The second chapter will take a look at the actual implementation of the aforementioned policies, the general reactions of Croat and Serb communities to their implementation, and the ways in which the Communist Party tried to respond to various forms of nationalist opposition to their education reforms. The roles and practical activities of youth organizations will also be described, as intermediaries in promoting the ideals of fraternity and national equality. Unlike the previous chapter, this one will make more use of archival records, such as the correspondence between the Ministry of Education and its subordinated regional and local departments.

Finally, the third research chapter will discuss the practical dynamics of ethnic relations within and surrounding the education system in several Croatian localities. More specifically, it will take a look at school records from three localities in different parts of Croatia. These records – school directories, diaries, meeting minutes, etc. – will (hopefully) show how the students reacted to Communist policies, and possibly how they voiced their disagreements, but also how the school administrations and local state and Party authorities reacted on such problems.

Ch. 1: The Ministry

Croatia in 1945 was a country in ruins. Four years of Axis occupation paired with devastating ethnic conflict resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, and an infrastructure network in dire need of rebuilding and renovation. The education system was no exception: many pre-war schools were either completely destroyed, or otherwise unfit for use. Another problem was a severe lack of teachers – an issue inherited from previous regimes, but clearly exacerbated by wartime events. The new Communist-led republican (Croatian) and federal (Yugoslav) governments were faced with the daunting task of rebuilding the country's education system; in some areas quite literally from scratch.

Infrastructural damage was not the only issue facing post-war Croatian society. The triple genocide conducted between 1941 and 1945 by the collaborationist *Ustaše* regime in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) resulted in the almost total annihilation of pre-war Croatian Jewish and Roma communities. The third – and numerically largest – target of *Ustaše* genocide were Croatian and Bosnian Serbs.¹² Although the final death toll was never precisely determined, and is still a matter of vicious political debate, most scholars agree on a figure of around 300.000 Serb wartime losses on the territory of the NDH – the vast majority of whom were victims of genocide.¹³ On the territory of modern-day Croatia itself, Serb losses most likely amounted to around 130.000: an apocalyptic level of destruction for a community that numbered around 700.000 people in 1941.¹⁴ Further tens of thousands of Serbs were expelled from Croatia, and only started to return following the end of the war in mid-1945. Around 100.000 Croats from Croatia also perished during the war; however, unlike the Serbs, over half

¹²The Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*) was formed in 1941, and encompassed most of modern-day Croatia, all of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and parts of northern Serbia.

¹³Vladimir Žerjavić. *Gubici stanovništva Jugoslavije u Drugom svjetskom ratu* (Zagreb: Jugoslavensko viktimološko društvo, 1989), 73.

¹⁴Žerjavić, *Gubici stanovništva*, 39.

of all ethnically Croat war victims died as members of collaborationist or Communist Partisan military units, with civilian casualties being in the minority.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, the war and genocide caused a serious deterioration of inter-ethnic relations between the Croat ethnic majority and the Serb ethnic minority in Croatia. Before 1941, the vast majority of Serbs and Croats lived in the countryside. While a clear ethnic divide was usually visible at the level of individual villages (most being homogeneously Croat or Serb), the ethnic heterogeneity of many Croatian regions became noticeable already at the level of municipalities. Serbs and Croats – or at least the people who will soon start perceiving themselves as members of those ethnic categories – used to interact on a daily basis before the war, with many everyday activities and local/regional social clubs having no discernible ethnic biases.¹⁶ Although political strife became commonplace throughout Croatia in the interwar period, mass ethnic-based violence between Croats and Serbs was virtually unheard of until the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia in April 1941.¹⁷

Spring 1941 was indeed a watershed moment in the history of Croat-Serb relations. State-sponsored violence against Serbs began within weeks of the proclamation of the NDH, and became widespread by summer of the same year. Even though the initial wave of *Ustaša* violence in 1941 was generally conducted by small groups of militants – more often than not recruited from the margins of society – their impact on inter-ethnic relations was horrific and long-lasting. Communities without previous histories of conflict suddenly became divided by ethnicity, and someone's perceived ethnic affiliation could often mean the difference between life and death. The first round of *Ustaša*-led violence soon resulted in an armed uprising by the Serb population, which brought with it many revanchist massacres targeting civilians perceived

¹⁵ Žerjavić, *Gubici stanovništva*, 101.

¹⁶ Max Bergholz. *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 51-52.

¹⁷It should be noted that the situation was somewhat different in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, where conflicts that blurred the lines between politics, ethnicity, religion, and class occurred several times throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, for instance in 1875-78, or 1918-1920.

as Croats. This circle of tit-for-tat mass murder would have most likely continued for the duration of the war, had it not been for the emergence of the Communist-led – and staunchly internationalist – Partisan movement by the fall of 1941.

The end of the war in 1945 did not bring an immediate stop to ethnic strife. Croat and Serb populations were thoroughly “ethnicized,” and recent memory of violence made any sort of push towards reconciliation and inter-ethnic fraternity an uphill battle. As Max Bergholz succinctly put it in his study of the Bosnian-Croatian borderlands during World War Two:

As the Partisans approached victory in the late spring of 1945, the key challenge for Communists in local communities (...) would be to find ways to manage the immense social transformations that the locally executed mass violence had wrought.¹⁸

It remained an open question whether the KPJ would manage to instill feelings of brotherhood and equality between two communities that just came out of a four-year-long cycle of violence. Furthermore, it was not only recent history that posed a problem, as the Party also found itself burdened by pre-war ideological postulates when it came to the national question.

The KPJ and the national question

Indeed, all Yugoslav Communists were faced with a complex and extremely sensitive task. The political line of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) in 1945 was strictly in favor of “brotherhood and unity” (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) between the different nations and ethnic minorities that comprised Yugoslavia, now subdivided into six highly autonomous people’s republics. However, several issues complicated the matter for Communist leaders and militants, who found themselves stuck between ideological continuity with the interwar period and the completely changed political and social landscape of post-war Yugoslavia.

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia already became infamous for its sharp turns in nationality policy in the years leading up to the Second World War. Founded in 1919, and forced

¹⁸Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, 263.

underground in 1920, the KPJ followed the many twists and turns of Comintern nationality policy regarding Yugoslavia. For the first couple of years following the 1918 establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929), the KPJ held that the aforementioned ethnic groups were not fully formed nations in their own right, but rather three distinct “tribes” (*plemena*) of a single Yugoslav nation; a position which was essentially in agreement with the otherwise vehemently anti-communist ruling regime.¹⁹

This position soon proved to be in conflict with the overall Comintern line on national liberation, and following several interventions from Moscow the KPJ finally shifted course – albeit not without serious factional struggles. By 1923 the Communists started propagating the idea of royalist Yugoslavia being an essentially Serbian imperialist project: a “Greater Serbia,” formed by a victorious Serbian bourgeoisie following the end of the First World War. All other nations (Croats included) were seen as fundamentally oppressed, and in need of national liberation – if need be, even by secession from Yugoslavia itself.²⁰ This stance led to a short-lived tactical alliance with the strongest Croatian nationalist party of the period, the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), in the mid-1920s. The HSS ultimately broke the alliance by making conciliatory moves towards the ruling regime, and even joining the royal government for a period between 1925 and 1927. The Communists considered this to be treason of the highest order, and continued trying to present themselves as the true defenders of Croatian national interests, in the hopes of peeling away at the left wing of the ever-growing HSS.²¹

The KPJ continued to agitate for some form of Croatian national liberation even after it stopped advocating for the dissolution of Yugoslavia following the Fourth Party Conference, held in Ljubljana in late 1934. This policy shift occurred due to the increasing threat of Nazi

¹⁹Gordana Vlačić. *Jugoslavenska revolucija i nacionalno pitanje 1919.-1927*. (Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost, 1984): 37-38.

²⁰Vlačić, *Jugoslavenska revolucija*, 151-152. The long-term goal of this strategy was not the creation of many entirely separate nation-states, however, but the formation of a socialist Balkan Federation. Royalist Yugoslavia – “the dungeon of nations,” as the Communists called it – had to be destroyed in order to create a federation of truly equal nations.

²¹Vlačić, *Jugoslavenska revolucija*, 146.

Germany, and was in line with the general Comintern move towards a “popular front” strategy, which was officially sanctioned several months later at the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress. A nationally disunited Yugoslavia was now seen as easy prey for various domestic fascist movements and their foreign backers; a scenario that clearly had to be avoided. Throughout the mid-1930s the Yugoslav Communists slowly moved towards the idea of a federated Yugoslavia as the optimal solution to the national question. It was precisely with that in mind that the Slovenian and Croatian national sections of the Party (KPS and KPH, respectively) were established in 1937. Croatian national liberation – yes; dissolving Yugoslavia – no, at least not under these conditions.²²

Towards a bi-national state (1943-1947)

The Communist Party of Croatia (KPH), as an integral part of the KPJ, put in a lot of effort to spread its influence among the widest possible strata of the Croat population. Even though they achieved limited breakthroughs among the ethnically Croat peasantry, the relatively small urban proletariat remained the Communists’ main support base. Croatian peasants remained under the sway of the HSS, which even managed to push through the formation of a highly autonomous Croat entity within Yugoslavia – the Croatian Banovina – in 1939, thus marking the official acknowledgment of the multinational character of the Yugoslav state.

The situation was even worse when it came to the Serb peasants in Croatia, with whom the Communists’ calls for Croatian national liberation simply did not resonate. The political scene among the Croatian Serbs was somewhat more diverse than among ethnic Croats, with some Serb parties supporting the HSS, and others being vehemently opposed to it on Serb nationalist grounds. In any case, the KPH barely made any inroads into the rural Serb

²²Stefan Gužvica. *Before Tito: The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge (1936-1940)*. (Tallinn: Acta Universitatis Tallinnensis, 2020), 46.

population before the outbreak of war, with many Serb-majority municipalities having barely any local Communist Party members or sympathizers. To give an example, we might look at the municipality of Srb, situated in the Central Croatian region of Lika, near the modern-day border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. The first card-carrying member of the Communist Party arrived at this Serb-majority municipality only in May 1941; a full month after the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia. The person in question – future Partisan general Đoko Jovanić – was born in the region but had not lived there since his early childhood; apart from him, there were only a handful of local Communist Youth (SKOJ) members and an even smaller number of active Party sympathizers.²³ The situation was not significantly different in other parts of Lika, nor in other rural regions of Croatia with a noticeable Serb ethnic presence.²⁴

The Axis invasion and subsequent dismemberment of Yugoslavia in April 1941 changed the situation dramatically. The Communist Party of Croatia would soon find itself at the helm of a massive resistance movement, albeit one whose base of support came from an unexpected demographic: the rural Serb population. This scenario was not at all surprising given the bloody events of mid-1941 which first led the Croatian Serbs to a (relatively spontaneous) armed uprising in July and August, and later provided the nascent Partisan movement with a steady flow of volunteers. Faced with *Ustaše* genocide, many Serbs of Croatia had nothing to lose by joining the Communist-led resistance, even if they had no contact with the KPJ before the war. The situation was clearly different for Croats, whose presence among the Partisan rank-and-file remained virtually negligible throughout 1941. Still, given that most Croats who joined the movement this early on were experienced urban Communist cadres, they often ended up in leadership positions which allowed them to achieve greater visibility and influence.

Communist dominance over the resistance movement was not a given, either. During the first months of the uprising it remained unclear whether the KPJ/KPH would manage to

²³Đoko Jovanić. *Ratna sjećanja* (Beograd/Zagreb: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar/Stvarnost, 1988), 22.

²⁴Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, 146.

wrest control from the hands of nationalist-inclined Serb warlords, who saw the conflict primarily in ethnic terms. There was a very real possibility that the war of resistance would devolve into an inter-ethnic bloodbath. In fact, a wave of retaliatory attacks against the Croat civilian population occurred throughout the summer and fall of 1941. At the time, Communist militants and others who (to borrow a term from Max Bergholz) we could call “the advocates of restraint” among the insurgents were often too few and far between to prevent these massacres from taking place.²⁵

In an increasingly „ethnicized” atmosphere, the Communists could no longer ignore the national demands of the Serb population in Croatia if they wanted to retain their support. On the other hand, the KPJ leadership understood perfectly well that any sort of resistance movement in Croatia would be impossible to organize without gaining the support of at least a large part of the Croat ethnic majority. Yugoslav Communist propaganda constantly emphasized the need for inter-ethnic cooperation in the fight against fascist forces: in an August 1941 pamphlet Croatian Serbs were invited to „accept the extended hand of the real and honest sons of the Croat people” and „not to equate the entire Croat people with the *Ustaša*.”²⁶ Around the same time, the KPH called on Croatian soldiers to join the fight for a „free, independent, and progressive Croatia, free from (...) looting, monstrous chauvinism, and racial madness.”²⁷

As time progressed and the resistance movement grew, these calls for fraternity and national equality had to become formalized. In November 1942 the Communist Party initiated the formation of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*, AVNOJ), which was to serve as the

²⁵ Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, 251.

²⁶ „Poziv privremenog glavnog štaba gerilskih odreda za Liku početkom kolovoza 1941. god. srpskom i hrvatskom narodu na zajedničku borbu protiv okupatora i ustaša” [„An appeal by the provisional guerrilla headquarters of Lika to the Serb and Croat people to join the common fight against the occupiers and the Ustaše”], August 1941, in: Jovan Vujošević (ed.). *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodno-oslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda: borbe u Hrvatskoj 1941. godine*. (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut JA, 1952), 74-75.

²⁷ „Poziv Centralnog komiteta KPH početkom kolovoza 1941. god. domobranskoj vojsci za priključenje Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi” [„An appeal by the KPH Central Committee to NDH regular army soldiers to join the People's Liberation Struggle”], August 1941, in: Vujošević (ed.), *Zbornik dokumenata 1941*, 27.

supreme political body of the Yugoslav resistance movement. Soon enough, this led to the formation of similar, subordinate bodies in various historical/political regions of Yugoslavia. Most importantly for the Croatian context, the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (*Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*, ZAVNOH) was founded in early 1943. As a Communist-dominated parliamentary body with an executive council comprised of various departments which took on the role of *de facto* ministries, ZAVNOH became the leading political force of the resistance movement in Croatia, and essentially served the purpose of a Communist government-in-waiting.

The question of Croat-Serb ethnic relations in Croatia was a recurring theme for ZAVNOH. Already at its first congress, held in June 1943 in the ethnically mixed region of Lika, ZAVNOH promised to fight for the „full and true democratic freedom and equality of the Croat and Serb people.”²⁸ ZAVNOH held two more congresses during the war (in October 1943 and May 1944), each of them reaffirming the full national equality of Serbs and Croats in Croatia. KPH general secretary Andrija Hebrang reiterated this point in one of his speeches at the October 1943 congress, saying:

It would be a crime towards the Serb people, towards the sacrifices they have made, to even think about denying them the same rights as the Croats. Serbs in Croatia deserve to be completely free and equal to the Croats.²⁹

Following its 2nd Congress in November 1943, AVNOJ declared itself the supreme legislative and executive authority in Yugoslavia, and thus openly positioned itself as an alternative to the London-based royal government-in-exile. Furthermore, the Congress decided that the post-war Yugoslav state should be “built on a democratic and federal basis, as a state union of equal nations.”³⁰ AVNOJ’s intended federal framework was generally in line with the

²⁸ Drago Roksandić. *Srbi u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Vjesnik, 1991), 136.

²⁹ „Drugo zasjedanje ZAVNOH-a: stenografski zapisnici,” October 12, 1943, in: *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 1: zbornik dokumenata*, ed. Hodimir Sirotković (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1964), 459.

³⁰ “Odluke, deklaracije i potpisi,” Javna ustanova Muzej II. zasjedanja AVNOJ-a, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://www.muzejavnoj.ba/galerije/odluke-deklaracije-i-potpisi>.

pre-war political positions of the KPJ, but it ultimately diverged from the Marxist-Leninist concept of national self-determination. Instead of strictly linking all six of the newly proposed federated units to single titular nationalities, Yugoslav Communists decided to turn two of them into explicitly multinational republics: Bosnia-Herzegovina (with Serbs, Croats, and Muslims as constituent peoples)³¹ and Croatia.

Croatia's multinational character was further affirmed during ZAVNOH's Third Congress, held in May 1944 in the Central Croatian town of Topusko. The opening line of the *Declaration on the Basic Rights of Peoples and Citizens of Democratic Croatia*, adopted at the congress, bluntly stated that „the Croat and Serb people in Croatia are entirely equal.”³² Croatian Serbs were also given elements of political and cultural (though not territorial) autonomy within the new state. The Serb Club of ZAVNOH Councilors (*Srpski klub vijećnika ZAVNOH-a*) was established already in January 1944, with the ostensible goal of defending Serb national interests in Partisan-controlled areas of Croatia.³³ Furthermore, November 1944 saw the foundation of “Prosvjeta” (*Srpsko kulturno prosvjetno društvo “Prosvjeta”*), a cultural-educational society tasked with promoting Serb national culture and general literacy among the Serb population in Croatia.³⁴ “Prosvjeta” went on to establish a network of chapters throughout Croatia, and played an important role in the political and cultural life of Croatian Serbs in the years following the war.

³¹ The status of Bosnian Muslims remained somewhat vague until the 1960s. Although Muslims were explicitly mentioned in various declarations issued by the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ZAVNOBiH) alongside Serbs and Croats, they were not recognized as a separate ethnic category on Yugoslav censuses until 1961, and were only upgraded to the status of a fully-fledged constituent nation of Yugoslavia in 1971. See: “Bošnjaci,” Hrvatska enciklopedija, May 30, 2024. <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/8952>.

³² „Deklaracija o osnovnim pravima naroda i građana Demokratske Hrvatske,” May 9, 1944, in: *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 2: zbornik dokumenata*, ed. Hodimir Sirotković (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1970), 666.

³³ “Srpski klub vijećnika ZAVNOH-a upućuje proglas srpskom narodu u Hrvatskoj kojim ga poziva na borbu protiv okupatora i njegovih pomagača” [“The Serb Club of ZAVNOH Councilors sends an appeal to the Serb people in Croatia to join the fight against the occupiers and their helpers”], January 12, 1944, in: Sirotković (ed.), *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 2*, 79-81.

³⁴ Tatjana Šarić, “Srpsko kulturno društvo “Prosvjeta” u socijalizmu – prilog uz sedamdesetu godišnjicu osnutka,” *Arhivski vjesnik* 57, no. 1 (2014): 308.

As the war drew to a close, ZAVNOH's role became ever more formalized: its Executive Committee (*Izvršni odbor*) was renamed the People's Government of Croatia (*Narodna vlada Hrvatske*) on April 14, 1945, and ZAVNOH itself was reconstituted as the People's Sabor of Croatia (*Narodni sabor Hrvatske*) in July of the same year.³⁵ Communist dominance over the political process in Yugoslavia – already well-established during the war – became undisputed following the November 1945 elections for the Yugoslav Constitutive Assembly. The Communist-led People's Front (*Narodni front*, NF) ran virtually unopposed, as the opposition decided to boycott the elections. The January 1946 constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRJ, renamed as such in November 1945) confirmed the federal structure of the new state, consisting of six constituent republics.

Croatia – now officially the People's Republic of Croatia (NRH) – adopted its own constitution in January 1947. Already in the first article of the new constitution, Croatia was defined as a “people's state (...) of the Croat people,” whose origins lay “in the liberation struggle, conducted in fraternal unity with the Serbs of Croatia.”³⁶ Although this line of the constitution could have been read as relegating Croatian Serbs to a secondary role, Article III, Section 11 of the same document was very straightforward in its phrasing: “Serbs in the People's Republic of Croatia are entirely equal to Croats.”³⁷

In short, as World War Two came to a close, Croatia found itself a bi-national republic within the multinational Yugoslav federation. Croatian Serbs were not to be treated as a national minority, but as one of two constitutive nations of the nascent republic, together with the much more numerous Croats. However, the question remained: what did national equality actually imply in practice? And perhaps more importantly – how to convince the Croats and Serbs to

³⁵“Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske,” Hrvatska enciklopedija, accessed May 30, 2024, <https://enciklopedija.hr/clanak/zemaljsko-antifasisticko-vijece-narodnog-oslobodjenja-hrvatske>. *Sabor* is the traditional name of the Croatian parliament.

³⁶*Ustav NRH (1947), Glava I, član 2*. Wikisource, accessed June 1, 2024, [https://hr.wikisource.org/wiki/Ustav_Narodne_Republike_Hrvatske_\(1947\)](https://hr.wikisource.org/wiki/Ustav_Narodne_Republike_Hrvatske_(1947)).

³⁷*Ustav NRH (1947), Glava III, član 11*.

see their supposed equals as “brothers,” following four years of ethnicized violence? The Communists sought to answer both of those questions through the medium of education.

(Re)building the education system

For Croatian Communists, the creation of a new education system went hand in hand with the development of new governmental structures. This process started already during the war of resistance, and continued on after the war’s end. On the one hand, it pretty much went without saying that schooling had to be organized in the “liberated territories.” On the other hand, organizing a school network during an active irregular conflict presented an almost indomitable task, especially when it had to compete with the state-run schools operated by the NDH Ministry of Education.

No centralized school network existed in the “liberated territories” in the first months of the war. Mandatory four-year elementary schools operated under the guidance of local Partisan authorities, and their curriculum was modified *ad hoc*; if any teachers were available to keep the schools open in the first place. High schools – either eight-year gymnasiums, or shorter vocational schools – only came under Partisan control temporarily, as they were usually situated in strongly defended urban centers. Because of this, high schools remained of secondary importance to Communist education efforts until well into 1944.

As the strength of central Partisan state institutions grew, so did their influence on the education system. ZAVNOH established its Department of Education (*Prosvjetni odjel*, PO) already in March 1943, in order to centralize and standardize education efforts in Partisan-controlled territories: these included schooling, but also literacy campaigns, as well as the promotion of certain cultural events. The Department of Education soon published its first educational program for elementary schools, which was meant to provide guidelines for the remainder of the 1942/43 academic year. Soon enough, a hierarchical network of education departments was created on the “liberated territories,” ranging from the regional (*oblast*) down

to the municipal (*kotar*) level, with the departments on each level being tasked with organizing education in their areas of supervision.³⁸ ZAVNOH's Department of Education ultimately became the Ministry of Education (MPRO) of the People's Government of Croatia in April 1945.³⁹

A federal proto-ministry of education, the Education Commission, was founded during the 2nd Congress of the AVNOJ in November 1943. It was part of AVNOJ's executive body, the National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia (NKOJ), and was generally tasked with coordinating the work of various lower-level departments of education. It continued in this role even after it got promoted to a fully-fledged federal ministry in March 1945, meaning that most practical decisions regarding education were left to the republican authorities. The federal Ministry of Education was abolished in January 1946, and its responsibilities were transferred to the newly-established Committee for Schools and Sciences, an auxiliary body of the federal government.⁴⁰ Due to the noticeable devolution of powers from the federal to the republican level in the field of education, this chapter will mostly deal with the decisions and policies of the Croatian republican Department/Ministry of Education.

As mentioned earlier, two main issues plagued the Communist-led education system from the moment of its inception: the lack of quality school infrastructure, and the lack of qualified teachers. The infrastructure issue became acute during the war, with many pre-war school buildings being looted or entirely destroyed. The lack of educated cadre, on the other hand, was a long-standing issue: 58 village schools had to be shut down in the Croatian Banovina in the last pre-war academic year (1939/40) due to lack of teachers,⁴¹ and the number of active elementary school teachers in Croatia dropped precipitously during the war, from

³⁸“Izveštaj Prosvjetnog odjela ZAVNOH-a o radu odjela od ožujka do kolovoza 1943.” [“A report by the ZAVNOH Department of Education regarding its activity for the period between March and August 1943”], August 26, 1943, in: Sirotković (ed.), *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 1*, 367-372.

³⁹Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 53.

⁴⁰Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 52-53.

⁴¹Josip Petrović. “Školstvo u Banovini Hrvatskoj” (Master's thesis, University of Zagreb, 2018), 19.

7491 in 1941 to 5542 in 1945.⁴² Similarly, the number of high school teachers fell from 2313 in the 1940/41 academic year down to 1794 in 1945/46.⁴³

Regional differences were also pretty stark: while schools in urban areas and in the homogeneously Croat northwest of the country remained more-or-less intact, schools in the poorer, more ethnically mixed regions (such as Lika, Kordun, and Banija) were very much in disarray. For instance, in August 1945 the Lika county (*okrug*) department of education informed the Croatian Ministry of Education (MPRO) that 101 out of 145 pre-war school buildings in Lika have been completely destroyed during the war, and that all the other buildings sustained at least some sort of damage. The Lika county PO still managed to organize 179 elementary schools during the 1944/45 academic year, 119 of which operated from private houses, and a further 31 held classes in the open. Forty-five more schools were established, but had to temporarily close down due to lack of teachers.⁴⁴

The end of the war in spring 1945 provided more opportunities for development, but also brought with it new challenges for the Communist authorities. MPRO now took control over the entire education system in Croatia, most of which had by that point been operating under the NDH Ministry of Education. The unification of the Partisan and NDH education systems was not without its hiccups, though: the teachers who took part in the resistance movement often viewed those who stayed in NDH-run schools with distrust, and small-scale purges took place in the first post-war months. Some teachers were laid off because of their *Ustaša* sympathies, but many more were implicitly punished by transfers to rural, often ethnically mixed areas. The chronic lack of professional educators meant that layoffs remained a rare occurrence, and some of the fired teachers got re-employed in the years following the war.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the wave of post-war transfers meant that a large number of Croat teachers

⁴²Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 70.

⁴³Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 158.

⁴⁴HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.4.4., box no. 26. Mjesečni izvještaj Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a za Liku MPRO-u za kolovoz 1945 (September 20, 1945).

⁴⁵Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 159.

suddenly ended up in Serb, previously Partisan-supporting villages – which, as we shall see in the following chapter, oftentimes led to conflict.

In such circumstances it was difficult to keep even the bare-bones structure of the education system running, let alone introduce the sort of radical education reform that the KPJ intended to do. Still, reform was very much on the minds of Communist policy-makers ever since the formation of the ZAVNOH Department of Education. School reform was supposed to be all-encompassing: from banning corporal punishment, through secularization, all the way to the most important element – curricular reform. The changes to the school curriculum were most clearly visible in subjects dealing with social sciences and humanities, such as history, geography, and philosophy, as well as in foreign and native language classes. Much of the curricular reform had to do with infusing these school subjects with a “materialist” worldview, as defined by contemporary Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy: class struggle thus became an important element of history classes, Marxism became the focus of high school philosophy classes, etc.⁴⁶

Education reform was supposed to tackle yet another issue of first-class political and social importance, however – the national question. Specifically, it had to both prove the practical validity of the proclaimed national equality of Serbs and Croats in Croatia, as well as infuse the new generations of schoolchildren with feelings of fraternal unity with their compatriots of different ethnicities. These tasks began in the middle of a genocidal war, and would continue throughout the existence of the multinational Yugoslav state.

⁴⁶Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 118.

Brotherhood through history

Cultivating fraternal relations between Croats and Serbs immediately became an important pedagogical focus of wartime Partisan-run schools, as was to be expected from a movement whose proclaimed goal was the formation of a multiethnic state. History – as a school subject – played a crucial role in achieving this goal. One of the first full education plans published by ZAVNOH's Department of Education (in September 1944) outlined the main goals of elementary school history:

Introducing pupils to the life of our peoples and their past struggles for freedom, introducing them to the people's liberation struggle and its outcomes, and helping them develop feelings of love towards our homeland.⁴⁷

Yugoslav history as taught in the third and fourth grades of Partisan-run elementary schools was more of an amalgamation of various national histories than a presentation of a unified Yugoslav historical narrative. As already noted by Snježana Koren,⁴⁸ this approach served the purpose of distancing the new curriculum from pre-war Yugoslav integralist narratives (now inextricably linked to the *de facto* deposed royal government), as well as promoting a sense of inter-ethnic fraternity by focusing on episodes of common struggle, usually against a foreign enemy. The aforementioned 1944 curriculum, for instance, placed a lot of emphasis on the historical struggles of Croat and Serb nobility against the Franks, Ottomans, Venetians, and Habsburgs, but it also covered various popular uprisings against “foreign rule,” such as the Croatian-Slovene Peasant Revolt of 1573, or the anti-Ottoman Serbian uprisings of the early 19th century. Of course, a lot of space was also given to recent history – the fall of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the subsequent (and still ongoing) Partisan struggle.⁴⁹

⁴⁷HR-DAOS-45. Oblasni NOO za Slavoniju, 8.10, box no. 52. *Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole* (September 1944), 6.

⁴⁸ Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 134-135.

⁴⁹HR-DAOS-45. Oblasni NOO za Slavoniju, 8.10, box no. 52. *Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole* (September 1944), 6-7.

The role of history education in promoting inter-ethnic fraternity became even more pronounced in the immediate post-war period. The 1946 education program for elementary schools, published by the Croatian MPRO, listed four main tasks of history education:

- 1) Acquainting the pupils with the history of our peoples and of our Yugoslav homeland;
- 2) Helping them develop feelings of love and loyalty towards our homeland and its peoples;**
- 3) Strengthening the brotherhood and unity of our peoples** [emphasis added] and of all the achievements of the people's liberation struggle;
- 4) Teaching the pupils to hate the enemies of our homeland, as well as all those who are trying to destroy the achievements of our people's liberation struggle.⁵⁰

While the elementary school history curriculum remained pretty much unchanged between 1944 and 1946, with its emphasis on major struggles against “foreign oppressors,” the first post-war high school curricula went into a lot more detail – most notably in their coverage of world history, which was given pretty much the same amount of space as Yugoslav history.⁵¹ Still, when it came to Yugoslav history itself, both the format and the goals of high school history education remained similar to those described above.

Although the social and cultural history of various Yugoslav nations received more coverage than in elementary schools, notable episodes of national resistance still seemed to have stayed in the spotlight. For instance, the MPRO-approved 1945/46 education program for the 8th (final) grade of high school included topics such as “the fight of [medieval] Croatia for Dalmatian cities,” “the *Bogumils*⁵² as the bearers of resistance against foreign conquests,” “Croatian lords (Šubićes and Nelipićes) and their struggle against the Anjou dynasty,” “national and peasant rebellions: Jovan Nenad,⁵³ Matija Ivanić,⁵⁴ Matija Gubec,⁵⁵ Pera Segedinac,⁵⁶ Karpoš,⁵⁷ etc. Nineteenth century topics emphasized inter-ethnic cooperation during the rise

⁵⁰*Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole u Narodnoj Republici Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Hrvatske, 1946), 16.

⁵¹Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 98.

⁵²Bogumils (*bogumili*) were a medieval heretic Christian sect, with origins in Bulgaria. In this context they were most likely (erroneously) equated with the Bosnian Church (*Crkva bosanska*), a schismatic Christian movement from medieval Bosnia.

⁵³Jovan Nenad (c. 1492-1527), Serb warlord and self-proclaimed emperor in southern Hungary, Bačka, and Banat.

⁵⁴Matija Ivanić (1445-1523), leader of the Hvar Rebellion (1510-1514) against the Republic of Venice.

⁵⁵Matija Gubec (c. 1548-1573), leader of the Croatian-Slovene Peasant Rebellion of 1573.

⁵⁶Pera Segedinac (1655-1736), leader of a 1735 peasant revolt in the Banat.

⁵⁷Petar Karpoš (? - 1689), leader of a failed anti-Ottoman uprising in Macedonia in 1689.

of national movements (“the fight of Croats and Slovenes for political and national freedom,” “joint struggle of Serbs and Croats in the Rakovica revolt”⁵⁸), and blamed instances of national conflict between South Slavic peoples on the ruling classes (“fratricidal war between Serbs and Bulgarians (1885), imposed by the dynasty against the will of the people”) or on agents of foreign interests (“the role of foreign lackeys in provoking Croat-Serb strife: Đurđević⁵⁹ and Frank”⁶⁰). The message was clear: inter-ethnic cooperation has always been in the interest of the Yugoslav masses, while ethnic particularism only benefited the ruling classes and foreign powers.⁶¹

The interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia was also given critical treatment in Partisan and early post-war schools. The supposedly “Serbian-hegemonist” character of the royal regime was emphasized and blamed for fomenting ethnic conflict (“the [Karadžević] dynasty and the hegemonistic clique as the main cause and supporter of ethnic strife among our peoples,” as per the 1945 gymnasium program), while federalist politicians – such as Frano Supilo – were painted in a positive light, even if they would have otherwise been considered “bourgeois.”⁶² Interwar leaders of the Croatian Peasant Party – Stjepan and Antun Radić⁶³ – were considered important enough to be mentioned already in elementary school education plans, as the most relevant figures of the anti-royalist Croatian national movement of the

⁵⁸The Rakovica revolt (*Rakovička buna*), an armed uprising against Habsburg rule led by Croatian nationalist politician Eugen Kvaternik (October 1871). Rakovica is situated in the Kordun region of Central Croatia, and many of the rebels were ethnic Serbs.

⁵⁹Vasa Đurđević (1841-1915), Croatian Serb nationalist politician, supporter of conservative viceroy (*ban*) Khuen Hedervary.

⁶⁰Josip Frank (1844-1911), Croatian nationalist politician, often considered an ideological precursor to the *Ustaše*.

⁶¹*Nastavni plan i program za gimnazije i klasične gimnazije za školsku godinu 1945.-1946.* (Zagreb: Ministarstvo prosvjete Federalne Hrvatske, 1945), 46-47.

⁶²*Nastavni plan i program za gimnazije i klasične gimnazije za školsku godinu 1945.-1946.*, 47. Frano Supilo (1870-1917) was a leading member of the pre-1914 Croat-Serb Coalition, founding member of the Yugoslav Committee in London, and a proponent of Yugoslav federalism.

⁶³Stjepan (1871-1928) and Antun Radić (1868-1919), founders and long-time leaders of the Croatian Peasant Party. Stjepan Radić was one of the victims of the June 1928 assassination of HSS representatives in the Yugoslav National Assembly by Serb nationalist politician Puniša Račić. Radić is generally considered to be one of the most important Croatian interwar politicians, and his assassination triggered massive protests and ultimately led to the introduction of the royal dictatorship in 1929.

1920s.⁶⁴ Young Croats had to be convinced that the new federal Yugoslav state had, in fact, fulfilled all of the progressive aspirations of the Croatian national movement.

Other subjects were also supposed to serve the purpose of promoting fraternal relations. The 1946 elementary school education program, for example, listed “awakening interest and love towards our homeland, our people, and our people’s government (*narodnoj vlasti*)” as one of the goals of 3rd and 4th grade geography lessons.⁶⁵ Similarly, Serbo-Croatian⁶⁶ language classes were meant to, among other things, “help develop feelings of love and loyalty towards our homeland and her peoples,” starting from the first grade of elementary school.⁶⁷

Interestingly, the 1944 elementary school plan provided a much shorter list of goals for both geography and Serbo-Croatian. Back then, the purpose of elementary school geography was simply given as “getting to know our homeland and the living conditions it provides” – no mention of love either for the country or its peoples as of yet. The curriculum did instruct teachers to explain the political structure of (Partisan-led) Croatia and Yugoslavia, but it did not seem to mention any ethnic groups by name.⁶⁸ The goal of Serbo-Croatian classes in 1944 was also much more modest: “to help students master the literary language in speech and in writing, and to awaken their love for literature.”⁶⁹

Equality through language and script

Serbo-Croatian classes served another important purpose, however – that of proving the practical value of proclaimed Croat and Serb national equality in Croatia. When it came to language classes, the KPJ encountered a conundrum. On the one hand, according to Stalin’s

⁶⁴*Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole u NRH (1946)*, 18.

⁶⁵*Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole u NRH (1946)*, 19.

⁶⁶The official name of the school subject was given as “Croatian or Serbian” (*hrvatski ili srpski*). This will be expanded on later.

⁶⁷*Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole u NRH (1946)*, 7.

⁶⁸HR-DAOS-45. Oblasni NOO za Slavoniju, 8.10, box no. 52. *Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole* (September 1944), 5-6.

⁶⁹HR-DAOS-45. Oblasni NOO za Slavoniju, 8.10, box no. 52. *Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole* (September 1944), 3.

classical definition of nationhood (as found in his seminal 1913 work, *Marxism and the National Question*) a national community was “inconceivable without a common language”⁷⁰ among other important factors, such as a common national territory, economic life, and culture.⁷¹ On the other hand, the Yugoslav Communists always insisted – and continued to insist until 1990 – that Croats and Serbs shared a single standard and literary language, variously called “Serbo-Croatian” (*srpskohrvatski*), “Croato-Serbian” (*hrvatskosrpski*), “Croatian or Serbian” (*hrvatski ili srpski*), or some other variation thereof.

An obvious paradox thus emerged: according to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, Croats and Serbs needed to have separate national languages in order to be seen as nations in their own right; the KPJ, however, was never willing to concede this point. Already by 1923 the Party’s position on the Yugoslav “national question” was clear: Serbs and Croats were two distinct nations, formed as such due to historical circumstances and differing ruling class interests, no matter the linguistic similarity. Both the right-wing and the left-wing of the Party agreed on this point, even as they were about to enter an almost decade-long factional struggle over its proposed solutions. Sima Marković, a leading ideologue of the Party’s right-wing in the 1920s, put it succinctly:

As we can see, even a cursory look at the 19th century history of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes proves that the Serbs, the Croats, and the Slovenes all developed into modern nations completely independently from one another. The Serb, the Croat, and the Slovene nations fulfill all the conditions (...) necessary to form a nation.⁷²

His left-wing critics within the Party agreed with this characterization of Croatian and Serbian nationhood, even if they proposed radically different solutions to the Yugoslav state and national question.⁷³

⁷⁰Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 5.

⁷¹Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, 7.

⁷²Sima Marković, “Nacionalno pitanje u svetlosti marksizma,” in *Razprava o nacionalnem vprašanju v KPJ leta 1923*, ed. Jurij Perovšek (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1990), 193.

⁷³Rajko Jovanović, “Povodom knjige dr. S. Markovića o nacionalnom pitanju,” in *Razprava o nacionalnem vprašanju v KPJ leta 1923*, ed. Jurij Perovšek (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1990), 252.

During, and especially following the Second World War, the question of language and nationhood gained an additional dimension; once again due to the policies of the *Ustaše* regime in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). The NDH authorities declared “Croatian” (*hrvatski*) to be the sole official language of the new state, and passed legislature aiming to distance standard Croatian from standard Serbian, as well as from any pre-war Serbo-Croatian standard(s). To quote a 1941 NDH language law: “[Croatian] is not identical to any other language, nor is it a dialect of any other language.”⁷⁴ Separating the Croatian and Serbian components of the Serbo-Croatian language thus became an important component of Croatian nationalist ideology, and something to be opposed by any pro-Yugoslav political force – such as the KPJ.

As such, Yugoslav Communists in the 1940s had to find a compromise solution: how to affirm the separate (but equal) status of the Croat and Serb nations, without veering either into Croatian nationalist, Serbian nationalist, or Yugoslav integralist territory on the matter of language?

Several decisions were made by ZAVNOH’s Department of Education between mid-1944 and mid-1945 in order to produce a satisfying answer to that question. First of all, the common language of Croats and Serbs in Croatia started being called “Croatian or Serbian” (*hrvatski ili srpski*) in official documents and school curricula. This name was chosen not only to reaffirm the national equality of Croats and Serbs, but also to further distance the new education system from its pre-war, integralist precursor. A commentary on the new education plan published in a mid-1945 issue of *Narodna prosvjeta* – the official newspaper of the Croatian Department of Education – explained both of these points in a few short sentences:

The second subject in our plan is ‘Croatian or Serbian language.’ In the old [pre-war] plan this subject was called ‘People’s language (Serb-Croat-Slovene).’ Since there is but one literary language in the Federal State of Croatia, spoken by both Croats and Serbs, the name from our [new] education plan is only logical.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Quoted in: Snježana Kordić, *Jezik i nacionalizam* (Zagreb: Durieux, 2010), 16.

⁷⁵J. Jurman, “Nastavni plan i program za osnovne škole” [“The Education Plan and Program for Elementary Schools”], *Narodna prosvjeta*, June 1945, 9.

Even though the official position of both the Department of Education and the Croatian Communist government as a whole was that Croatian and Serbian were not distinct languages *per se*, the differences between the Croatian (or western) and Serbian (or eastern) *standards* were still widely acknowledged. These amounted to small differences in vocabulary and spelling, as well as different forms of writing the future tense.⁷⁶ In February 1945 ZAVNOH's Department of Education sent a note to all of its subordinated county-level departments that schools with Serb ethnic majorities should use the Serbian (eastern) standard variant of grammar and spelling, while majority-Croat schools should stick to the Croatian (western) standard.⁷⁷

These instructions were supposed to be provisional (“until a final decision has been made”),⁷⁸ and indeed they seem to have been superseded already by November 1945. That month, a new list of approved textbooks was published by the Croatian Ministry of Education, with only two approved textbooks for “Croatian or Serbian language” classes: Mijo Sušec's *Grammar of the Croato-Serbian Language (Gramatika hrvatskosrpskoga jezika)* from the 1930s, and the 4th (1928) and 8th (1941) editions of Dragutin Boranić's *Croatian or Serbian Language Orthography (Pravopis hrvatskog ili srpskog jezika)*.⁷⁹ Boranić's manual had already been mentioned by ZAVNOH's Department of Education in its February 1945 note, as the template for teaching orthography in Croat-majority schools. The decision to specifically pick the 1928 and 1941 editions was not accidental, either: the editions published during the 1930s incorporated many aspects of Serbian (eastern) standard orthography, under pressure

⁷⁶For example: “pisat ću” in standard Croatian vs. “pisaću” in standard Serbian, both meaning “I will write.” The pronunciation remains the same in both cases.

⁷⁷“Dopis Povjereništva prosvjete ZAVNOH-a NOO-ima o pisanju latinice i ćirilice u osnovnim, srednjim i ostalim školama,” February 9, 1945, in *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 4: zbornik dokumenata*, ed. Hodimir Sirotković (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1985), 175.

⁷⁸“Dopis Povjereništva prosvjete ZAVNOH-a NOO-ima o pisanju latinice i ćirilice u osnovnim, srednjim i ostalim školama,” February 9, 1945, in *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 4*, 175.

⁷⁹“Popis školskih knjiga koje se mogu upotrebljavati škol. godine 1945-46. u srednjim školama Federalne Hrvatske” [“List of textbooks approved for use in high schools of Federal Croatia for the academic year 1945-46”], *Narodne novine*, November 3, 1945, 1.

from the integralist policies of the Yugoslav royal dictatorship.⁸⁰ The 1928 and 1941 editions (published right before the occupation of Yugoslavia) were thus seen as more distinctly “Croatian” in character. Consequently, it seems that by late 1945 Croatian standard orthography became dominant in all schools in the republic, no matter their ethnic composition. Grammatical and orthographic differences were thus seemingly not considered relevant forms of national particularities of the Serbs in Croatia.

However, the most important national aspect of “Croatian or Serbian” language education was the script of instruction. While standard Croatian is traditionally only written in the Latin script, Serbian was originally standardized using the Cyrillic script. Although both scripts were declared official (and thus equal) in interwar Yugoslavia, the use of Cyrillic never took off among the Croat and Slovene populations. As such, the everyday use of Cyrillic on the territory of modern-day Croatia remained “ethnic-coded,” being more-or-less restricted to Serbs.⁸¹

The *Ustaše* banned the use of Cyrillic on April 25, 1941, a little more than two weeks after the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia.⁸² Partisan-run schools did not heed this order, of course, but it remains unclear how common instruction in Cyrillic actually was in the “liberated territories” – at least until 1944, when the ZAVNOH Department of Education issued clear directives regarding its use. According to these directives, Cyrillic was to be the primary script of instruction in all schools with a clear Serb ethnic majority, starting from the first grade of elementary school. Likewise, students in Croat-majority schools were supposed to learn the Latin script first. Importantly, educators were instructed to teach their students to read and write “in the other script” in the second grade of elementary school.⁸³ The principles

⁸⁰Amir Kapetanović, “Položaj i razvoj hrvatskoga jezika od 1918. do 1945. godine,” *Studi Slavistici* 15, no. 2 (2018): 92.

⁸¹Macedonians, Bulgarians, and Montenegrins also used the Cyrillic script – either exclusively, or at least often – but these groups never established a significant ethnic presence on the territory of modern-day Croatia.

⁸²“Zakonska odredba o zabrani ćirilice,” *Narodne novine*, April 25, 1941.

⁸³“Odluke III. zasjedanja ZAVNOH-a provode se u život” [“The decisions of ZAVNOH’s 3rd congress are being brought to life”], *Narodna prosvjeta*, October 1944, 4-5.

of national equality and fraternity were pretty noticeable in these directives – students were allowed to learn their “national” script first, but as both scripts were seen as equal, they were expected to learn the “other one” as well.

Plans rarely survive their first contact with reality, however. Although both the Department of Education and the ZAVNOH itself placed a lot of emphasis on the total national equality of Croats and Serbs in Croatia, it took a lot of time and effort to even partially fulfill their directives. The previously mentioned February 1945 note by the Department of Education also stated that:

In many schools with a Serb [ethnic] majority the teachers are Croats, so they often overlook that directive [on the primacy of Cyrillic] due to inattention and absent-mindedness, and they do not refer to it in the correct manner.⁸⁴

It quickly became clear that the practical implementation of the decisions regarding Serb and Croat national equality would take a lot more time than planned, and would very much depend on the resources available to the education authorities and the mood of the people on the local level. Nevertheless, as the ZAVNOH and the KPJ attained complete control over Croatia in May 1945, the promise of national equality seemed within sight. The recently renamed Ministry of Education of Federal Croatia decided to officially expand the use of Cyrillic to Croatian high schools in the 1945/46 academic year. From now on, out of the three annual “Croatian or Serbian” essays, the students in schools (or even individual classes) with a Croat majority would write two of them using the Latin script, and the third one using Cyrillic. Serb-majority schools and classes would do the opposite.⁸⁵ It seemed clear that if there was one element of national equality the Communists would continue to insist upon, it would be the parallel use of two “national” scripts. However, Yugoslavia was about to enter another

⁸⁴“Dopis Povjereništva prosvjete ZAVNOH-a NOO-ima o pisanju latinice i ćirilice u osnovnim, srednjim i ostalim školama,” February 9, 1945, in *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 4*, 174.

⁸⁵*Nastavni plan i program za gimnazije i klasične gimnazije za školsku godinu 1945.-1946*, 7.

turbulent era, which was bound to have some sort of impact on the fragile balance of Croat-Serb relations.

Years of change and uncertainty (1947-1952)

By mid-1946, Communist rule over Yugoslavia seemed secure. The Party and its fellow travelers secured a victory in the November 1945 federal elections, and would soon achieve similar results at the republican level. The new federal constitution of January 1946 officially turned Yugoslavia into a “people’s state” – the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRJ). Croatia followed suit, changing its name to the People’s Republic of Croatia (NRH) in 1946, and adopting a new, Soviet-inspired republican constitution in early 1947. In another move inspired by their Soviet role-models, the Yugoslav Communists nationalized the industrial sector, and began the process of agricultural collectivization, with the ultimate goal of introducing a fully centrally planned economy. As the pinnacle of these efforts, the federal government launched a very ambitious Five-year Plan (commonly known as “*petoljetka*”) in early 1947, with the goal of boosting the national economy. Everything seemed to be going according to plan.

Just a few months later Yugoslavia would find itself a pariah state, unsure of its own future. The 1948 Tito-Stalin split, kicked off by the critically intoned June 1948 Resolution of the Cominform and its rebuttal by the KPJ Politburo, meant that the Yugoslav Communists had to reappraise their stance towards the Soviet Union and its economic and social policies. Not everyone was ready to break contact with the “first land of socialism,” however, and the KPJ leadership was well aware of that. What followed was a massive purge of Party members accused of Cominform (Soviet, Stalinist) sympathies. The Communist Party of Croatia (KPH)

alone expelled over 4000 supposed Cominformists from its membership between 1948 and 1952; and it was one of the least affected republican parties.⁸⁶

For the first couple of years following the split, the KPJ tried to stay the course of Soviet-inspired political and economic development. By 1950, though, Yugoslavia was ready to part ways: the Basic Law on Management of State Economic Enterprises, passed in the summer of that year, introduced workers' councils as governing bodies of Yugoslav industrial enterprises.⁸⁷ This was the beginning of a decades-long Yugoslav experiment with “workers' self-management” (*radničko samoupravljanje*), a distinctly non-Soviet, decentralized form of market socialism.

The Party itself underwent reform during this period as well. Although the 5th Party Congress of the KPJ, held in July 1948, dismissed the allegations of anti-socialist activity put forward by the Cominform, it also reaffirmed the Party's loyalty to the Soviet political model, and even included several pledges of loyalty to Stalin personally, including some made by Tito himself.⁸⁸ The 6th Party Congress, held in November 1952, contained no such rhetoric. The split with Soviet-style socialism was complete, and there was no turning back. Instead, the leadership of the KPJ doubled down on its promises of political and economic reform – including cultural liberalization, opening up to the West, workers' self-management, and decentralization of decision-making processes. To further emphasize the changing role of the Party in society, the KPJ changed its name to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (SKJ), which also served as a nod to its supposed ideological continuity with the pre-Stalinist Marxist movement.

⁸⁶Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 146.

⁸⁷Goran Musić, *Making and Breaking the Yugoslav Working Class: The Story of Two Self-Managed Factories* (Budapest/New York: CEU Press, 2021), 28.

⁸⁸Josip Broz Tito, “Politički izveštaj CK KPJ na V. kongresu KPJ,” in *V. kongres Komunističke partije Jugoslavije, 21.-28. jula 1948: stenografske bilješke* (Zagreb: Kultura, 1949), 119.

Changes at the federal level were always mirrored in the republics. The Communist Party of Croatia went through pretty much the same evolution as the Yugoslav Party as a whole, ultimately changing its name to the League of Communists of Croatia (SKH) in 1952. Nonetheless, the period between 1947 and 1952 in Croatia had its own peculiarities – many of which had to do with Croat-Serb relations.

Statistics and politics: the question of ethnic representation

The KPH entered the post-war period with a noticeably skewed ethnic composition. According to data presented at a KPH Politburo meeting in October 1945, 35% of all active Communist Party members in Croatia at the time were ethnic Serbs, and 62% were Croats.⁸⁹ In comparison, the number of Serbs in the general population of Croatia amounted to barely 14,5% on the first post-war census, conducted in 1948.⁹⁰ The massive over-representation of Serbs in the Croatian Communist Party immediately after the war was directly related to their participation in the Partisan movement. As we have established earlier, the 1941-1945 *Ustaše* genocide of Serbs prompted them to join the resistance much earlier than their more numerous Croat compatriots – who actually remained a numerical minority in the Partisan army until 1943.

While this situation could have been tolerable during the war, the KPH leadership understood that it needed to widen its base among the ethnic Croat population if it wanted to stabilize power in the post-war period. A concerted effort was made to introduce more Croats to KPH ranks, and lower-level Party committees were instructed to attempt to mirror the general ethnic structure of their municipality, city, county, or region. This was easier said than done, of course; still, by the time of the 2nd KPH Congress, held in November 1948, the

⁸⁹*Zapisnici Politburoa Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske, 1945-1952. vol. 1*, ed. Branislava Vojnović (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2005), 128.

⁹⁰Žerjavić, *Gubici stanovništva*, 39.

percentage of Croats in the Party rose to nearly 68%, and the number of Serbs fell to 28%.⁹¹ Serbs were still over-represented, but a tendency towards proportional ethnic representation became clear.

Post-Cominform purges in the KPH were also often linked to issues of ethnicity and national policy. When former⁹² KPH general secretary Andrija Hebrang was purged from the Party in 1948, one of the main accusations leveled at him was that of being a Croatian nationalist. Hebrang was blamed for promoting chauvinistic policies during the war of resistance, and obstructing the development of Serb national culture in the “liberated territories.” His successor at the post of KPH general secretary, Vladimir Bakarić, openly accused him of all of this in his speech at the 1948 KPH congress:

When it comes to the Serbs, Hebrang manifested chauvinistic tendencies. He used his influence to force Party organizations to pursue policies which neglected the Serbs, and blocked them from achieving national and cultural development. (...) In schools, including those in homogeneously Serb regions, the teaching of Cyrillic was neglected.⁹³

It is an open question whether or not these accusations of chauvinism and Croatian nationalism contained any elements of truth; and if so, how much. What does seem clear, however, is that Hebrang was a useful scapegoat for the perceived shortcomings of Party policy during and immediately after the war. The point about neglecting the use of Cyrillic in schools, for instance, is most likely an example of this. In 1944/45, ZAVNOH’s Department of Education already noticed that Cyrillic was not being taught in Serb-majority schools; back then, however, they simply found the culprit in “absent-minded” Croat teachers.⁹⁴ By 1948 it was time to blame the enemies of the Party. Even more so because – as we shall see – some of these wartime issues never got fully resolved.

⁹¹Antun Biber, “Organizacioni izvještaj CK KPH,” in *Drugi kongres Komunističke partije Hrvatske* (Zagreb: 1949), 133.

⁹²Hebrang was KPH general secretary between 1942 and 1944, after which he got co-opted into the NKOJ (federal government).

⁹³Vladimir Bakarić, “Politički izvještaj CK KPH,” in *Drugi kongres Komunističke partije Hrvatske*, 72

⁹⁴For instance: “Dopis Povjereništva prosvjete ZAVNOH-a NOO-ima o pisanju latinice i ćirilice u osnovnim, srednjim i ostalim školama,” February 9, 1945, in *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske* 4, 174-175.

Officially, the KPH remained just as committed to the principles of national equality and fraternity after the war as it had been prior to the spring of 1945. As mentioned earlier, the 1947 Constitution of the People's Republic of Croatia declared that "Serbs in the People's Republic of Croatia are fully equal to Croats,"⁹⁵ and all previously existing legislature to that effect remained in place. In practice, this mostly meant cracking down on all instances of overt Croat or Serb nationalism. Many members of the *Ustaše* were tried or executed without trial, remaining *Ustaše* and *Četnik*⁹⁶ guerrillas were being hunted down, and „brotherhood and unity” of the Yugoslav peoples was promoted in all walks of life.

Whatever the intentions of the Communist leadership may have been, many Croats and Serbs still felt discriminated in the new state, and inter-ethnic relations remained fragile. The over-representation of Serbs in the Party and state apparatus often alienated Croats. This was especially noticeable in rural, ethnically mixed regions – Lika, Kordun, Banija, and to a somewhat lesser extent Slavonia – in which wartime divisions (pro-*Ustaše* vs. pro-*Partisan*) closely followed ethnic (Croat/Serb) fault lines. As a report made at a KPH Politburo meeting in early 1946 made it clear: “The situation in Lika is serious; many local councils are entirely made up of Serbs, which causes discontent [in many places], for instance in Gospić.”⁹⁷ Similarly, a report from August 1946 claimed that „Croat chauvinism is stronger in the cities and smaller towns – especially in those municipalities (*kotarevima*) where Croats are under-represented in local government.”⁹⁸

The KPH Politburo desperately tried to fix the issue of Croat distrust towards the new regime. In early 1948 they criticized the work of several KPH municipal committees from Central Croatia and Slavonia for “failing to implement the correct nationality policy when

⁹⁵*Ustav NRH (1947), Glava III, član 11.*

⁹⁶*Četnici* – colloquial name for Serb nationalist guerrillas active during World War Two and the immediate post-war period. Most were members of the royalist “Yugoslav Army in the Homeland,” headed by Draža Mihailović. *Četniks* often collaborated with the Axis forces, especially in Croatia.

⁹⁷*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 1*, ed. Branislava Vojnović, 182. Gospić is the regional capital and largest town in Lika.

⁹⁸*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 1*, 251.

promoting Croat cadres,” which led to Serb dominance in local Party apparatuses. According to the critically intoned report, this led to “feelings of insecurity” among the “Croat masses.”⁹⁹ The Politburo continued to intervene in local Party matters in order to alleviate ethnic imbalances: in December 1949, for instance, it ordered seven municipal committees to “fix their national composition” by promoting more Croats, Serbs, or ethnic minorities into leadership positions.¹⁰⁰ Interventions of this kind were not limited to Party matters, either: the Politburo sometimes prevented people from taking local government office if their appointments would have disturbed the ethnic balance of power.¹⁰¹

Over time, Croatian Serbs also started to feel neglected by the post-war Communist government. Attempts to reform and expand the role of wartime Serb political organizations such as the Serb Club of ZAVNOH Councilors culminated with the organization of the Congress of Serbs in Croatia (*Kongres Srba u Hrvatskoj*), held in Zagreb in September 1945 and attended by thousands of delegates. The Congress elected the Central Council of Serbs in Croatia (*Glavni odbor Srba u Hrvatskoj*), whose stated goal was to represent Croatian Serbs within the framework of the ruling People's Front.¹⁰² In other words, the Central Council was supposed to serve as a pressure group for Serb national interests in Croatia. Its activities peaked around 1947, but it would ultimately fade out of existence by the early 1950s, leaving the Serbs of Croatia without any sort of distinct political representation.¹⁰³

The situation in Serb villages deteriorated as well. The post-war campaign to include more ethnic Croats in the Party sometimes resulted in accepting applications from people who

⁹⁹*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 1*, 439-441.

¹⁰⁰*Zapisnici Politbiroa Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske, 1945-1952. vol. 2*, ed. Branislava Vojnović (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2006), 285-286.

¹⁰¹For example: Nikola Bivković (a Serb) was not allowed to become president of the Kostajnica people's council (NO) in August 1951. That position was supposed to be given to a Croat, because an ethnic Serb had already taken up the position of local Party secretary. *Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 2*, ed. Branislava Vojnović, 841.

¹⁰²Šarić, “Srpsko kulturno društvo “Prosvjeta” u socijalizmu,” 309.

¹⁰³Šarić, “Srpsko kulturno društvo “Prosvjeta” u socijalizmu,” 312.

used to be members of the NDH armed forces, or even of the *Ustaše*.¹⁰⁴ Unsurprisingly, this sort of leniency towards Croats with “murky” pasts resulted in widespread discontent. The pace of post-war reconstruction efforts also raised tensions. Politburo member Rade Žigić reported in October 1947 that “there are examples where *Ustaše*, *Četniks*, or rich peasants managed to rebuild their properties faster than our veteran (*prvoboračke*) masses,” which resulted in a “strong feeling of dissatisfaction over the injustice.”¹⁰⁵ Similar feelings of discontent among the Serbs were widespread throughout Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and they often followed ethnic instead of political lines – with all Croats or Muslims being identified as “*Ustaše*” unworthy of help.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, by the time of the mid-1947 local elections, the KPH Politburo had to report that many ethnically Serb Partisan strongholds (*ustanička sela*) seemed to have become uninterested in the Communist-led political process.¹⁰⁷

All of these political and ethnic factors coalesced during the September 1950 purge of top Serb cadres from the Croatian Communist leadership. Croatian government ministers and KPH Politburo members Rade Žigić and Duško Brkić, as well as forestry minister Stanko Opačić-Ćanica, were expelled from the Party and imprisoned for alleged “Cominform activity.”¹⁰⁸ Although officially all three of these high-ranking Serb Communists were expelled for harboring pro-Soviet sympathies (which Duško Brkić, at least, seemingly did not entirely deny),¹⁰⁹ most of the trio’s criticism of KPH policy came down to issues regarding the economic and political life of Croatian Serbs: lack of proper care for devastated Serb-majority villages,¹¹⁰ promoting cadres with (alleged) *Ustaše* backgrounds to important positions in the

¹⁰⁴A May 1947 report stated that around 8000 KPH members used to be soldiers in the NDH regular army (*Domobranstvo*). *Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH*, vol. 1, 356.

¹⁰⁵*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH*, vol. 1, 394.

¹⁰⁶Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, 279-280.

¹⁰⁷*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH*, vol. 1, 347.

¹⁰⁸Martin Previšić, “Pad Stanka Opačića Ćanice – od Korduna do logora natrag,” *Istorija 20. veka* 37, no. 2 (2019):179-182.

¹⁰⁹“I declared myself against the Cominform Resolution, and I did not change my mind. However, I will be honest: the Slavic connection also encouraged me to join the movement.” *Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH*, vol. 2, 469.

¹¹⁰*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH*, vol. 2, 449, 484.

secret police,¹¹¹ disinterest in the preservation of Serb cultural heritage,¹¹² and the problematic attitude of the Ministry of Education towards the use of Cyrillic in schools, which will be covered in depth in the following pages.

Today, the purge of the Žigić-Brkić-Opačić group is seen by many nationalist-inclined authors as the final blow to Serb national equality in socialist Croatia.¹¹³ It is definitely true that their removal from the public eye had a role in the decline of some other Serb national organizations they used to be leading members of – such as the Central Council of Serbs in Croatia, or the “Prosvjeta” cultural-educational society – but it is also a fact that Serb ethnic rights remained in flux in the years following their purge, just as they had been in the years before it took place. We can try tracing this change and uncertainty through the lens of the post-war Croatian education system.

Brotherhood or patriotism?

Education reform in Yugoslavia picked up pace as the Communist Party consolidated its power over government and society. A federal law extending compulsory schooling from four to seven years was passed in October 1945, clearly inspired by the Soviet model. Croatian republican authorities passed a similar law in 1946, and the first seven-year elementary schools opened during the 1946/47 academic year. This was done either by adding an extra three grades on top of the existing four, or by transferring three existing lower grades of high school to elementary schools. The implementation of seven-year mandatory education was slow, however, with only 91 such schools being open by 1949.¹¹⁴

Most schools were still operating under the old (4+8) system when, in December 1949, the KPJ Central Committee decided to break away from the Soviet model, and implement an

¹¹¹*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 2, 468.*

¹¹²*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 2, 467.*

¹¹³See for instance: Momčilo Diklić, *Srpsko pitanje u Hrvatskoj 1941-1950*. (Beograd: Udruženje Srba iz Hrvatske – Beograd, 2004), 322.

¹¹⁴Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji, 71-73.*

eight-year mandatory education system. This move was confirmed by the KPH in April 1950, and the first education plans for eight-year elementary schools were published soon after.¹¹⁵ As was perhaps to be expected, progress remained relatively slow: 7% of elementary schools still operated under the four-year system at the end of the 1953/54 academic year, with many more being stuck somewhere “in between,” as either six-year or seven-year schools. It was not until 1958/59 that 97% of Croatian elementary schools fully implemented the eight-year program.¹¹⁶

For a short period of time following the Tito-Stalin split the Yugoslav federal government decided to centralize decision-making processes, taking some autonomy away from the republics. The federal Ministry of Science and Culture was established in late 1948, as part of the overall push towards centralization. It was also tasked with issues of public education, which often led to tensions with the (officially) subordinated republican ministries. This situation did not last long, and by mid-1950 the federal ministry was once again downgraded, becoming the governmental Council for Science and Culture.¹¹⁷ The Croatian Ministry of Education got renamed as well: from April 1951 on it was referred to as the Council for Education, Science and Culture – though the scope of its duties remained the same as before.¹¹⁸

On the surface, issues of national equality and fraternity were not particularly affected by the education reform. “Brotherhood and unity” remained one of the main pillars of Yugoslav Communist ideology, and the bi-national character of the Croatian republic was not being put into question. Nevertheless, some seemingly minute changes were taking place after the Tito-Stalin split – most notably, the concept of “socialist patriotism” started to gain relevance. This became formalized at the 5th Congress of the KPJ (held in July 1948), where it was declared that the role of public education should be “the upbringing of the wide masses of the people in

¹¹⁵Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 77.

¹¹⁶Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 80.

¹¹⁷Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 53.

¹¹⁸Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 61.

the spirit of socialist patriotism and internationalism.”¹¹⁹ Brotherhood and unity did not disappear, but with another war looming over Yugoslavia the people had to be instilled with a sense of patriotism before anything else.

This change became immediately noticeable in education plans and programs published in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The 1948 elementary school program, published by the Croatian MPRO, still limited the goals of “Croatian or Serbian” language education to “developing feelings of love and loyalty towards our homeland and its peoples, as well as a sense of brotherhood and unity between our peoples.”¹²⁰ History classes were supposed to achieve pretty much the same goal, with the added bonus of “developing an undying hatred towards the enemies of our homeland.”¹²¹ Socialist patriotism as such was not on the radar as of yet.

It did not take long for that to change, however. The 1950 program for eight-year elementary schools tasked “Croatian or Serbian” classes with “developing Yugoslav socialist patriotism” among the student body. “Brotherhood and unity” was not mentioned at all.¹²² Meanwhile, history education doubled down on “developing pride and enthusiasm for the great accomplishments of our peoples, as well as love and loyalty towards our homeland and its peoples.” Students were also meant to learn about “the struggle of our peoples against the conquerors and oppressors,” in order to become “active fighters for the freedom of their country.”¹²³ The 1951 program for eight-year elementary schools repeated the same points; once again without ever mentioning brotherhood and unity.¹²⁴ All the while, the actual content of the programs published between 1947 and 1952 remained very similar to those published in earlier years, with an emphasis on episodes of struggle against “foreign oppression” in history,

¹¹⁹Quoted in: Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 75.

¹²⁰*Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu* (Zagreb: MPRO NRH, 1948), 9.

¹²¹*Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu (1948)*, 21.

¹²²*Nastavni plan i program za osmogodišnje škole i niže razrede gimnazije, osnovne škole i produžne tečajeve* (Zagreb: MPRO NRH, 1950), 6.

¹²³*Nastavni plan i program (1950)*, 25.

¹²⁴*Nastavni plan i program za osmogodišnje škole i niže razrede gimnazija* (Zagreb: MPRO NRH, 1951), 7, 60.

and covering the literary corpora of all Yugoslav nations in “Croatian or Serbian” classes. The main differences between pre- and post-1948 curricula were related to the Soviet Union – namely its history, its culture, and its political influence.¹²⁵

The move towards socialist patriotism seemed to be the result of two main factors: the danger of foreign invasion, and the (temporary) centralizing tendencies of the KPJ. Although inter-ethnic fraternity was perhaps implied within the concept of “socialist patriotism,” the lack of any overt references to “brotherhood” still represented a noticeable rhetorical shift from the immediate post-war years. Defending the country (and the KPJ) became the priority; inter-ethnic relations had to take a back seat – for now.

Equality – on paper or in practice?

Even if overt references to fraternity got pushed to the background in the school programs of the late 1940s, the practical aspects of Croat-Serb national equality in Croatia officially remained in place. The 1948,¹²⁶ 1950,¹²⁷ and 1951¹²⁸ education programs for Croatian elementary schools all reconfirmed ZAVNOH’s 1944 decision on the use of Cyrillic as the primary script of instruction in Serb-majority schools. “Croatian or Serbian” also remained the official name of the subject in all programs published by the Croatian Ministry of Education. Programs published in other republics – such as the 1949 program for two- and three-year vocational schools – sometimes referred to it as the “People’s language” (*narodni jezik*), though this term was most likely used as a simple stand-in due to the fact that the program was used in different republics, which had different names for the standard Serbo-Croatian language. The same program also mentioned “writing short compositions in verse and

¹²⁵Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 148.

¹²⁶The 1948 program does this somewhat indirectly, only mentioning that “the other script” (either Latin or Cyrillic) should be taught in the second semester of the second grade of elementary school. *Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu (1948)*, 14.

¹²⁷*Nastavni plan i program (1950)*, 8.

¹²⁸*Nastavni plan i program (1951)*, 9.

prose, in Cyrillic and Latin scripts,” without mentioning the ethnic composition of schools.¹²⁹ Once again, the decision on the practical implementation of these instructions was most likely left to the republican and local authorities.

Laws and regulations, and their actual implementation are two different things, however. As mentioned in the previous part of this chapter, both Serbs and Croats in Croatia often felt discriminated in the post-war years, and much of that feeling had to do with education policies. That a problem existed was clear to federal authorities as well: a March 1948 meeting of the KPJ Agitation and Propaganda Committee (*Uprava za agitaciju i propagandu*) concluded that “our republics veered into nationalism” when it came to teaching national history and national literature. Instead, the Agitprop Committee recommended “educating the youth in an all-Yugoslav spirit.”¹³⁰

Many Croatian Serbs – and some high-ranking Serb Communist cadres – definitely agreed that there was a problem with nationalism in the Croatian school system; Croatian nationalism, to be exact. Although many Serbs, especially intellectuals, hoped that the practical aspects of national equality in education would expand after the war, by 1948 their wishes seemed to have remained unfulfilled. Journalist Mile Joka, then-secretary of the “Prosvjeta” cultural-educational society, wrote in early 1945:

However, the question of equality, and the cultivation of national culture and all of its values does not consist only of learning both scripts. (...) The teacher did not fulfill his duty as an education worker if he thinks that everything is contained in the script and the celebration of national holidays. In our schools, according to the intentions of our people’s government (*narodne vlasti*), Serb children will be taught more Serb national history and literature, our young comrades will be introduced to the centuries-long struggle of the Serb people against the conquerors, [they will learn] about the creation of national consciousness in the days of the [Serbian] uprisings. (...) But, at the same time, children will learn what is necessary about the history, literature, geography, ethnographic characteristics, and lives of other Yugoslav peoples, and most importantly of the brotherly Croat people.¹³¹

¹²⁹*Nastavni planovi i programi za dvogodišnje i trogodišnje škole učenika u privredi i industrijske škole* (Beograd: Vesnik rada, 1949), 7-8.

¹³⁰Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 95.

¹³¹Mile Joka, “Naša prosvjetna politika i pitanje gajenja nacionalne kulture hrvatskog i srpskog naroda,” *Narodna prosvjeta*, March/April 1945, 3.

As far as we can glean from education programs, curricula, and textbooks, this sort of development never took place. Serb children in Croatia were meant to be taught about Serb history and culture, of course, but not necessarily in any more depth than their Croat counterparts. In practice, Cyrillic really did become the only element of Serb national identity taught in Croatian schools. Serb cultural events and national literature were not banned in public schools – far from it – but they slowly became the domain of extra-governmental, People’s Front organizations. “Prosvjeta,” for instance, took it upon itself to supply schools with Serb national literature, and provide teachers with materials written in Cyrillic.¹³² The Croatian republican government appreciated these efforts, and as late as 1952 called upon schools and education workers to subscribe to “Prosvjeta’s” publications.¹³³ Interestingly, local “Prosvjeta” chapters were often run by school teachers; in many cases – Croats by ethnicity.¹³⁴

All well and good, perhaps, but in the minds of many Croatian Serbs this was meant to be the government’s job – not that of scarcely funded cultural organizations. In late August 1950, soon-to-be-purged KPH Politburo members Rade Žigić and Duško Brkić criticized the republican Ministry of Education for its lack of interest in the preservation of Serb culture. Worse yet, they criticized the pace of school reconstruction in Serb-majority villages, as well as the tendency of transferring teachers to Serb-majority regions as a means of punishment.¹³⁵

At the same Politburo meeting, Brkić also alleged that MPRO employees openly discussed removing Cyrillic from the curriculum in Serb villages, and converting to Latin script-only instruction.¹³⁶ This was later vehemently denied by other members of the KPH Politburo, who insisted that individuals in the Ministry only proposed Latin script instruction because of the wider accessibility of children’s literature written in Latinic – and that no one

¹³² HR-HDA-640. SKD ‘Prosvjeta,’ box no. 18. “Savjetovanje predsjednika i sekretara pododbora SKD ‘Prosvjeta’”(December 28, 1947), 41-42.

¹³³HR-HDA-640. SKD ‘Prosvjeta,’ box no. 35. “Dopis Savjeta za prosvjetu NRH savjetima za prosvjetu i kulturu kotarskih narodnih odbora” (1952).

¹³⁴HR-HDA-640. SKD ‘Prosvjeta,’ box no. 18. “Izveštaj o ‘Prosvjetinim’ radnicima u radu pododbora” (1951?).

¹³⁵*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 2, 449, 467.*

¹³⁶*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 2, 467,*

took those proposals seriously, anyway.¹³⁷ Whatever the case, it seems clear that discontent was brewing among Croatian Serbs, and that the Ministry's education policy failed to satisfy many demands for Serb national equality. The possible rollback of existing national rights also seemed to be a source of constant anxiety among many Serbs of Croatia.

Religion and ethnicity

Many ethnic Croats were also dissatisfied with the course of KPH's education policy. Some, whose sympathies might have laid with the *Ustaše*, were simply not happy with any sort of national equality in school curricula. Others were unhappy with the pro-Communist political line of new education programs, but many became antagonistic because of the radical secularization of the school system that took place in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Religious education was turned from a mandatory to an elective subject in Partisan-run schools in 1944, and the policy spread to all schools run by the Croatian MPRO during the 1945/46 academic year. Over time, the KPH enforced an ever stricter line towards religious education in public schools, before eventually banning it entirely in February 1952.¹³⁸

The separation of church and state (and with it, the education system) immediately blurred the line between religious and national issues. The Communist government of Croatia saw the Catholic Church – to which most Croats adhered to – as its most dangerous internal enemy. The Serbian Orthodox Church, on the other hand, was seen as more of a nuisance: its power among the Croatian Serbs was decisively broken during the war, first by *Ustaše* persecution, and then by the rising influence of Communists within the resistance movement. It was certainly not a coincidence that by 1948 the first municipalities to virtually abolish religious education in public schools were those with a sizable Serb population.¹³⁹

¹³⁷*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 2, 481.*

¹³⁸“Ukidanje dozvola za podučavanje vjeronauka,” *Prosvjetni vjesnik*, February 15, 1952, 4.

¹³⁹“The municipalities (*kotarevi*) in which religious education is almost non-existent are Glina, Vrginmost, Otočac, Gospić, Brinje, Donji Lapac, and some other rebel (*ustanički*) municipalities, where Serbs live.” From: *Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 1, 480.*

Most Croats, however, did not break off with the Catholic Church; and so the anti-religious campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s inadvertently gained an ethnic tinge. The impact of this policy – as well as all the other reforms implemented by the KPH between 1943 and 1945 – on Croat and Serb communities will be the subject of the next chapter.

Ch. 2: The Village

As much as Yugoslav Communists tried to promote the ideals of “brotherhood and unity” in post-war Croatian society, the on the ground reality did not often follow Party directives. The four-year-long experience of war and mass murder created a persisting atmosphere of distrust and fear between the two largest ethnic groups in the nascent people’s republic. On the one hand, the Serb minority, having survived a campaign of genocide at the hands of the Croat *Ustaše*, held easily understandable grudges against the majority ethnicity. Having been the original and most loyal base of the Communist Partisan resistance, the Serbs of Croatia often saw Communist victory in the war as victory not over abstract forces of Fascism, but over Croats in general, who were in many cases equated with the *Ustaše* regime as such.

Croats, on the other hand, had a much more varied reaction to the creation of post-war Yugoslavia. Some welcomed it – either because of Communist sympathies or a genuine belief in Yugoslav federalism – but many others feared KPJ rule, seeing the Party as a vehicle of Serb ethnic interests. Fears of Serb revanchism also abounded, supported by the fact that tens of thousands of Croat prisoners of war had been executed following the end of open hostilities in spring and summer of 1945.¹⁴⁰ The Communist Party thus faced a serious problem: it had to gain the sympathies of Croats without alienating their Serb political base. As we shall see, this task proved to be much more difficult than party ideologues had originally hoped, and it was precisely schools that became some of the primary battlegrounds in the fight for the hearts and minds of Croat and Serb youth.

In the previous chapter we have covered the policies implemented by the KPH/KPJ in order to promote inter-ethnic cooperation and national equality in the wartime and early post-war Croatian education system. This chapter will explore the difficulties that surrounded the

¹⁴⁰Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 765. The KPH Politburo discussed the extrajudicial murders of regular NDH army soldiers (*domobranci*) on several occasions in July/August 1945. *Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 1, 72, 75, 77.*

implementation of those policies, and how the local population – especially parents, teachers, various political activists, and others – reacted to them. Finally, we will also take a short look into the activities of both Communist-led, and anti-communist youth organizations in post-war Croatian society.

“Serb villages love our schools”

In order to fully understand the intertwined history of Croat-Serb relations and education in socialist Croatia, we have to go back to the years preceding the final liberation of Yugoslavia in May 1945. The formation of the wartime Croatian Partisan parliament – ZAVNOH – in 1943 was followed by the creation of various subordinated departments, which took over the role of pseudo-ministries operating on the territory under Partisan control. The Department of Education (*Prosvjetni odjel*, PO) was formed at the first session of the ZAVNOH held in June 1943, and immediately became one of its most active components. Already by August 1943, the Department had organized classes in close to a hundred schools on the liberated territory of central Croatia, including a high school in the town of Otočac.¹⁴¹

Of course, as with every other aspect of the People’s Liberation Movement (NOP),¹⁴² the Communist Party used elementary and high school education to promote its own political agenda – including that of brotherhood and national equality of Croats and Serbs in Croatia. However, many obstacles presented themselves almost immediately. For instance, the same mid-1943 report in which the PO bragged about the number of operational schools under its oversight also included information on the lackluster performance of schools in the Otočac region, which stemmed from the widespread unwillingness of parents to send their children to “Partisan” schools. At this moment the PO placed the blame squarely at the feet of the local

¹⁴¹“Izvještaj Prosvjetnog odjela ZAVNOH-a o radu odjela od ožujka do kolovoza 1943,” August 26, 1943, in: *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 1: zbornik dokumenata*, ed. Hodimir Sirotković (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1964), 370-371.

¹⁴²*Narodnooslobodilački pokret* (NOP) – the overall name for the antifascist resistance movement in Yugoslavia, led by the Communist Party.

NOP authorities, criticizing them for being overly lenient towards the population and failing to convince the locals of the permanence of NOP state and educational structures. Ethnic conflict was still nowhere to be found, at least not within official reports.¹⁴³

It will not take long for this to change, however. The further spread of the Partisan movement throughout 1943 and 1944 resulted in it slowly gaining control over some of the more ethnically Croat parts of Croatia – some of which were less than enthusiastic by the prospect of Communist rule and Serb national equality. Monthly reports sent by the regional people’s liberation council (NOO)¹⁴⁴ of Slavonia (Eastern Croatia) to ZAVNOH’s Department of Education provide us with a lot of insight into the matter. The mere fact that the ZAVNOH instructed its regional and local authorities to include an analysis of the political situation in their monthly reports on education is quite telling, and the reports themselves tend to paint a picture of a politically and ethnically divided country.

At this point, Croat-majority villages were proving to be the biggest obstacles to Communist education efforts. A March 1944 report by the Slavonia NOO bluntly stated that “all Serb villages love [our] school (...) even though they have been thoroughly sacked and burned,” while in the Croat village of Skenderovci the locals voiced protests against the “Partisan teacher” employed by the NOO.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the report decried the fact that no school has yet been opened in the village of Podvrške, “even though the village had been liberated over a year ago.”¹⁴⁶ Although a school was later opened in Podvrške, attendance remained spotty for years to come: a report from the 1952/53 academic year stated that six out

¹⁴³“Izveštaj Prosvjetnog odjela ZAVNOH-a o radu odjela od ožujka do kolovoza 1943,” 370-371.

¹⁴⁴*Narodnooslobodilački odbor* (NOO) – local, municipal, or regional political/administrative bodies of the NOP.

¹⁴⁵HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Izveštaj br. 3/1944. “Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO-a za Slavoniju Prosvjetnom odjelu ZAVNOH-a” (March 31, 1944).

¹⁴⁶HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. “Izveštaj br. 3/1944. Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO-a za Slavoniju Prosvjetnom odjelu ZAVNOH-a” (March 31, 1944).

of 67 school-age children still did not attend classes.¹⁴⁷ Podvrške was (and is), unsurprisingly, a Croat-majority village.

This state of affairs barely changed throughout the final months of the war. For instance, a report from Slavonia dated July 1944 claimed that “there is no enthusiasm for our schools in Croat villages,”¹⁴⁸ and another one from December of the same year stated that some Croat-majority villages insisted on exclusively employing teachers of Croatian ethnicity.¹⁴⁹ Apparently, certain Serb-majority villages also demanded Serb teachers, but according to an October 1944 report “most [Serbs] do not care, but only demand the teachers to work properly.”¹⁵⁰

Indeed, the Serbs of Slavonia seemed content with having access to any sort of education for their children. ZAVNOH’s directive to use Cyrillic as the main script of instruction in Serb-majority schools was certainly met with approval, but practical considerations often trumped national ideals – for instance, it was reported that many Serb villages in the Psunj region demanded their children to start learning the Latin script, for the simple reason that literature written in Latinic was more readily available than that written in Cyrillic.¹⁵¹ It should be worth remembering that similar arguments continued to abound in the post-war years, and – as Duško Brkić was quick to remind the KPH Politburo right before his 1950 purge – they started to circulate in higher government offices as well.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷HR-DASB-NG-3. NO kotara Nova Gradiška, box no. 33. “Izveštaj o polasku škola na kotaru Nova Gradiška u školskoj godini 1952/53. od 1. 9. 1952. do 20. 6. 1953.” (June 1953).

¹⁴⁸HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Izveštaj Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO za Slavoniju Prosvjetnom odjelu ZAVNOH-a (July 14, 1944).

¹⁴⁹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Dopis (1001/1944) Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO-a za Slavoniju Odjelu narodne prosvjete ZAVNOH-a (December 12, 1944).

¹⁵⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Dopis (617/44) Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO-a za Slavoniju Odjelu narodne prosvjete ZAVNOH-a (October 7, 1944).

¹⁵¹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Dopis (617/44) Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO-a za Slavoniju Odjelu narodne prosvjete ZAVNOH-a (October 7, 1944).

¹⁵²*Zapisnici Politburoa CK KPH, vol. 2, 467.*

“The people must be appeased”

The end of the war in mid-1945 created a new situation for Croatian Communists. Having achieved full territorial control over Croatia, the wartime administrative units of the NOP had to be transformed into a legitimate state. Already in April 1945 the ZAVNOH had proclaimed the creation of the People’s Government of Croatia, and its department of education got promoted into a ministry (MPRO).¹⁵³ ZAVNOH itself was duly renamed to the People’s *Sabor* of Croatia in July 1945. A new – Communist – era of Croatian history thus began in earnest.

Consolidating control over Croatia’s school system was not a straightforward thing for the new Communist ministry, however. While teachers in wartime Partisan schools could have generally been counted on by the KPJ/KPH to be loyal Communist sympathizers, the majority of teachers in the newly liberated cities and towns had in the best case spent the war in total political passivity, or, in the worst case, had actively supported the *Ustaše* Nazi-puppet regime. This issue of questionable loyalties had to be resolved, but a wholesale purge was simply not in the cards – a severe lack of professional school cadres meant that any sort of radical blood-letting would risk destroying the whole system. In the end, it took several years for the MPRO to rid the education system of “enemy elements.” The problem of potential disloyalty among Croatian teachers was so pervasive that even the KPH Politburo had to discuss it in one of its meetings in August 1946, well over a year following the end of the war.¹⁵⁴

Several other issues further complicated things for the Ministry of Education. First of all, schools in Serb-majority areas of Central Croatia had in many cases been destroyed during the war, and it would take years for them to be rebuilt.¹⁵⁵ Even in those cases in which school

¹⁵³Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 53.

¹⁵⁴*Zapisi Politbiroa CK KPH*, vol. 1, 250.

¹⁵⁵See for instance a report from the Serb-majority village of Primišlje in the Kordun region, given at the annual conference of the “Prosvjeta” Serb Cultural Society in 1947, which stated: “We have 180 children in the village, and but one classroom. Classes have to be held throughout the day.” HR-HDA-640. SKD Prosvjeta, 640.7., box no. 18. Savjetovanje predsjednika i sekretara pododbora SKD Prosvjeta (December 28, 1947), p. 40.

infrastructure came out of the war intact, getting teachers to work in such remote villages proved to be a grueling task. Although all teachers in the People's Republic of Croatia were employees of the state, and the state had every right to transfer them around the country according to necessity, in practice many teachers simply ignored such orders. This led to a severe lack of professional cadres in the (rural and ethnically mixed) regions of Lika, Slavonia, and Dalmatia, with a deficit of up to a thousand teachers by September 1945.¹⁵⁶

Any of the above-mentioned problems would have presented an obstacle for the Communists' education efforts in and of themselves, even if they had not been compounded by issues of ethnicity. In post-war Croatia, though, those could not have been avoided. On a surface level, some of the issues remained the same as in the final year of the war, most notably those of "matching" the ethnicity of teachers to the ethnic majority of the villages they were being sent to. However, a clear break took place around spring 1945 – if previously both Croat and Serb-majority villages demanded teachers of "their" ethnicity to work in local schools, after the final liberation of the country those demands continued to appear almost exclusively in Serb villages.

Some useful examples of this phenomenon could once again be found in reports from Slavonia. A June 1945 report from the Slavonski Brod county NOO stated that "reactionaries" had become so influential in certain villages – namely, the Serb-majority village of Novo Topolje – that they convinced the locals not to send their children to school until the current (presumably NOO-appointed) teacher got replaced. The situation in Novo Topolje only improved after the county NOO replaced the teacher with a new one, of Serb ethnicity.¹⁵⁷ A report from November of the same year informed the Ministry of Education that children from the Serb villages of Čenkovo and Paučje were not being sent to school in the nearby Croat-majority village of Milinci. When asked why, the locals explained that they were "Serbs and

¹⁵⁶*Zapishnici Politbira CK KPH, vol. 1, 170.*

¹⁵⁷HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Mjesečni izvještaj (3761) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NOO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (June 27, 1945).

[Partisan] fighters and as such deserved a school in their own village.”¹⁵⁸ According to another report from late 1945, this time written by the people’s council (NO)¹⁵⁹ of Osijek county, the villagers of Tenja had but one simple question for their newly appointed teacher: “Are you a Serb?”¹⁶⁰

In the few instances in which Slavonian Croats openly complained to the authorities regarding issues of ethnicity in schooling, their tone was noticeably more docile. When the Croat denizens of Ovčare in Eastern Slavonia asked about the possibility of opening a school in their village, they did not demand it as their right; instead, they essentially pleaded for the safety of their children, who they thought might get beaten up at school in the neighboring Serb-majority village of Majar.¹⁶¹

What caused this sudden shift in attitude among the Serbs and Croats of Slavonia? A simple explanation could be that local Croats – generally passive or unsympathetic towards the Partisans and the KPJ – lost the leverage they used to have before spring 1945. If during wartime the KPJ/KPH had to try and accommodate Croat wishes in order to gain essential support for the Partisan struggle, after May 1945 that was no longer necessary – at least not in the same measure. Slavonia’s Serbs, on the other hand, might have felt empowered by “their” victory, and emboldened to demand what they considered to be their “deserved” rights: in this case, the right to pick a Serb teacher for a Serb village. A “national right,” perhaps, but certainly not in the form the Communists intended it to be.

Of course, the actual situation was not so black-and-white. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Communist authorities at the republican level never ceased trying to appease the Croat population; the implementation of their directives on the local level remained a

¹⁵⁸HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redoviti mjesečni izvještaj (26671) za mjesec listopad Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (November 4, 1945).

¹⁵⁹*Narodni odbori* (NO) – territorial administrative bodies of post-war Yugoslavia which replaced the NOOs.

¹⁶⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovni mjesečni izvještaj (za septembar i oktobar) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u (October 29, 1945).

¹⁶¹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Mjesečni izvještaj (17773) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (September 28, 1945).

separate issue, however. Furthermore, local and regional departments of education in Slavonia found a very specific culprit for the increase in “Serb chauvinist tendencies” – specifically, some among the thousands of Serb refugees returning from Serbia proper. These returnees, expelled by the *Ustaše* back in 1941, were generally much less involved with the multi-ethnic Partisan movement than those Serbs who lived in Croatia throughout the entire war, and who fought side by side with many Croat Partisans. As such, the returnees were also far less sympathetic to the new Communist government: in the words of republican secret police chief Ivan ‘Stevo’ Krajačić, “all Serbs returning from Serbia are talking about king Peter.”¹⁶² It was precisely this group of people that the head of the Osijek county department of education blamed for spreading “distrust in Croat-Catholic teachers” in August 1945,¹⁶³ and the same was stated by his counterpart in Nova Gradiška county just a month earlier.¹⁶⁴

As easy (and politically expedient) as it would have been to put the blame squarely on returnees from Serbia, it is obvious that the root cause of the rise of “chauvinist tendencies” could in many cases be traced back to wartime grudges. For instance, the aforementioned Serb-majority villages of Čenkovo and Paučje were first targeted by the Croat *Ustaše* for forced conversion to Catholicism in 1941, and then had several hundred of their residents interned and executed at the Jasenovac death camp in 1942.¹⁶⁵ It is not hard to understand why people from those villages would have been less than enthusiastic to send their children to school in neighboring Croat-majority Milinci, even without any further persuasion by returnees from Serbia.

¹⁶²*Zapisnici Politbiroa CK KPH, vol. 1, 72.* King Peter II Karađorđević fled Yugoslavia in 1941 and was forbidden to return by the AVNOJ in 1943.

¹⁶³HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovan mjesečni izvještaj (11530) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u (August 29, 1945).

¹⁶⁴HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovni mjesečni izvještaj (1159) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NOO-a N. Gradiška MPRO-u (July 17, 1945).

¹⁶⁵Milan Radanović, “Prisilna asimilacija, internacije i masakri. Položaj pokatoličenih Srba u Velikoj župi Baranja 1941-1942,” in *Pokatoličavanje Srba u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj*, ed. Milan Radanović (Zagreb: Srpsko narodno vijeće, 2019), 290.

In any case, the Communist authorities had to respond to these demands. This was, of course, not an easy task. On the one hand, the whole concept of “brotherhood and unity” depended on the idea that ethnicity simply should not matter when it came to employment and politics. On the other hand, the KPH had to be careful not to alienate Croatian Serbs who, in mid-1945, still represented more than 35% of KPH members, and were equally over-represented in the officer corps and most People’s Front organizations.¹⁶⁶

It seems that, at least in Slavonia and at least in 1945, the Ministry of Education was willing to accommodate Serb demands. To achieve this, the government was sometimes willing to overrule the personal interests of teachers. Such was the example of Bosiljka Jović, who was meant to be transferred from her post in Zagreb – Croatia’s capital – to the remote Slavonian village of Slobodna Vlast. The local population of the village insisted on the MPRO appointing a Serb teacher, and Jović was (apparently) the only available candidate. However, she never arrived to her new posting. This prompted the county department of education to implore the Ministry to use any appropriate means to send her to Slobodna Vlast, her protests notwithstanding. After all, the people of Slobodna Vlast wanted her there, and, to quote the report itself: “the people must be appeased.”¹⁶⁷

Still, replacing teachers of the “wrong” ethnicity was seen as a measure of last resort. Before being replaced, the teachers were expected to do everything in their power to convince the locals of their merits. In the eyes of Communist authorities, this was supposed to be done by taking part in as many extracurricular and political activities as possible. In other words, teachers were expected to be the bearers of social life in their respective towns and villages. The Croat teachers in Palača and Ada in northern Slavonia were perfect examples of this, at least according to the Osijek county department of education. Local Serbs were initially suspicious towards them, and some – allegedly under the influence of returnees from Serbia –

¹⁶⁶*Zapishnici Politbira CK KPH, vol. 1, 128.*

¹⁶⁷HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redoviti mjesečni izvještaj (26671) za mjesec listopad Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (November 4, 1945).

did not want to send their children to classrooms supervised by “Šokac”¹⁶⁸ teachers. The teachers seemingly managed to change these attitudes by engaging in “tireless, hard, and correct class and extracurricular work,” which led to the locals demanding them to stay at their posts. We should not paint too rosy a picture here, though, as it should be noted that the teacher in Ada was simultaneously the secretary (*sekretar*) of the local people’s council – meaning that he most likely had the clear backing of the Communist Party.¹⁶⁹

Finally, as much as the Ministry wished to appease the population, it was ultimately restrained by objective realities. As mentioned earlier, there were simply not enough teachers to go around in the immediate post-war period, and the budget for school-building was severely limited. This meant that our old acquaintances from Čenkovo and Paučje could not get the two new schools they wished for, and were essentially instructed to swallow their pride and send their children to Milinci.¹⁷⁰

In any case, such plebiscitary demands based on ethnicity – be they demands to build a new school or demands to transfer a teacher – seemed to slowly disappear from the archival record by 1946, and even in their heyday such demands were strictly a rural phenomenon with no clear parallel in Croatian cities.

“Passivity”

At the same time, rural Croats were expressing their grievances in different ways. The lack of enthusiasm for Communist schools in Croat-majority villages – described by the Slavonian NOO’s department of education back in 1944 – continued well into 1945, and

¹⁶⁸Šokci are a small, Catholic South Slavic ethnic group native to Slavonia and Vojvodina, who nowadays mostly consider themselves a subgroup of Croats. By the mid-20th century “Šokac” started being used as a slightly derogatory term for Croats/Catholics, usually by local Serbs/Orthodox Christians.

¹⁶⁹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovan mjesečni izvještaj (11530) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u (August 29, 1945).

¹⁷⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redoviti mjesečni izvještaj (26671) za mjesec listopad Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (November 4, 1945).

beyond. When describing the situation in many Croat villages in Slavonia, the various county-level departments of education tended to use one word above all others: “passivity.”¹⁷¹

Passivity was mostly seen as a lack of enthusiasm for state-mandated education efforts, but could often border on open hostility towards the new regime. We can find an example of the latter in a July 1945 report from the county of Osijek, which informed the MPRO in Zagreb of the difficulties an elementary school teacher in the Croat village of Beničanci faced when she tried to organize children to join a regional rally of the Union of Pioneers.¹⁷² The teacher barely managed to gather half of the pupils, as many parents were seemingly afraid that their children might be “shipped off to Russia.”¹⁷³

Hostility towards pro-Communist teachers and the new curriculum continued to plague certain parts of rural Croatia at least until the late 1940s. One such case, from the Croat village of Donja Motičina in Slavonia, got so out of hand that a local teacher – Nada Dobrovin – had to send a personal appeal to one of the department heads of the Našice *kotar* department of education. The letter, written in January 1949, described the dire political and personal situation the teaching staff found itself in: not only did the villagers not attend events organized by the People’s Front,¹⁷⁴ they did not attend parent-teacher conferences either, allegedly calling them “Communist meetings.” Some locals even resorted to violence and intimidation. Dobrovin enclosed a copy of one such intimidating letter, addressed (anonymously) to local teachers and members of the village NO, whose author threatened to “cut off the head” of one of the teachers if he did not stop promoting Communist policies. Dobrovin claimed that the situation in this

¹⁷¹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovan mjesečni izvještaj (11530) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u (August 29, 1945). Also: HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovan mjesečni izvještaj (7230) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u (July 31, 1945).

¹⁷²The Union of Pioneers (*Savez pionira*) was a youth organization formed by the KPJ in 1942, based on the Soviet Young Pioneer movement. Membership was officially voluntary, but *de facto* mandatory.

¹⁷³HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. „Redovan mjesečni izvještaj (7230) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u” (July 31, 1945).

¹⁷⁴*Narodni front* (NOF) – largest mass organization in post-war Yugoslavia, controlled by the KPJ.

“*Ustaše* village” – as she called it – had only gotten worse since she was first posted there in 1945, and asked for an immediate transfer.¹⁷⁵

The *kotar* department of education initially declined her request, saying that “progressive teachers” such as Dobrovin were irreplaceable in “passive villages” like Donja Motičina.¹⁷⁶ However, just a few months later she was recommended for a transfer to the town of Našice, where she was supposed to take over as manager of the local student dormitory.¹⁷⁷ It should be noted that overt threats such as the one described above were seen as outliers by 1949, and were not part of the everyday experience of most teachers in rural Croatia. To quote Nada Dobrovin again, “even the *kotar* authorities could not wrap their heads around this village.”¹⁷⁸

Another, even more violent aspect of Croat resistance to Communist education efforts came from the *Križari* (Crusader) movement – in essence, a decentralized collection of nationalist guerrilla bands formed by *Ustaša* stragglers in spring and summer of 1945. Despite lacking a clear objective, or a coherent military structure, the *Križari* posed a serious threat (or at least a constant nuisance) to the Communist government of Croatia until the early 1950s.¹⁷⁹

Educational workers became some of their favorite targets, especially if they happened to be ethnic Serbs or Communist-sympathizing Croats. A note from central Slavonia dated September 1945 reported that a *Križar* band had entered the village of Djedina Rijeka, and threatened the local (ethnically Croatian) teacher to “stop cooperating with the Partisans,” or face consequences.¹⁸⁰ Similarly, in November of the same year, the MPRO was forced to

¹⁷⁵HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 2.2.9., box no. 14. “Pismo Dobrovin Nade KNO-u Našice o premještanju iz Donje Motičine” (January 1949).

¹⁷⁶HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 2.2.9., box no. 14. “Dopis KNO Našice MPRO-u NRH” (January 25, 1949).

¹⁷⁷HR-DAOS-59. Oblasni NO Osijek, box no. 150. “Zapisnik sastanka Odjela za prosvjetu i kulturu” (October 31, 1949).

¹⁷⁸HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 2.2.9., box no. 14. Pismo Dobrovin Nade KNO-u Našice o premještanju iz Donje Motičine (January 1949).

¹⁷⁹Zdenko Radelić, “Križari: ustaška gerila 1945.-1950. - problemi istraživanja.” *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 32, no. 1 (2000): 5-7.

¹⁸⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Mjesečni izvještaj (17773) Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (September 28, 1945).

transfer another Croat teacher away from Slavonia after he had received death threats from a *Križari* group operating in the vicinity of the town of Đakovo.¹⁸¹ Other reports warned that the passivity of certain Croat teachers in the *kotar* of Vukovar had to do with their links to the local *Križari* organization.¹⁸²

Perhaps the most poignant example of *Križari* attacks on Communist-run schools came not from Slavonia, but from the Central Croatian region of Lika – an economically backward region that saw some of the bloodiest inter-ethnic violence of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. A report sent to the MPRO by the Lika county department of education in August 1945 recounted the events that followed a *Križari* incursion into the Croat-majority village of Križpolje that occurred the previous month. According to the report, one of the aims of the *Križari* attack was to capture the two ethnic Serb teachers appointed to the village school by the Lika people’s council. Once they realized the teachers had managed to flee, the *Križari* organized a rally in which they scorned the locals for letting “*Vlah*¹⁸³ scum teach their children.” Not to end on a depressing note, the report claimed that local Croats implored the teachers to return as soon as the *Križari* left the village.¹⁸⁴ Lacking any supporting evidence, however, the veracity of such a claim can certainly be doubted.

Although *Križari* activities slowly subsided, and flashy actions such as the one described above became an ever more uncommon occurrence in the years following 1945, their presence in the countryside nonetheless continued to unnerve Communist authorities until the end of the decade. Especially worrisome for the KPH were *Križari* links to underground organizations in the cities – many of which were recruiting members from high schools throughout the People’s Republic of Croatia.

¹⁸¹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovni mjesečni izvještaj (26671) za mjesec listopad Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Sl. Brod MPRO-u (November 4, 1945).

¹⁸²HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Redovni mjesečni izvještaj (25447) za septembar i oktobar Prosvjetnog odjela Okružnog NO-a Osijek MPRO-u (October 29, 1945).

¹⁸³“*Vlah*” is a common slur for Serbs/Orthodox Christians in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

¹⁸⁴HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.4.4., box no. 26. Mjesečni izvještaj Prosvjetnog odjela (10180) Okružnog NO-a za Liku MPRO-u za mjesec juli (August 21, 1945).

The struggle for the hearts and minds of Croatian youth

Any analysis of the Yugoslav education system would be incomplete without mentioning the various youth organizations, whose presence was ubiquitous in post-war schools and general society. Primarily, these organizations functioned as transmission belts between the Communist Party and the wider strata of Yugoslav youth. However, youth organizations were much more than that: they were often the only medium through which younger generations could get access to various forms of leisure activities (especially in the rural areas), and – importantly for our topic – they were an indispensable, and often quite autonomous part of the management structure of Yugoslav schools. Given the intermediary nature of these organizations it seems fitting to introduce them at this point in the thesis, while their practical activities in schools will be covered in the following chapter.

The history of Communist-leaning youth organizations in Yugoslavia is inseparable from the history of the KPJ itself: the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*, SKOJ) was founded in October 1919, only six months after the founding congress of the Communist Party.¹⁸⁵ Just a few months later the SKOJ adopted the Communist Party's program as its own and had officially joined the Communist Youth International, thus clearly and unambiguously aligning itself with the KPJ.¹⁸⁶

Following the December 1920 ban on Communist activity, the SKOJ went underground together with its parent party. The following decade and a half were marked by heavy-handed state repression, which culminated after the 1929 proclamation of the royal dictatorship in Yugoslavia; the badly timed call to arms by the KPJ and SKOJ resulted in their almost complete annihilation by the royal authorities, from which they did not recover until the late 1930s. In 1934 the SKOJ had around 400 members in Croatia, but the official acceptance of the “popular

¹⁸⁵The founding congress of the KPJ was held in Belgrade in mid-April 1919. The newly-formed party was initially called the Socialist Workers' Party of Yugoslavia (communist), or SRPJ(k) for short. The KPJ name was adopted at the 1920 Vukovar congress, following a split with the party's right-wing and center.

¹⁸⁶Tatjana Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma: mladi Hrvatske 1945.-1954.* (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2017), 26.

front” strategy by the Comintern and the KPJ meant that it soon experienced rapid growth: by January 1941 the SKOJ in Croatia numbered around 11.000 members, mostly ethnic Croats from urban areas.¹⁸⁷

The beginning of the war in Yugoslavia in April 1941 brought further changes to the structure and activity of KPJ-aligned youth organizations. The SKOJ continued to grow throughout the war (barring a short period of decline in mid-1941, due to mass arrests in urban centers), and by 1944 its membership reached approximately 40.000 people in Croatia alone.¹⁸⁸ The SKOJ remained a distinctly Communist political organization, though, and the practical needs of the war necessitated the creation of an even wider mass organization of resistance-minded youth. To this end, the Communist Party of Croatia established the League of the Young Generation (*Savez mlade generacije*, SMG) sometime in late 1941, whose membership numbered in the tens of thousands by winter 1942.¹⁸⁹

Antifascist youth organizations were further consolidated with the formation of the United League of Antifascist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Ujedinjeni savez antifašističke omladine Jugoslavije*, USAOJ), whose founding congress was held in December 1942 – mere weeks after the establishment of the Partisan proto-government, the AVNOJ.¹⁹⁰ Just like the AVNOJ itself, the USAOJ was also formed along a federal structure; its Croatian branch being the United League of Antifascist Youth of Croatia (*Ujedinjeni savez antifašističke omladine Hrvatske*, USAOH), which subsumed the SMG. By 1944, the USAOH numbered around 50.000 members.¹⁹¹ Following the same trend as the KPH, the USAOH now recruited a disproportionate number of Croatian Serbs – a trend the Party will try to rectify in the post-war period.

¹⁸⁷Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 28-30.

¹⁸⁸Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 34.

¹⁸⁹Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 32.

¹⁹⁰Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 33.

¹⁹¹Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 34.

As Yugoslavia entered the period of post-war reconstruction and revolutionary transformation under the aegis of the Communist Party, the youth organizations duly complied. In 1946, the USAOJ and the USAOH were renamed the People's Youth of Yugoslavia and Croatia (*Narodna omladina Jugoslavije/Hrvatske*, NOJ/NOH), respectively, and continued to lose their autonomy in relation to the KPJ/KPH. The culmination of this process came in December 1948, when the SKOJ was officially integrated with the NOJ, thus ending its 29-year existence as a separate youth organization.¹⁹²

Youth organizations had many stated political and social goals – all of which closely followed the Party line – but the one that remained a constant throughout all the twists and turns of KPJ policy was the promotion of inter-ethnic fraternity. Already in November 1941 the first issue of *Omladinska borba*, the wartime newspaper of the SKOJ, listed “the brotherhood of the youth of all Yugoslav peoples” as the main guarantee of victory.¹⁹³ The same issue also reported that “[Croat youths] are taking part in the defense of their fraternal Serb people” in Slavonia, Lika, and Kordun – an important, if at the time somewhat exaggerated propaganda point for the mostly Serb readership of the newspaper.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, the resolution of the 1st Conference of the USAOH, held in June 1943, reconfirmed the crucial importance of the “unity and brotherhood of the Croat and Serb youth” in waging the war of resistance.¹⁹⁵

Apart from promoting the “brotherhood in arms” (*oružano bratstvo*) of Serb and Croat youth, the Communist-led youth organizations also promoted fraternal relations through peaceful means – more often than not by using schools as recruitment centers for various extracurricular activities. These activities included literacy campaigns (conducted in

¹⁹²Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 79.

¹⁹³“Mlada generacija u oslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije” [“The young generation in the war of liberation of the peoples of Yugoslavia”] in *Omladinska borba: organ Saveza komunističke omladine Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Komisija za istorijat omladinskog pokreta CK Narodne omladine Jugoslavije, 1949), 8.

¹⁹⁴“Hrvatska omladina ustaje protiv svojih tlačitelja” [“Croatian youth rises against its oppressors”] in *Omladinska borba*, 12.

¹⁹⁵“1. konferencija Ujedinjenog saveza antifašističke omladine Hrvatske” [“The 1st Conference of the United League of Antifascist Youth of Croatia”], in *Omladinska borba*, 130.

coordination with other People's Front-affiliated organizations), political discussion groups (*kružoci*), as well as rallies and lectures on the occasions of important state holidays, such as International Women's Day (March 8), Labor Day (May 1), Uprising Day (July 27 in Croatia),¹⁹⁶ Republic Day (November 29)¹⁹⁷, etc. Most notably, the SKOJ, USAOJ, and later the NOJ organized youth labor brigades (*omladinske radne brigade*) to work on (re)construction projects; both locally, and as part of the First Five-Year Plan, launched in 1947. Although the primary reason for the formation of labor brigades was economic – as their labor was generally voluntary and thus unpaid – they also served an important ideological function in the process of strengthening “brotherhood and unity” as places of encounter between young laborers from different Yugoslav republics and ethnic groups.¹⁹⁸

These activities were not unopposed, however. Small groups of anti-communist and nationalist youths kept popping up throughout post-war Yugoslavia, and just as the SKOJ/USAOJ/NOJ, they were often based in and around high schools. Another – but closely related – enabler of anti-communist youth activity was the Catholic Church. The Church often organized extracurricular activities ranging from religious processions to music and typing classes, which often served as meeting points for disaffected youths. Moreover, local priests sometimes banned people from participating in Church-organized events if they previously took part in NOJ activities, or had joined labor brigades.¹⁹⁹ By doing so, the Church was inadvertently blocking Party-led efforts to promote inter-ethnic fraternity; especially as Croats and Serbs nominally belonged to different faiths, and thus rarely socialized at events organized

¹⁹⁶July 27 was designated as “Day of the Uprising of the People of Croatia,” in honor of the July 27, 1941 uprising in Srb. Each Yugoslav republic had its own “uprising day.”

¹⁹⁷In honor of the second congress of the AVNOJ held on November 29, 1943, during which Yugoslavia was declared a federal republic.

¹⁹⁸Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 327. It might be interesting to note that one of the largest infrastructure projects of the First Five-Year Plan – the Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade highway – was officially named the “Brotherhood and Unity Highway.” Thousands of Yugoslav youths took part in the construction of the highway as members of youth labor brigades, and it remains ingrained in the collective memory of post-war generations.

¹⁹⁹Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 140.

by the Catholic or Serbian Orthodox churches. As such, religious influence presented a problem that had to be dealt with – one way or another.

Even though they were active throughout society, youth organizations in early socialist Croatia – either legal, illegal, or somewhere in between – still based most of their activities in high schools, dormitories, and other parts of the formal education system. The interplay between youth organizations, school administrations, Party and state structures, and local communities on the level of individual schools will be described in depth in the following chapter.

Ch. 3: The Classroom

Whatever plans the Yugoslav federal and Croatian republican governments might have had to promote Croat-Serb fraternity and national equality through the education system, they seldom managed to implement those plans according to their wishes. Difficult obstacles kept popping up at all levels: from the disinterest of certain government employees and Party members (as mentioned at the end of Chapter 1), to the sometimes open hostility of local communities and non-governmental actors, which we have covered in Chapter 2. All of these different and often mutually opposing influences ultimately came together in classrooms throughout Croatia, where the Communist Party's plans were put to the test. The following chapter will continue where the two previous chapters left off, and analyze the successes, failures, and the overall reception of Communist nationality policy in Croatian schools – among the teachers, school administration, and most importantly, among the first post-war generations of Croatian students.

Of course, once we get down to the level of individual schools, the amount of available sources quickly becomes overwhelming; the records of most Croatian schools from the 1940s and 1950s are generally well-preserved in various regional archives, and they amount to thousands upon thousands of pages of written documents. In order to be able to make sense of the information without losing the ability to establish patterns, I have mainly decided to concentrate on three Croatian schools: the State Men's Gymnasium in Karlovac (*Državna muška realna gimnazija Karlovac*), the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium (*Gimnazija Nova Gradiška*), and the Knin Gymnasium (*Gimnazija Knin*). These three schools were chosen for several reasons, most important of which is their geographic location: Karlovac is located in Central Croatia, some 50 kilometers south of Zagreb, bordering the regions of Kordun and Banija; Nova Gradiška is located in Slavonia, around 150 kilometers east of Zagreb; finally,

Knin is located in Southern Croatia, in the northern part of the Dalmatian Hinterland (*Dalmatinska zagora*).

Secondly, there was the question of demographics: 1940s Croatia as a whole was relatively ethnically heterogeneous, but this heterogeneity was very region-specific. The northwest of the country, for instance, had been ethnically homogeneous for centuries, with a clear Croat ethnic majority. Central and Eastern Croatia were much more ethnically diverse, with large non-Croat populations; mostly Serbs, but also Hungarians, Germans, Czechs, etc. As one of the goals of this thesis was to analyze the impact of the Communist education system on inter-ethnic (specifically Croat-Serb) relations, it was necessary to find schools in ethnically mixed regions. Although both Karlovac and Nova Gradiška were (and are) towns with clear Croat ethnic majorities (79,6% and 74% per the 1948 census, respectively),²⁰⁰ they also served as gravitational centers of wider, rural regions with significantly larger ethnic Serb populations: Kordun and Banija for Karlovac, Posavina and Western Slavonia for Nova Gradiška. Before 1941 the town of Knin also had a Croat ethnic majority; due to wartime events and post-war immigration from rural areas, however, the town soon became majority Serb. On the other hand, the wider Knin *srez*²⁰¹ had a Serb demographic majority since before World War Two, with Serbs making up 77,5% of its population in 1948.²⁰²

Finally, recent political history also played a role. In most parts of modern-day Croatia, Serbs tended to support the Communist-led Partisan resistance movement. Kordun and Banija especially were some of the Partisans' strongest support bases: in these regions the war between the Partisans and the NDH government mostly followed ethnic lines, with Serbs joining the

²⁰⁰ "Stalno stanovništvo po narodnosti, 1948," Republički zavod za statistiku Srbije, May 30, 2024, <https://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/G1948/pdf/G19484001.pdf>.

²⁰¹ *Srez* was an administrative unit in post-war Yugoslavia, larger than a *kotar*, but smaller than an *okrug*. In this thesis I have generally translated *kotar* as "municipality," as the *općina* (which is usually translated as "municipality") were abolished soon after the war, and only reintroduced in the 1950s. I translated *okrug* as "county" and *oblast* as "region." The territorial-administrative units of Croatia and Yugoslavia underwent several reforms in the 1940s and 1950s.

²⁰² "Stalno stanovništvo po narodnosti, 1948."

resistance, and Croats aligning themselves more with the NDH, or at the very least remaining passive. The situation in Slavonia was complex and multifaceted, with local ethnic Croats becoming the majority of new Partisan volunteers by mid-1944.²⁰³ The Knin region (*Kninska krajina*) was the odd one out: the Serb-nationalist, royalist *Četnik* movement gained the upper hand in Knin and its environs by late 1941, and soon joined the Axis forces (including the NDH army) in their fight against the Communist Partisans, before finally being dislodged from Knin by a Partisan offensive in late 1944. Knin thus represented an interesting anomaly, where the usual links between ethnic Serbs and the Communist Party did not exist in the same measure as in Kordun, Banija, or Slavonia.

Choosing these three specific examples came with some limitations, though, which should be acknowledged. Most importantly, all of the aforementioned schools were high schools – meaning that the experiences of elementary school pupils and teachers could not be covered in this part of the thesis. Furthermore, the schools in question were all gymnasiums, ie. secondary schools that generally served as an intermediary step between primary and higher (university-level) education. Thus, various vocational schools will also have to be omitted.

Still, the choice of gymnasium-type high schools was not accidental. For most of the observed period these schools operated on an eight-year basis (following four years of mandatory elementary school education), giving us more time to observe possible changes within the same generation of students; in comparison, vocational schools of the period only lasted two to three years. The high school student body was also older, and thus more politically mature – meaning that more political activity was to be expected. Finally, the fact that high school education was not mandatory in post-war Yugoslavia meant that the school and government authorities had more available resources for dealing with possible disruptive or dissident activity.

²⁰³See for instance: “During the month of July alone, 1393 new fighters applied to join [the Partisans in Slavonia]. (...) 70% of all new applicants are Croats.” HR-HDA-291. MPRO, 5.2.1., box no. 23. Dopis (503/33) Prosvjetnog odjela Oblasnog NOO-a za Slavoniju ZAVNOH-u (August 8, 1944).

Additionally, it should be noted that all three of the listed gymnasiums only came under Communist control during the 1944/45 academic year. These schools were never “Partisan schools” in a stricter sense – they were never under the jurisdiction of the ZAVNOH Department of Education, and they operated under the supervision of the NDH authorities throughout the war. The following accounts will thus only cover the post-war period: an unfortunate situation, but one that can hardly be corrected due to the lack of archival records from wartime high schools run by ZAVNOH.

All in all, the experiences of students and teachers in the Karlovac, Nova Gradiška, and Knin gymnasiums should provide us with valuable insight into the practical implementation of the policies of fraternity and national equality, their acceptance among the Croat and Serb youth, but also the possible sources of discontent and disunity among students of different ethnic affiliations. The diversity of the chosen locations should prevent “regional myopia,” and allow us to notice both republic-level patterns, as well as possible regional differences.

“Cleansing our schools”

The final liberation of Croatia by Partisan forces in spring 1945 brought the entirety of the Croatian education system under the control of the Communist-led Ministry of Education of Federal Croatia (since 1946, the People’s Republic of Croatia). As we have already established in Chapter 1, this takeover was nothing but peaceful. Before the new curriculum – with its emphasis on “brotherhood and unity” and national equality of Serbs and Croats – could be introduced in earnest, the schools had to be purged of potential enemies of the new order. Most teachers stayed at their posts, but some fled their schools before the new Communist authorities could even lay their hands on them: in the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium, for instance, five teachers (including the gymnasium’s wartime principal, Đuro Jakobčić) fled west with the retreating NDH army in April 1945. Their ultimate destiny could not be ascertained from school records, nor from the archival records left by the Communist-led MPRO. What is certain,

however, is that by mid-June Jakobčić was officially replaced as principal of the gymnasium by one of the professors who remained in Nova Gradiška.²⁰⁴

Many teachers who spent the period between 1941 and 1945 in schools run by the NDH government were viewed with suspicion by the Communist authorities, as well as by their colleagues who joined the resistance movement during the war. Still, apart from the teachers who actively joined the retreating Axis forces in April/May 1945, it was hard to find evidence of any large scale purges of school personnel in any of the consulted archival records. This was perhaps to be expected in the case of high school professors, who were – unlike their elementary school counterparts – usually university-educated, and thus an extremely scarce resource in post-1945 Croatia. To illustrate this point, we could go back to the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium: around mid-June 1945 there were only 16 active professors in the entire (eight-year) school, and many mandatory subjects were not being taught to the officially prescribed extent due to lack of personnel.²⁰⁵ In such a situation neither the MPRO, nor the local authorities could afford losing a large number of professional educators to political purges. As we shall see later, the chronic lack of educated school cadre allowed for the continued employment of many teachers who passively – or even actively – obstructed many Communist education policies in Croatian high schools.

In any case, if teachers had it rough in the post-war Croatian education system, it could easily be argued that students had it even worse. While the lack of educated cadres prevented a massive purge of teachers, students were, if anything, overabundant. Mandatory education in 1945 consisted of only four years of elementary school, after which a student could enroll into a vocational school (of varying length), or an eight-year high school (gymnasium) program. Mandatory education was expanded to seven years in 1946/47, and finally to eight years in 1950,²⁰⁶ although it took nearly another decade to fully implement those reforms. However, the

²⁰⁴HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book no. 1. *Spomenica gimnazije, 1924.-1950.* (1944/45).

²⁰⁵HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book no. 1. *Spomenica gimnazije, 1924.-1950.* (1944/45).

²⁰⁶Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 209.

fact that high school education was not mandatory allowed the state to crack down on any form of real or imagined dissident activity among the student body without receiving virtually any pushback.

Massive purges of high school students began in mid-1945, and continued well into 1946. The very first issue of *Srednjoškolic*, the main paper of the People's High School Youth (*Narodna srednjoškolska omladina*, NSO),²⁰⁷ reported on purges in twelve Zagreb high schools, which aimed to “remove from its ranks the remnants of the *Ustaša*, clerical fascists, and other enemies.” School bureaucracies were criticized for being too slow in expelling those accused of enemy activity, but youth organizations were also warned not to be too harsh towards the younger generations of students.²⁰⁸

The April 1946 issue of *Srednjoškolic* published an article on the recommended expulsion of seventeen “incorrigible Fascists” from the 1st (Men's) Gymnasium in the Central Croatian town of Karlovac – the students in question were supposedly well-known for harassing Communist sympathizers in the final years of the war.²⁰⁹ The MPRO was duly informed of the situation in Karlovac, and given a detailed report on the seventeen students: all except one were Croats, and accused of *Ustaša* sympathies. One 4th grade student was explicitly accused of “spreading chauvinistic hatred by speaking badly of Serbs,” while one of his 5th grade colleagues was called out for making antisemitic remarks. The one non-*Ustaša* student was accused of joining a *Četnik* organization during the war.²¹⁰

In Knin the situation was similar, but with an expected ethnic and political twist given the *Četnik* allegiances of many of its inhabitants. At a school conference held in the Knin Gymnasium in March 1946, NSO activists demanded the expulsion of five students – three

²⁰⁷The People's High School Youth (NSO); the high school component of USAOJ/NOJ, founded in 1946.

²⁰⁸Djuka Julius, “Srednjoškolic uklanjaju iz svojih redova nepopravljive fašističke elemente” [“High school students are eliminating incorrigible fascist elements from their ranks”], *Srednjoškolic*, March 15, 1946.

²⁰⁹“Očistili smo našu školu od nepopravljivih fašista” [“We cleansed our school of incorrigible fascists”], *Srednjoškolic*, April 1, 1946.

²¹⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Prijedlog za isključenje učenika donesen na 3. konferenciji NSO 1. muške realne gimnazije u Karlovcu (February 22, 1946).

Serbs and two Croats – for alleged “enemy activity.” All of them were accused of providing support to anti-communist guerrillas: the Serbs to *Četnik* stragglers, and the two Croats to the *Križari*. The NSO leadership based these accusations on information given to them by the local branch of the Yugoslav secret police (OZNA), and the conference concluded with “the vast majority of attending students” approving the recommendation to expel the accused five.²¹¹

The documents provided by the OZNA were included in the report sent by the school administration to the MPRO in Zagreb, and presented a somewhat more complex picture of the events leading up to the aforementioned purge. The two expelled Croat students – the sisters Lidija and Danira Sekanini – were interrogated by the OZNA sometime in early 1946. During her interrogation, Lidija was asked about the time when the youth of the (Serb-majority) village of Vrbnik was reforesting a plot of land near her family home. Lidija described how many of the youths started yelling obscenities at her visiting uncle – a Jesuit priest – and kept calling her entire family “*Ustašas*,” to which, she insisted, none of the household members responded.²¹²

At first glance, it might seem possible that the purge of the Sekanina sisters had been the result of barely disguised ethnic conflict: the Serb youth of Vrbnik deciding to continue their maltreatment of an ethnically Croat family through official channels. However, at least according to later reports by the Yugoslav secret police, the Sekanina family was deeply involved with the *Ustaše* movement during the war, and Lidija and Danira’s mother was executed for (alleged) collaboration in December 1944.²¹³ As always in post-war Croatia, the ethnic and the political were closely intertwined.

Another element that could have theoretically contributed to the scale of high school purges among Croatian students were pre-war grudges, and the revenge of the surviving

²¹¹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Prijepis dopisa NSO-a Knin nastavničkom zboru gimnazije u Kninu (March 1946).

²¹²HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Prijepis zapisnika nastavka ispitivanja Sekanina Lidije, učenice VII. pomoćnog razreda gimnazije u Kninu (April 4, 1946).

²¹³HR-HDA-1561. SDS RSUP SRH. Sekanini Danira, 4.

militants of the pre-war and wartime Communist Youth movement. Although Croatian high schools used to be hot spots of Communist activity in the 1930s and in the first years of World War Two, by 1945 the vast majority of teenage militants had either joined the Partisans or died in Axis concentration camps. To once again use Nova Gradiška as an example: according to post-war Yugoslav literature, there were 77 SKOJ members in the town of Nova Gradiška before April 1941; nearly 40 of them were dead by May 1945.²¹⁴ The town gymnasium was the epicenter of pre-war Communist Youth activity in Nova Gradiška; however, it also served as a recruitment base for local Croat nationalists. The *skojevci* and the *frankovci*²¹⁵ became bitter enemies on the corridors of the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium, and their pre-war feuds spilled over onto the Yugoslav battlegrounds of World War Two. Ethnicity also played a role in this long-lasting conflict, as most members of the SKOJ in Nova Gradiška were ethnic Serbs.²¹⁶

Many members of the SKOJ fantasized about getting even after the war. As SKOJ member and political commissar of the Yugoslav Partisan 12th Slavonian Division, Josip Krajačić-Prika, was reported as saying to his comrade and pre-war schoolmate, Ranko Zec:

“You should know, Ranko, those *frankovci*, those *Ustaše*, none of them will remain, none of them will stay alive after the liberation... One of us has to cleanse Nova Gradiška. We know them best.”²¹⁷

Josip Krajačić himself was an ethnic Croat, and the younger brother of future Croatian secret police chief Ivan Krajačić-Stevo. Still, most of the surviving members of the pre-war SKOJ in the Nova Gradiška region were ethnic Serbs, so any post-war retribution conducted by them would have invariably been seen by the local Croat population as having an ethnic component to it. Their very vocal calls for revenge notwithstanding, however, it remains unknown whether the pre-war *skojevci* actually took part in post-war purges in the Nova

²¹⁴Antun Duhaček, *SKOJ u novogradiškoj gimnaziji i području njenog djelovanja* (Nova Gradiška: Narodno sveučilište M. A. Reljković, 1985), 24.

²¹⁵*Frankovci* – a somewhat derogatory name for Croat nationalists of the interwar period, named so after Josip Frank (1844-1911), one of the ideological forefathers of the *Ustaše*.

²¹⁶Duhaček, *SKOJ u novogradiškoj gimnaziji*, 259.

²¹⁷Duhaček, *SKOJ u novogradiškoj gimnaziji*, 260.

Gradiška gymnasium. No evidence to that effect came up during the research I have conducted in the Croatian State Archives, nor in the local archives in Nova Gradiška. Nevertheless, such vengeful emotions most certainly did not help pacify the post-war atmosphere in Croatian high schools.

The wave of purges finally hit Nova Gradiška in March 1946.²¹⁸ Eight students were accused by the NSO of being “clero-fascists and chauvinists,” and promptly expelled from the ranks of all youth organizations in the gymnasium. NSO militants recommended the eight students to the school administration for expulsion, after which they were interrogated by the principal of the gymnasium, Stjepan Lukić, and several other professors. The accusations themselves were interesting, and worth mentioning. One of the students allegedly remarked that “we do not need Cyrillic” in the gymnasium curriculum (reintroduced after the fall of the NDH), and referred to Serbs as “guests” in Croatia – admitting to the latter himself during the questioning.²¹⁹ Another student wrote an article for the school newspaper in which he argued that the Croat people “should have their own free and independent state.”²²⁰ Two students were accused of publicly expressing their admiration for their fathers, who were members of the *Ustaša* movement.²²¹ Interestingly, one of the accused students went on the offensive, in turn accusing the president of the school NSO of having been a supporter of the *Ustaša* during the war; he also said that he believed “the Serbs” denounced him for drawing a Croatian coat-of-arms on a picture frame.²²² Ultimately, the teachers’ council (*nastavnički zbor* or *nastavničko*

²¹⁸Even though school records show that a significant number of students left the gymnasium between February and April 1945, it seems impossible to definitively conclude whether these students retreated with the army and government of the NDH, or if they left school for unrelated reasons. Whatever the case, these students were not victims of any sort of Communist-led purge. HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, books 86-99. *Priručni imenici* (1944/45).

²¹⁹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika VI.b razreda Šimunović Ivana povodom njegovog isključenja iz NSO-a i USAOH-a (March 6, 1946).

²²⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika VI.b razreda Marenčić Josipa povodom isključenja iz NSO-a (March 7, 1946).

²²¹HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika IV.b Pavičić Zvonimira povodom isključenja iz NSO-a (March 7, 1946). Also: HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika VI.b razreda Ferenčina Danijela povodom zahtjeva NSO-a da se imenovani kao štetan ukloni sa ove škole na 4 godine (March, 1946).

²²²HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika VI.a razreda Marenčić Ljubomira povodom isključenja iz NSO-e i USAOH-a i zahtjeva da se isti udalji iz gimnazije (March 6, 1946).

vijeće) suspended all except one of the accused students from the school for a period of one or more years.²²³

It is important to emphasize that the expulsions of students in Knin, Karlovac, and Nova Gradiška were all initiated by the school chapters of the NSO, and only afterwards confirmed or rejected by the administrations of their respective schools. This process of expulsion was informally approved by the KPH Politburo, and proceeded unabated for the duration of the 1945/46 academic year.²²⁴ The school administrations did not simply rubber-stamp NSO decisions, though: in the Karlovac case, seven of the students recommended for expulsion by the NSO were exonerated by the teachers' council. The one student specifically accused of making chauvinist remarks against Serbs did not appear before the council, so his case was left open – meaning that the administration was open to rectifying decisions made by the NSO, and often served as a counterbalance to the radicalism of high school militants.²²⁵

All in all, the high school purges of 1944-1946 were widespread, and apparently grassroots phenomena initiated by the Communist-led NSO. Their targets were mostly students accused of *Ustaše* or *Četnik* sympathies during the war, but also those accused of spreading chauvinistic rhetoric, no matter their prior political engagement. Whether or not many of the accusations were led by ulterior motives (as it might have been the case with the president of the Nova Gradiška NSO), it seems undeniable that Croatian high schools – and especially the Communist-led youth organizations – took the ideology of inter-ethnic fraternity to heart: open expressions of ethnic nationalism were simply not tolerated in the immediate post-war years.

That does not mean that ethnic tensions entirely subsided in later years, nor that the Communist authorities were any less interested in cracking down on nationalist individuals and groups in Croatian schools – the only thing that changed was the *modus operandi*. When a

²²³HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Dopis ravnatelja Gimnazije Nova Gradiška Prosvjetnom odjelu Okružnog NO-a u Slavonskom Brodu povodom isključenja učenika zbog protunarodnog rada (March 7, 1946).

²²⁴Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 152.

²²⁵HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Izvod iz zapisnika izvanredne sjednice Nastavničkog zbora 1. gimnazije (muške) u Karlovcu održane 8. lipnja 1946. (June 8, 1946), 8-9.

group of Croat youths attempted to assassinate Stjepan Lukić – the principal of the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium – in September 1948, their case was immediately taken over by the Yugoslav secret police. The NSO/NOJ had already dealt with this group of young nationalists in 1946, when they demanded their expulsion for spreading chauvinistic slogans aimed at their Serb colleagues.²²⁶ They were temporarily expelled, but returned back – apparently without having any sort of change of heart. The Yugoslav secret police was no NSO, however: Mirko Tomlinović, the ringleader of the group, soon got sentenced to 12 years imprisonment.²²⁷ Other members of Tomlinović's informal group were also sentenced to several years in prison.²²⁸ Both sides seemed to be losing patience – the nationalist youth was getting more organized and violent, while the state decided to take off its proverbial gloves in the form of peer-organized purges.

Elements of national equality

Whatever problems might have plagued Croatian schools after 1945, the KPH and the republican Ministry of Education took their policies of inter-ethnic fraternity and national equality seriously. The first sign of change was noticeable in the renewed use of ethnic categories in school documents. The “Serb” ethnic category was banned from official documents by the NDH government in 1941, and replaced with the essentially religious category of “Greek Easterner” (*grko-istočnjak*) in order to further deny the Serbs of Croatia any form of national subjectivity.²²⁹ The reintroduction of ethnic categories by the Croatian Communists was not so much a sign of support for Serb national equality as such, as it was the logical consequence of the “ethnicized” way of thinking that permeated Marxist-Leninist

²²⁶HR-HDA-1561. SDS RSUP SRH. Tomlinović Mirko, 10c-11c.

²²⁷HR-HDA-1561. SDS RSUP SRH. Tomlinović Mirko, 21.

²²⁸HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book 4. *Zapisnik sjednice nastavnčkog vijeća* (December 27, 1950).

²²⁹Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, 69.

ideology in general. Removing references to religion was an added bonus in the period leading up to wide-ranging anti-clerical and anti-religious campaigns.

Ethnic categories started being reintroduced to Croatian school documents in the 1945/46 academic year. However, even this seemingly small change took some time to take root. The 1945/46 school directories of both the Nova Gradiška and Karlovac gymnasiums still made use of the old, NDH-era religious classification, writing students down as “Roman Catholic,” “Orthodox,” “Greek Catholic,” etc. In Nova Gradiška this seemed to be the norm in all classes,²³⁰ while some teachers from Karlovac already switched to using ethnic categories.²³¹ By the 1946/47 academic year school directories in the Karlovac gymnasium used ethnic categories exclusively.²³² Interestingly, following 1945/46 the surviving directories from Nova Gradiška seemed to avoid mentioning the students’ ethnic or religious affiliation altogether.²³³

The education programs whose contents we have covered in Chapter 1 started being implemented in Croatian schools as soon as the war had ended. In stark contrast to the vehemently Croat-nationalist programs dictated by the *Ustaše* government, the programs published by the KPH-led Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of Croatia included many references to non-Croat Yugoslav ethnic groups, especially in history, geography, and “Croatian or Serbian” language classes. As we have already mentioned in the previous chapters, the new curriculum was supposed to promote feelings of “brotherhood and unity” among the peoples of Yugoslavia; or in the Croatian case, specifically among the Croats and Serbs.

Available archival records and secondary literature prove that students in post-war Croatian high schools learned quite extensively about the history and culture of non-Croat

²³⁰HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, books 95-99. *Priručni imenici (1945/46)*. Not all classes have surviving directories.

²³¹HR-DAKA-354. Prva (muška) realna gimnazija u Karlovcu, books 8 and 9. *Školski imenici (1945/46)*.

²³²HR-DAKA-354. Prva (muška) realna gimnazija u Karlovcu, book 10. *Školski imenik (1946/47)*.

²³³HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, books 102-116. *Priručni imenici (1946/47-1952/53)*. Not all classes have surviving directories.

Yugoslav nationalities. This was the case both in gymnasiums and in vocational schools: the educational plan and program of the Industrial School for Radio Technicians in Zagreb from the mid-1940s, for instance, was pretty much a carbon copy of the 1945/46 educational plan for Croatian gymnasiums, with only a few small changes in the literary studies curriculum.²³⁴

However, teaching Serbian literature was sometimes seen as a provocation by more nationalist-minded Croat students. Ivan Udovičić, one of the founders of the Croatian National Movement (*Hrvatski narodni pokret*), an illegal youth organization that operated in mid-1950s Slavonia, criticized the alleged Serb-centrism of “Croatian or Serbian” language classes as taught by his (ethnically Serb) professor in the Slavonski Brod gymnasium. According to Udovičić, Serb national literature was given much more space than Croatian or any other Yugoslav national literature, ethnically Serb historical figures such as the 19th century philologist and Serbian nationalist ideologue Vuk Stefanović Karadžić²³⁵ were constantly praised, and three out of the four classroom walls were decorated with images of Serb poets and writers – the fourth being decorated with a photograph of Josip Broz Tito. Ultimately, several Croat nationalist-inclined students (including Udovičić) decided to tear down and destroy the images.²³⁶

Udovičić saw his professor as being “consciously or unconsciously in the service of Greater Serbian (*velikosrpska*) ideology; and perhaps even instructed to conduct her work in that way” by, it is implied, the Yugoslav Communist authorities. Whether Udovičić’s claim that his professor only mentioned Croatian literature “here and there” is true or not, it seems clear that high school teachers were given a certain amount of autonomy in defining their curricula.²³⁷ Sometimes, apparently, the personal preferences of teachers erred to the side of

²³⁴ HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 8. Plan i program općeobrazovnih predmeta u Industrijskoj školi za radiotehničare (1946?).

²³⁵ Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864); philologist and folklorist, considered to be the “father” of the modern Serbian language, which he helped standardize.

²³⁶ Udovičić, et. al, *Hrvatski nacionalni pokret* (Koprivnica: Nakladna kuća dr. Feletar, 1997), 15-16.

²³⁷ Udovičić, et. al, *Hrvatski nacionalni pokret*, 16.

nationalism – or were at least perceived as such by some among the student body. The fact that such alleged “nationalist deviations” were often not penalized by the mid-1950s could have also been related to the fact that post-1948 Yugoslav education reforms took a more “hands-off” approach when it came to the practical implementation of education plans and programs, giving more freedom of action to individual teachers.²³⁸

“Croatian or Serbian” classes were not only supposed to instill a sense of inter-ethnic fraternity, but were also seen as a means of promoting the practical aspects of Croat and Serb national equality in Croatia, as we have discussed back in Chapter 1. One of these aspects was the teaching of the Cyrillic script, previously banned by the government of the NDH. The Cyrillic and Latin scripts were officially considered equal in early post-war Croatia, and Serb-majority elementary and high schools were supposed to use the Cyrillic script as the main script of instruction.²³⁹ However, Cyrillic was taught in all schools to some extent, no matter their ethnic structure. That this was indeed the case could be ascertained from the interrogation records of youths accused of “Croat chauvinism” by the NSO during the period of high school purges in 1945 and 1946, many of whom were angered specifically by having to learn the Cyrillic script.²⁴⁰

The Cyrillic script kept being taught in Croatian schools until the dissolution of Yugoslavia, but its actual prevalence, both in education and in general society, slowly subsided compared to the mid- to late 1940s. The slow retreat of Cyrillic – as the most visible element of Serb national equality in Croatia – was already noticed by the Žigić-Brkić-Opačić group in 1950, and remained somewhat of a sore spot of Serb-Croat relations throughout the existence of socialist Yugoslavia. The increasing prevalence of the Latin script in Croatia was seen by

²³⁸Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji*, 111.

²³⁹See for instance: *Nastavni plan i program za gimnazije i klasične gimnazije za školsku godinu 1945.-1946*, 7.

²⁴⁰HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika VI.b razreda Marenić Josipa povodom isključenja iz NSO-a (March 7, 1946). Also: HR-HDA-291. MPRO, box no. 34. Zapisnik o saslušanju učenika V.b razreda Tomlinović Mirka povodom isključenja iz NSO-a i zahtjeva da se isključi iz gimnazije (March 6, 1946).

some Serb nationalist historians as proof of the Croat nationalist character of the KPH/SKH from the 1950s onward.²⁴¹ In connection to this, it should be noted that all of the consulted archival material from the Karlovac and Nova Gradiška gymnasiums had been written exclusively using the Latin script.

The official name of the subject – “Croatian or Serbian” – was chosen in order to emphasize both the shared nature of the standard language taught in schools, as well as the equal status of the Croat and Serb nations. In practice, however, the naming remained rather inconsistent. Although school directories mostly conformed to the official naming convention (especially from 1946/47 onward),²⁴² teachers themselves often kept referring to the subject simply as “Croatian” (*hrvatski*). In fact, this did not only occur in common parlance: when deputy education minister Ivan Leko visited the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium in June 1951, he reportedly talked about issues in “Croatian language classes.”²⁴³ Similarly, the principal of the State Women’s Gymnasium in Karlovac mentioned “Croatian classes” in his 1952 written report to the Ministry of Education in Zagreb.²⁴⁴

Apparently, the official name of “Croatian or Serbian” classes became somewhat of a formality by the early 1950s. Clearly, it would have been impractical to always refer to the “Croatian or Serbian” language in everyday speech – nor was anything of the sort ever required of the general population – but the fact that even school principals and high-ranking government officials referred to it simply as “Croatian” in relatively formal settings could be telling us something about the secondary role given to the “Serbian” component of the common standard language in the NRH. Authors sympathetic to Serbian nationalism would later decry the “loss of the Serb component of the [common] language” as further proof of the

²⁴¹See for instance: Diklić, *Srpsko pitanje u Hrvatskoj*, 338.

²⁴²“Croatian” (*hrvatski*) still occurred in some school directories in 1945/46; for instance, in several directories of the State Women’s Gymnasium in Karlovac. HR-DAKA-211. Državna ženska realna gimnazija – Karlovac, book 8. *Školski imenik (1945/46)*.

²⁴³HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book 4. *Zapisnik sjednice nastavnog vijeća* (June 6, 1951).

²⁴⁴HR-DAKA-211. Državna ženska realna gimnazija – Karlovac, box no. 8. *Izveštaj direktora DRŽG Karlovac na kraju prvog polugodišta školske godine 1951/52*. (January 23, 1952).

discriminatory policies of the KPH/SKH towards the Serb population in Croatia.²⁴⁵ However, more research into the contemporary reactions of the Serb population to the aforementioned changes would be needed before coming to any sort of definite conclusions. For what it is worth, the archival records I have consulted for this thesis showed no sign of any sort of discontent coming from students of Serb ethnicity regarding this issue.

Equal in theory, separate in practice

An important phenomenon took place in Croatian cities in the fall of 1945. Thousands of teenagers – mostly Serbs, but also Croats – who spent the last several years fighting among the Partisans now descended upon Croatian high schools, wishing to continue their abruptly interrupted education. This massive influx of new students created many problems for the Croatian high school system. Some issues were strictly logistical: new classes (and even schools) had to be formed, and accommodation had to be found for the newly arrived students. Other issues, however, erred more to the side of politics and ethnic conflict, often blurring the divide between the two.

Stanko Opačić-Ćanica, an ethnic Serb Partisan colonel and post-war Croatian government minister, succinctly explained the issue that arose in Croatian high schools following May 1945:

“While people at the front were dying in assaults, in pits, and in mountain gorges, the gymnasiums in Croatian cities never closed down, and their children were being educated to become future bureaucrats and managers.”²⁴⁶

The ZAVNOH Department of Education decided to alleviate this issue in November 1944 by creating auxiliary classes, and thus reintroducing young Partisan fighters into the

²⁴⁵Diklić, *Srpsko pitanje u Hrvatskoj*, 338.

²⁴⁶“I dok se na bojištu umire na jurišima, u jamama i planinskim klancima, u gradovima Hrvatske rade sve gimnazije i njihova djeca se školuju za buduće činovnike i upravljače.” Quoted in: Čedomir Višnjić, *Partizansko ljetovanje*, 24.

school system.²⁴⁷ Auxiliary classes were meant to be established in all high schools in the “liberated territories,” and were supposed to represent a sped-up version of regular classes, with one year of auxiliary classes covering the curriculum of two years of regular ones.

However, the creation and massive expansion of auxiliary classes following the end of the war inadvertently led to ethnic segregation in Croatian high schools. Once again, ethnicity and wartime political allegiances could hardly be untangled: given the over-representation of Serbs in the Partisan army, Serbs also became over-represented in auxiliary classes in many high schools – especially those in or near ethnically mixed regions.

The unintentional segregation of post-war schools could easily remain obscured by the way we decide to present data. For instance, although the ratio of 867 Catholics to 424 Orthodox Christians²⁴⁸ in the Karlovac Gymnasium in the 1945/46 academic year might seem about right for a high school whose gravitational area included the ethnically (and religiously) mixed regions of Kordun and Banija, the situation becomes more complicated once we go down to the level of individual classes, as we can see in Table 1 (shown on the following page).

Table 1 presents the ethnic structure of individual classes in the 1st (Men’s) Gymnasium in Karlovac, for the 1945/46 academic year. Classes written in bold and marked with “(aux)” are auxiliary classes. The difference between regular classes – most of which had single digit numbers of Orthodox (ie. mostly ethnically Serb) students – and ethnically mixed, or even predominantly Orthodox/Serb auxiliary classes should now become glaringly obvious.

²⁴⁷This decision was reiterated in: “Dopis Povjereništva prosvjete ZAVNOH-a svim oblasnim i okružnim NOO-ima o otvaranju pomoćnih razreda i tečajeva za učenike srednjih škola koji su sudjelovali u NOB-u,” March 6, 1945, in *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske 4: zbornik dokumenata*, ed. Hodimir Sirotković (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1985), 175.

²⁴⁸Some school directories during the 1945/46 academic year still used religious, instead of ethnic designations. Still, it can be taken for granted that most of the students listed as “Catholics” in Karlovac in 1945/46 would be listed as “Croats” in the following years; the same is generally true for the categories of “Orthodox Christian” and “Serb.”

Tab. 1. Religious structure of the lower grades of the 1st (Men's) Gymnasium in Karlovac in the 1945/46 school year.

<i>Class</i>	Catholics²⁴⁹	Orthodox Christians	Others
<i>I.a</i>	47	8	1
<i>I.b</i>	50	4	0
<i>I.c</i>	53	1	0
<i>I.d (aux)</i>	25	19	0
<i>I.e (aux)</i>	33	14	0
<i>I.f (aux)</i>	13	54	0
<i>I.g (aux)</i>	8	52	0
<i>II.a</i>	42	2	0
<i>II.b</i>	35	7	0
<i>II.c</i>	42	1	0
<i>II.d (aux)</i>	14	31	0
<i>II.e (aux)</i>	30	19	1
<i>II.f (aux)</i>	11	35	0
<i>III.a</i>	?	?	?
<i>III.b</i>	42	3	0
<i>III.c</i>	44	0	0
<i>III.d (aux)</i>	12	31	0
<i>III.d (2) (aux)</i>	13	51	0
<i>IV.a</i>	33	5	1
<i>IV.b</i>	36	1	1
<i>IV.c</i>	38	0	0
<i>IV.d (aux)</i>	9	45	0
<i>IV.d (2) (aux)</i>	6	10	0

Source: HR-DAKA-354. Prva (muška) realna gimnazija u Karlovcu, books 8 and 9. *School directory (1945/46)*.

The situation in the “higher” (5th – 8th) classes of the Karlovac gymnasium, where no auxiliary classes were established, still reflected the ethnic composition the high school had during the NDH era, as seen in Table 2:

²⁴⁹Mostly Roman Catholics, but including a small number of Greek Catholics from the Žumberak region.

Tab. 2. Religious structure of the higher grades of the 1st (Men's) Gymnasium in Karlovac (1945/46).

<i>Class</i>	Catholics	Orthodox Christians	Others
<i>V.a</i>	48	9	0
<i>V.b</i>	44	11	0
<i>VI.a</i>	25	2	1
<i>VI.b</i>	27	4	0
<i>VII.a</i>	26	1	0
<i>VII.b</i>	25	2	0
<i>VIII.</i>	36	2	0

Source: HR-DAKA-354. Prva (muška) realna gimnazija u Karlovcu, books 8 and 9. *Školski imenici (1945/46)*.

The two tables clearly show that in the academic year 1945/46 Serb and Croat high school students in Karlovac only shared the *ad hoc* created auxiliary classes, while regular classes – even those formed in September 1945 – remained predominantly Catholic/Croat. This state of affairs would continue at least until the 1947/48 academic year, when auxiliary classes seemed to have disappeared from the record in the Karlovac gymnasium, and the ethnic structure of regular classes started mirroring that of the wider Karlovac region.²⁵⁰

A similar phenomenon to the one described above could have been noticed in the higher grades of the Nova Gradiška gymnasium during the first post-war academic year:

Tab. 3. Religious structure of the higher grades of the Nova Gradiška gymnasium (1945/46).²⁵¹

<i>Grade</i>	Roman Catholics	Orthodox Christians	Greek Catholics	Others
<i>V.c</i>	17	5	0	1
<i>VI.c</i>	22	2	0	0
<i>VII.b</i>	17	6	0	3
<i>VII.a</i>	25	1	1	0
<i>VIII.a</i>	24	2	0	0

Source: HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, books 95-99. *Priručni imenici (1945/46)*

In the sort of atmosphere of political tension and ethnic division that existed in Croatian high schools in 1945 and 1946, the NSO became the only potential unifying factor that cut

²⁵⁰HR-DAKA-354. Prva (muška) realna gimnazija u Karlovcu, book 11. *Školski imenici (1947/48)*.

²⁵¹ Not all classes have surviving directories.

across ethnic lines. It is no wonder, then, that the NSO (and the NOJ in general) played such a major role in education and indoctrination efforts of Croatian Communists in the 1940s. Without the work of youth organizations, most Serb and Croat high school students would not have had a lot of opportunities for socialization with their supposed “brethren” in the immediate post-war period. Over time, however, the situation changed, and classes became more heterogeneous, thus also reducing the role organizations such as the NSO had in promoting the ideals of inter-ethnic fraternity.

Religion as a source of discord

That religion and nationalism have always been intertwined in the Balkans is no news. In the Croatian context, Catholicism has been closely related to the development of Croat nationalism ever since the beginning of the 19th century. The Croatian Serbs, on the other hand, were mostly associated with Orthodoxy, even more so following the formation of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, SPC) in 1920.

As mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, the events of World War Two left the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia severely weakened. Many of its priests were executed or deported by the *Ustaše*, thus weakening its presence among the Serb masses, and allowing for easier agitation by the Communist Party. By the end of the war, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia did not present a serious obstacle for the Communists.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, was a much tougher nut to crack. During the war the KPH denounced the Church leadership in Croatia for supporting the *Ustaše*, but still attempted to gain sympathies among the rural Catholic Croats by generally allowing Catholic religious activities in the “liberated territories.” This attitude started to change after the war, and the final break came with the 1946 trial of Alojzije Stepinac, the archbishop of Zagreb. The Catholic Church soon found itself the target of state-sponsored anti-religious campaigns. Over

time, the KPJ/KPH also moved towards the complete abolition of religious education in public schools, banning it entirely in 1952.

Anti-religious campaigns in and of themselves would have fomented conflict among the youth of Croatia, but it was their connection to the national question that made them explosive. Even though the KPH considered all religious organizations to be more-or-less hostile, the fact that Serbs generally readily accepted secularization, while most Croats continued to cling onto their Catholic traditions meant that the anti-religious campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s seemed to be targeting Croats, specifically.

In the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium, for instance, the question of religion became acute almost immediately. In July 1945, unknown perpetrators destroyed the crosses that were hanging in all of the school's classrooms. What came next was public outcry by a large group of students (most likely Catholic Croats) who demanded the crosses be reinstated in classrooms, and forced the principal to acquiesce – at least for now.²⁵² Around the same time, the Nova Gradiška county committee of the KPH reported that “priests are trying to gather as many young people as possible,” in order to retain their influence in the gymnasium.²⁵³

And retain their influence they did. For example, even though the federal and republican governments soon removed religious holidays from the official list of state holidays, the Nova Gradiška gymnasium continued to close down on Catholic Christmas, Catholic Easter, the Feast of Corpus Christi, and the Pentecost until at least the 1948/49 academic year. The gymnasium's memorial book laconically noted that this was due to “local circumstances.”²⁵⁴ In other words, the influence of the Catholic Church on the student body in Nova Gradiška was simply too strong for the administration to successfully tackle.

²⁵²HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book no. 1. *Spomenica gimnazije, 1924.-1950.* (1944/45).

²⁵³HR-HDA-1838. OK KPH Nova Gradiška, box. no. 4. Izvještaj OK KPH Nova Gradiška Oblasnom komitetu u Osijeku (July 24, 1945).

²⁵⁴HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book no. 1. *Spomenica gimnazije, 1924.-1950.* (1945/46-1948/49).

By 1950 the party-state started to lose its patience. The secularization of the education system had to be kicked into high gear – from now on, schools would be open for Christmas and all other major Catholic holidays, and absences would be penalized. This move had an unintended negative impact on inter-ethnic relations, however. According to the teachers' council of the Nova Gradiška Gymnasium, well over 50% of all students did not attend classes on (Catholic) Christmas Day, 1950. Some were forced to stay at home by their parents – sometimes under threat of violence – but others organized themselves to collectively skip classes. Apparently, one group of students who skipped class on Christmas Day bragged how “only the Orthodox and [NOJ] committee members stayed in school.”²⁵⁵

The campaign of radical secularization thus inadvertently helped create (or maintain) a divide between high school students of Croat and Serb ethnicity. A certain number of teachers in Nova Gradiška actively obstructed the anti-religious campaign. One of them, mentioned (though not by name) in the minutes of a teachers' council meeting, allegedly decided not to examine those students who claimed to be celebrating (Catholic) Christmas. Furthermore, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, 1952, the same teacher publicly implied that all students who came to school that day were, in fact, Orthodox.²⁵⁶ Unfortunately, what happened to the teacher in question could not be determined from the archival record.

The fact that the local Serbian Orthodox parish in Nova Gradiška was led by an openly pro-communist priest, Platon Buzadžić, probably did not help the situation either.²⁵⁷ Additionally, Buzadžić's son, Veljko, was a pre-war member of the Nova Gradiška SKOJ, and died fighting in the Partisan army.²⁵⁸ Given the amicability between the local SPC priest and the Party authorities, the Communists did not have a lot of trouble dealing with religious

²⁵⁵HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book 4. *Zapisnik sjednice nastavničkog vijeća* (December 27, 1950).

²⁵⁶HR-DASB-NG-48. Gimnazija Nova Gradiška, book 5. *Zapisnik sjednice nastavničkog vijeća* (April 14, 1952).

²⁵⁷HR-HDA-640. SKD Prosvjeta, box no. 18. Savjetovanje predsjednika i sekretara pododbora SKD Prosvjeta (December 28, 1947), 34-35

²⁵⁸Duhaček, *SKOJ u novogradiškoj gimnaziji*, 190.

matters among the Serb population of Nova Gradiška. In the minds of many Croats, however, this was bound to create new theories about the inherent links between Croatian Serbs and Croatian Communists.

As the secularization campaign continued into the 1950s, this potential element of conflict became ever more visible. Not only that, but all of the efforts by the NSO, the school administration, the Party, and even by the secret police could not prevent the continued spread of nationalist ideas among the students of Nova Gradiška. New illegal youth groups would pop up by the mid-1950s, inspired by their previously arrested colleagues.²⁵⁹ The Croatian Communists seemed to be fighting an uphill battle against ethnic nationalism.

²⁵⁹Udovičić, et. al, *Hrvatski nacionalni pokret*, 51-52.

Conclusion

Writing a history of inter-ethnic relations is a complicated task. An issue as multifaceted as this one can hardly ever be analyzed in its entirety. At first, I intended to write a general history of Communist Party-mediated ethnic relations between the Croats and Serbs in the first decade of socialist Yugoslavia's existence. The lack of research conducted on this exact topic, in this exact period of Croatian and Yugoslav history, seemed to provide me with ample opportunity to achieve new insights into some of the events and policies that ultimately helped shape the country I was born in. I was not wrong – the array of available sources and possible approaches to the topic of Croat-Serb ethnic relations in Yugoslavia was simply staggering. So I had to limit my scope: and in order to do so, I decided to concentrate on one crucial element of all state-building efforts – the education system.

Through the lens of the education system I wanted to answer two simple questions with possibly incredibly complicated answers: how, exactly, did the Croatian Communists intend to promote their policies of inter-ethnic fraternity and Croat-Serb national equality through the medium of education, and how did the Croats and Serbs of Croatia themselves react to the implementation of those policies during and immediately after a four-year-long genocidal civil war?

I felt that by taking a look into the decisions, programs, and curricula published by the various departments and ministries of education of wartime and post-war Croatia we should be able to determine the reasoning, the intentions, and the ultimate goals of Communist nationality policy in early socialist Croatia. On the other hand, regional and local archives seemed to be good sources of insight into the mood of the general population, and the obstacles their wartime grudges might have created for the new regime and its policies. And finally, it felt important to look into the actions and opinions of the Croatian youth at the level of the schools and

classrooms they spent most of their days in, because it was precisely there that all of the aforementioned policies and social pressures ultimately combined.

In the first chapter we have seen how the Croatian Communists tried to reconcile their pre-war ideological tenets and their preconceived solutions to the Croat “national question” with the drastically changing situation on the ground during World War Two. The KPJ came up with two interconnected solutions to this conundrum: the formal national equality of Croats and Serbs in Croatia, as part of a wider Yugoslav federation, and the promotion of the idea of fraternity between the different ethnic groups living in the country as a whole, i.e. “brotherhood and unity.” The practical validity of both of these concepts had to be proven, and they had to become accepted by the people of Croatia and Yugoslavia in order to truly function.

To this end, the Communists decided to reform and use the education system. In order to promote inter-ethnic fraternity, new curricula were published, which emphasized the common struggles of Croats and Serbs, and taught them about their respective cultures in order to create links and built mutual understanding. Additionally, Communist-led youth organizations were meant to function as places of socialization for the younger generations of two communities that seemed to have been split apart by war and genocide. These organizations sometimes proved to be the only places of continuous encounter between young Croats and Serbs, as was the case with many Croatian high schools in the immediate post-war years; without organizations like the USAOJ/NOJ and the NSO, most Croat students would not have shared spaces with their Serb colleagues, who ended up in *ad hoc* organized auxiliary classes.

The issue of national equality was closely linked, but different: it had to be proven to the Serbs that they were truly equals in the new Croatian republic, and Croats had to be proven that the Communists’ victory was not, in fact, a victory of Serb nationalism – as it easily might have seemed given the over-representation of Serbs in all walks of political life after spring 1945. Once again, schools were used to this end. Most notably, both “national scripts” – Cyrillic

and Latin – were being taught, and the common standard language was given a “double” name to make it clear that the Croat and Serb nations were entirely equal in the eyes of the government and its education system.

Both of these policies – fraternity and national equality – were temporarily pushed to the side following the 1948 Tito-Stalin split, the latter of which never entirely recovered. Yugoslav nations and ethnic groups were still supposed to have amicable relations, of course, but for a short while it was “socialist patriotism” that became the basic tenet of Yugoslav (civil) nationalism promoted in Croatian classrooms. The full national equality of Serbs in Croatia also seemed to be in danger of becoming a mere formality, reduced to learning the Cyrillic script in school and not much else.

The curriculum is not everything, however, and many practical obstacles soon abounded during the implementation of the aforementioned policies. The process of “ethnicization” induced by four years of monstrous violence based on perceived ethnic categories seemed to have created a chasm between the Serb and Croat communities. Many Serbs thirsted for vengeance, while many Croats feared retribution. The KPH had to try and stop the cycle of violence, but it often found itself torn between ideology and political reality; between the need to expand its base among the Croats without alienating their battle-hardened Serb loyalists. The solutions to these issues were manifold and diverse: some forms of discontent were tolerated – mostly those coming from “veteran” Partisan backgrounds – while others were harshly punished. The differences between the Party center and its local branches became noticeable during this period, with the KPH CK having to intervene in local matters more often than it most probably wished to.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the Party always tried to protect its political line of fraternity and equality, but sometimes it had to back down: for instance, in the cases of the Serb villages in Slavonia demanding teachers of “their own” ethnicity. Those people were the Party’s wartime support base, and could not be angered in the immediate post-war period. This was

understood by both sides, as well as by the rural Croat population which generally understood that “the tables have turned” and rather decided to show their disapproval by “passivity.”

When it came to other forms of dissent, such as that shown by nationalist-inclined high school students in Nova Gradiška or Karlovac, the party-state was much less forgiving: the students simply had no leverage in their hands. Still, the purges that occurred in high schools throughout Croatia were generally grassroots events, organized by young militants and often countermanded by the school administration. Schools were supposed to be the epicenters of fraternity and equality, and as such all “enemy elements” who intended to sow discord had to be cleansed. This applied to both students and teachers. However, the latter were often given leeway due to the scarcity of educated cadre, meaning that they managed to retain some influence in schools.

Today, many people in ex-Yugoslavia view the Communist Party as a virtually omnipotent, totalitarian political organization; especially in the years preceding the Tito-Stalin split. Simultaneously, it seems that it simply could not get a grip on the issue of inter-ethnic conflict. From the peasants in Paučje not allowing their children to go to school to a Croat village, through young high school radicals tearing down pictures of Serb poets, to teachers openly making fun of students by comparing them to people of another faith, the Party never managed to fully control neither the Croat nor the Serb component of Croatian society, nor was it able to (or even willing to) create harmonious inter-ethnic relations through repression alone – not even in the period of its most authoritarian rule. The topics of Communist Party nationality policy, and Croat-Serb relations in socialist Yugoslavia thus remain as complex as ever.

List of abbreviations

AVNOJ	- Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (<i>Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije</i>)
CK	- Central committee (<i>Centralni komitet</i>)
FNRJ	- Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (<i>Federativna Narodna Republika Jugoslavija</i>)
HSS	- Croatian Peasant Party (<i>Hrvatska seljačka stranka</i>)
KPH	- Communist Party of Croatia (<i>Komunistička partija Hrvatske</i>)
KPJ	- Communist Party of Yugoslavia (<i>Komunistička partija Jugoslavije</i>)
KPS	- Communist Party of Slovenia (<i>Komunistička partija Slovenije</i>)
MPRO	- Ministry of Education (<i>Ministarstvo prosvjete</i>)
NDH	- Independent State of Croatia (<i>Nezavisna Država Hrvatska</i>)
NF	- People's Front (<i>Narodni front</i>)
NKOJ	- National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia (<i>Nacionalni komitet oslobođenja Jugoslavije</i>)
NO	- people's council (<i>narodni odbor</i>)
NOH	- People's Youth of Croatia (<i>Narodna omladina Hrvatske</i>)
NOJ	- People's Youth of Yugoslavia (<i>Narodna omladina Jugoslavije</i>)
NOO	- people's liberation council (<i>narodnooslobodilački odbor</i>)
NOP	- People's Liberation Movement (<i>Narodnooslobodilački pokret</i>)
NRH	- People's Republic of Croatia (<i>Narodna Republika Hrvatska</i>)
NSO	- People's High School Youth (<i>Narodna srednjoškolska omladina</i>)
OZNA	- Department for Protection of the People (<i>Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda</i>)
PO	- Department of Education (<i>Prosvjetni odjel</i>)
SKH	- League of Communists of Croatia (<i>Savez komunista Hrvatske</i>)

- SKJ - League of Communists of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunista Jugoslavije*)
- SKOJ - League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*)
- SMG - League of the Young Generation (*Savez mlade generacije*)
- USAOH - United League of Antifascist Youth of Croatia (*Ujedinjeni savez antifašističke omladine Hrvatske*)
- USAOJ - United League of Antifascist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Ujedinjeni savez antifašističke omladine Jugoslavije*)
- ZAVNOBiH - State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine*)
- ZAVNOH - State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (*Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*)

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