STATE OF GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA AND THE DEVELOPMENTS OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY AND JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS), established after World War I, and socialist Yugoslavia, formed following World War II, were both characterized as multinational and multi-religious states, encompassing diverse historical and cultural traditions. These differences led to tensions, which were often exploited by secular and religious leaders for their own ends. The state system, religious communities, and representatives of various nations of both countries were finding it hard to adjust to this situation,[1] which led to constant political, cultural and interreligious arguments. Religion has historically played a significant role in the region, and it remains a particularly compelling aspect due to its deep ties to the country's diverse national identities, making it a crucial subject of study.[2]

The complex national and religious composition of SHS and Yugoslavia included the following majority religions: Orthodox Serbs

[1] Gašper Mithans, *Jugoslovanski konkordat: Pacem in discordia ali jugoslovanski "kulturkampf"* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2017), 340.

[2] Stella Alexander, "Religion in Yugoslavia Today," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 10, no. 5 (1990), 7, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1511&context=ree&httpsredir=1&referer=.

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and Montenegrins, Roman Catholic Slavonians, Dalmatians and Slovenes, an Albanian Muslim minority in southern Serbia, Hungarians, Germans and a few Slavic groups, mainly Serbs, lived in Vojvodina. Macedonia was divided between Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria in 1912. Macedonian Slavs were Orthodox, and the Albanians were Muslim. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) had an autochthonous Muslim population, having belonged to the Ottoman Empire for centuries until its annexation by Austria-Hungary in 1908. Serbs in BiH were Orthodox and Croats were Catholic.[3]

Covering the era of the first and second Yugoslavia – the period from 1918 to approximately 1990 – this paper explores state policies, legal recognition, and the attitude of the political leadership, towards the legally recognized religious communities. As case studies, this research examines two unrecognized religious communities, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Bahá'ís, across Yugoslavia. They serve as representative examples of small religious groups within the country's broader religious landscape, but they are also distinct in key ways, making them particularly valuable for research because of their:

- Legal and Social Marginalization: Both communities were unrecognized by the state for much of Yugoslavia's history, placing them in a similar category as other minority faiths that lacked institutional support.
- Missionary Focus: Unlike some ethnic-based religious groups, Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahá'ís actively sought converts, making them subject to state scrutiny.
- State Perception of Foreign Influence: Both were viewed as being linked to international religious movements, which made them susceptible to suspicion in a socialist state wary of external ideological influences.

However, they are also uniquely non-typical as minority religions as they exhibit atypical characteristics, which make them particularly valuable for comparative research.

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[3] Stella Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

Jehovah's Witnesses were subject to state persecution because of their political neutrality. Their refusal to participate in military service and state rituals made them a direct target for persecution, leading to imprisonment and surveillance.

- The socialist Yugoslav state promoted patriotism, while Jehovah's Witnesses rejected nationalism, making them highly visible dissenters.
- Jehovah's Witnesses adapted to repression through underground printing and secret religious gatherings, illustrating state–church dynamics in a restrictive environment.

As for the Bahá'í Community:

- The Bahá'í Faith did not align itself with a single national or ethnic identity, unlike most religious groups in Yugoslavia.
- Bahá'ís were less politically conspicuous and did not openly reject state policies, making their interactions with the authorities different.
- The community was relatively small and tended to attract individuals in urban and intellectual circles rather than the working class, differentiating them from other alternative religious movements.

We examine how these communities faced contrasting levels of acceptance and persecution. Through this comparative lens, the paper sheds light on the broader dynamics of religion and governance in a complex and evolving political landscape.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the general characteristics of the Bahá'í community and Jehovah's witnesses. The subsequent chapters are organized chronologically, each focusing on key aspects of the relationship between the state and these religious communities during specific time periods. At the conclusion of each chapter, an analysis is provided to examine the events and developments affecting either the Bahá'í community or Jehovah's Witnesses during that particular timeframe.

The Bahá'í Community and Jehovah's Witnesses – Short Overview

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the Bahá'í Faith is, one of the world's youngest independent religions. It originated in 1844 in Persia and spread around the world, including to Europe, in the first decades after its creation. Bahá'ís believe its founder Bahá'u'lláh, and his predecessor, the Báb, to be manifestations of one God, who is essentially unknown. The central teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are the fundamental unity of all religions and the unity of mankind. Bahá'ís believe that all the founders of the world's major religions were manifestations of God and executors of a progressive divine plan for the education of the human race. There are no priests, every believer must teach their faith.4 It has been present in Yugoslavia since the 1920s. As a young, non-nationalistic religion, the Bahá'í community emphasized principles of peace, equality, and collaboration, which resonated across social, economic, and educational boundaries. The Bahá'ís adhered to the laws of the country and fostered a harmonious relationship with the state, thus avoiding persecution.

Jehovah's Witnesses originated in the 1870s when Charles Taze Russell founded a Bible study group in Pennsylvania that critically examined Christian teachings. Initially predicting Christ's return in 1874, Russell later established the Watchtower Society, a Bible study association, which became the movement's organizational core, publishing *The Watchtower*. By 1931, the group formally adopted the name Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses believe in Jehovah as the one true God, rejecting the Trinity and viewing Jesus as God's first creation. They see the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force and consider the Bible, particularly the 1961 translation, their ultimate authority. They believe humanity is in its last days and that God's Kingdom will soon establish a paradise on earth after Armageddon. Only 144,000 anointed ones will enjoy heaven, while the rest of humanity will cease to exist. They reject the concept of Hell and emphasize strict moral conduct, including disfellowshipping unrepentant members. Jehovah's Witnesses

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4 *Encyclopaedia Britannica Book of The Year* (Chicago, London Etc., 1996).

distinguish themselves by rejecting traditional holidays, birthdays, and nationalistic practices like saluting the flag or military service, which they see as unbiblical. Their faith centres on evangelism, with a strong focus on door-to-door preaching and Bible study. They avoid secular politics and interfaith movements, believing only God's Kingdom can bring true peace. Over the years, they have repeatedly predicted Christ's return, with key dates including 1874, 1914, and 1975. Their beliefs – particularly opposition to military service and blood transfusions – have led to legal and social challenges worldwide. Jehovah's Witnesses have existed in Yugoslavia since the 1920s.[5]

The Relationship between the Newly Established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918–1929), Later Renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–1941), and (Predominant) Religious Communities

In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later renamed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) the 1921 and 1931 constitutions did not establish a state religion, nor was there a separation of church and state,[6] but the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church were established religions. Catholic Slovenes and Croats came from the religiously more homogeneous Austro-Hungarian Empire, to a religiously diverse country where their religion was no longer prevalent; the Serbian Orthodox Church was no longer a state religion, although as the religion of the ruling dynasty and with the largest number of adherents, it remained the leading religion legally and politically especially in Serbia and Montenegro.[7] The Roman Catholic Church was prominent in areas with Croatian and Slovene majorities and was a dominant force in its regions and a key cultural and political player. Islam was practiced by a significant portion of the population, particularly by Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia. All

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5 Aleš Črnič, *Na vodnarjevem valu: nova religijska in duhovna gibanja* (Ljubljana: FDV, 2012), 134–36.

6 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 209.

7 Mithans, *Jugoslovanski konkordat,* 38.

religious communities sought to expand their influence and strengthen their respective communities, which led to competition and tension.[8] Neither community took the opportunity to move beyond past disagreements; instead, both contributed to the new state's instability.[9]

In 1918, a Ministry of Religion was established and all religious communities previously recognised in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were given equal status.[10] However, laws pertaining to religious communities were specific to particular regions,[11] and freedom of religion only applied to legally recognised religions: the Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed Churches, the Orthodox Church, Islam and the Greek Orthodox Church.[12] The 1921[13] and 1931 constitutions declared that both historic and adopted religions were legitimate: the Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Methodist, Muslim, and Jewish religions. Other religions were not permitted.[14]

But not all religions enjoyed the same legal rights: Islamic, Jewish, Lutheran, and the Reformed Church were protected by law and were allowed to perform religious rites, including weddings, funerals, and birth registration. According to the 1921 census, 46.6% of the population declared themselves members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 39.4% members of the Catholic Church and 11.2% members of the Islamic Community.[15]

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8 Paul Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1992), 341.

9 Mithans, *Jugoslovanski konkordat,* 36.

10 Aleksandra Đurić-Milovanović, "'On the Road to Religious Freedom': A Study of the Nazarene Emigration from Southeastern Europe to the United States," *Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*, no. 1-2 (2017): 11, https://dais.sanu.ac.rs/bitstream/handle/123456789/13960/On_the_Road_to_Religious_Freedom_a_Stud.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

11 Gašper Mithans, "Religious Conversions and Religious Diversification in Interwar Yugoslavia and Slovenia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40, no. 2 (2020): 50, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss2/6/.

12 Milivoja Šircelj, *Verska, jezikovna in narodna sestava prebivalstva Slovenije: Popisi 1921-2002* (Ljubljana: Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2003), https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-0TNJ0XB4.

13 Marie-Janine Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2019), 100.

14 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR,* 341.

15 Mithans, *Jugoslovanski konkordat,* 34.

Religious communities had different views on their roles in society and politics, as well as on interreligious and interethnic coexistence. Relations between religious communities were also not regulated legally.[16] Typical of dominant religions,[17] the Catholic Church generally resisted the emergence of new religious communities, despite occasional efforts at ecumenism.[18]

When speaking about new religious communities one of the basic rights of a religiously pluralistic society must be mentioned – religious conversion, which has been a relatively unexplored topic. In Slovenia for example, religious conversions were quite rare at that time. Migrants mostly kept their religion and ethnic character, which made it more difficult for them to adapt to their new environment.[19] Conversions took place out of convenience, such as religiously mixed marriages, to legalise illegitimate children, for political and career opportunism, to seek protection, or as a political statement.[20] Sometimes the numbers kept in state archives, for example, differ from those recorded by churches.[21] The number of members and believers in religious[22] communities and voluntary associations is often unclear, as it depends on the framework used to define membership. Factors such as who is recognized as a member, a believer, a visitor, a sympathizer, or someone who identifies as a believer but is not acknowledged as such by the institution all shape how membership in a religious community is determined.[23]

Conversions during the 1930s were indirectly influenced by the Concordat between the state and the Roman Catholic Church. The Concordat was never ratified due to complaints from the Yugoslav

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16 *Ibid.*, 34.
17 *Ibid.*, 44.
18 The principle or aim of promoting unity among the world's Christian Churches.
19 Mithans, "Religious Conversions," 74–75.
20 *Ibid.*, 54.
21 *Ibid.*, 71.
22 After World War I, the Serbian Orthodox Church established parishes in major Slovenian cities, initially attended by immigrants, and later Slovene converts. The Serbian Orthodox Church attracted new believers through publications in the national media and through the Sokol Gymnastics Club. Russian immigrants brought their Orthodox faith. The number of Muslims was minimal but growing - the first Slovenian imamate opened in 1931.
23 Aleš Črnič, *V imenu Krišne: družboslovna študija gibanja Hare Krišna* (Ljubljana: Fakulteta za družbene vede, 2005), 98–100.

Episcopate, alleged opposition of Italy, indifference of the Croatian Peasant Party and lack of interest of the Slovenian People's Party. Public pressure on the government led King Alexander to decide to keep the negotiations secret. The public, the political parties, the Roman Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church did not react well to this decision, and as a result, protests erupted.[24] After 1929, authorities intervened in all areas of social life, also banning political parties and associations of an ethnic and religious nature.[25] Protests only subsided when the Concordat was denounced, in 1938.[26] At the time of the adoption of the Concordat, there was a well-organised state-sponsored propaganda for conversion to the Serbian Orthodox Church. During the first Yugoslavia, around 200,000 people, mostly in Croatia, are believed to have converted to the Orthodox faith. At that time, it was socially unacceptable to be a non-believer, so it is possible that people claimed to be members of a particular religion, even if they were not active in it. The official number of believers of the different communities in Slovenia for instance, didn't change much.[27]

The First Mention of The Bahá'í Community and Jehovah's Witnesses in The Kingdom of Yugoslavia

Although a small and unknown religious community, the Bahá'í religion had adherents in Yugoslavia[28] and by 1926, there was a group of Bahá'ís in Petrinja, Croatia, who sent reports of their activities to the head institution of their religion, in the Bahá'í World Centre.[29] The American travelling teacher, writer, and public speaker Martha Root

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24 Mithans, *Jugoslovanski konkordat,* 341.
25 Mithans, "Religious Conversions," 50.
26 Mithans, *Jugoslovanski konkordat,* 343-44.
27 Mithans, "Religious Conversions," 57.
28 Nemanja Radulović, "Esotericism Among the Serbian and Yugoslav Freemasonry in the Interwar Period," *Freemasonry in Southeast Europe from the 19th to the 21st Centuries*, 2020, 194, https://www.academia.edu/45027955/Esoteric_Current_in_Serbian_and_Yugoslav_Interwar_Freemasonry.
29 *The Bahá'í World, Vol. 2, 1926-1928* (New York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1928), 186.

visited Yugoslavia in 1926 and in 1928 sparking a genuine interest in the Bahá'í teachings.[30]

After the great interest in the Bahá'í Faith shown by Queen Mary of Romania, whom Martha Root met in the spring of 1926,[31] they met again in the beginning of 1928 in Belgrade, at the Karađorđević Royal Palace. Later, Martha Root was invited back to the Royal Palace, where she spoke to Prince Paul and his wife Olga. Together they arranged for Professor Bogdan Popović, literary critic and academic at the University of Belgrade, to translate a booklet on the Bahá'í Faith into Serbian entitled *The World Religion: A Brief Overview of its Goals, Teachings and History ('Religija sveta: Kratak pregled njenih ciljeva, učenja i istorije)*,[32] of which four thousand copies were handed out in the first ten days. A second book 'Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era' was translated into Serbian by the Serbian poet and translator Draga Ilić and a representative of the Bahá'í community in Yugoslavia,[33] with a foreword by Prof. Popović, published in 1933,[34] followed by a successful presentation on the Bahá'í Faith at Belgrade University.

After several lectures in Belgrade, Martha Root travelled to Zagreb to address the Croatian Women's Club with more than 2,000 members. She had a long conversation with Stjepan Radić, leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, and presented him with the book 'Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era.' On 29 February 1928, on her way from Zagreb to Czechoslovakia by train, Martha Root stopped in Maribor, Slovenia, and met with members of the Slovenian Esperantist Association.[35] She regularly visited Yugoslavia until 1935.

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30 *The Bahá'í World*, 31.

31 M. R. Garis, *Martha Root: Lioness at the Treshold* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983), 242.

32 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Austria, Vienna [Der Nationale Geistige Rat der Bahá'í in Österreich, Wien], Effendi, Shoghi, Religija sveta: Kratak pregled njenih ciljeva, učenja i istorije / World Religion: A Brief Overview of its Goals, Teachings and History, 1st ed. (Belgrade, Serbia: Jugoslovenska Baha'i grupa, 1928).

33 Nemanja Radulović, *Gde ruža i lotos cveta: slika Indije u srpskoj književnosti i kulturi 19. i 20. veka* (Beograd: Fedon, 2023), 162.

34 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Austria, Vienna, Esselmont, John E., Bahá'u'lláh i Novo Doba / Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 1st ed. (Belgrade, Serbia, 1933).

35 Anonymous, "Martha Root En Zagrebo," *Konkordo*, 3 ed. (March 1928): 6–8.

From 1926 on there are reports of continued activities of individual Bahá'ís and micro-communities, that consisted of 4 members or more in Petrinja and Zagreb, Croatia and Belgrade, Serbia. These reports are crucial for the research on the community. In one report to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa it is written:

> The analysis of the religious situation in the Balkan countries made by all the Bahá'ís who have first-hand knowledge of that region, indicate clearly that the intolerable burden of economic, political and social oppression, which for so many centuries has stunted the collective life of those peoples, is now being lifted by an ever-increasing demand among the people themselves for a more dynamic and useful spiritual experience. From some perspectives, it would appear that no part of the world offers better possibilities for universal religious quickening than the Balkan States.[36]

Concerning the attitude of the state: the Yugoslav state archive, archives of the Police, and archives of the Ministry of the Interior and Religious Communities, do not contain names of Bahá'ís in Yugoslavia of that period, or references to the Bahá'í community, because it was not registered then. With no information recorded, it can be concluded that the authorities did not consider the Bahá'í community and its activities to be dangerous to the state.[37]

In 1925, Franz Brand from Vojvodina heard of Jehovah's Witness teachings in Austria. He returned home and joined a small Bible study group. With his help two booklets explaining Bible teachings were translated into Serbian. Franz then moved to Maribor, Slovenia, where he was teaching, and formed a micro-community. They established the Lighthouse Society of Bible Students in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This legal entity enabled them to preach and hold meetings freely.

In 1931, two "brothers"[38] from Switzerland held presentations of the faith in Maribor, Zagreb, Mostar, and other cities. *The Watchtower* was translated into Slovenian and Croatian. They used the magazines to travel around Yugoslavia and share their religion. They were supported

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[36] The Bahá'í World, Vol. 2, 1926-1928 (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928), 31.

[37] Helen Basset Hornby, *Lights of Guidance* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, 1996).

[38] Worldwide Brotherhood – A term used by Jehovah's Witnesses to emphasize unity among members who are also called brothers.

by German brothers and sisters, as the religion was being banned in Germany. They travelled through the countryside on foot or by bicycle with a backpack full of literature, preaching to all who would listen. A micro-community grew in Macedonia through the efforts of two brothers travelling to Bulgaria. In 1935, the "brothers" moved the branch office from Maribor, Slovenia, to Belgrade, Serbia.

There was significant religious opposition, and the pioneers faced considerable persecution. In smaller villages, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests exerted strong influence over their followers and, at times, encouraged schoolchildren to throw stones at the pioneers. Additionally, the clergy urged local authorities to harass them, leading to the confiscation of their literature and their arrests. Sometimes the pioneers were attacked and their booklets burnt. The pioneers were mindful of local customs, for instance when preaching in predominantly Muslim villages in Bosnia.

In 1933, the Catholic Church issued a brochure explaining Jehovah's Witnesses and they predicted that they would stop existing in Yugoslavia soon. They also tried to block their preaching activities through courts, which wasn't successful. In August 1936, *The Lighthouse* was banned, Kingdom Halls were sealed, and literature was confiscated. Forewarned congregations hid most materials. To continue their work, *Kula Stražara* (*The Watchtower*) was established in Belgrade, and meetings moved to private homes. With the ban in place, the government increased pressure to stop preaching, targeting full-time ministers, especially German-speaking brothers. Many had come to Yugoslavia after bans in other countries, only to face restrictions again. The booklet *Judge Rutherford Uncovers Fifth Column*, exposing Catholic support for the Nazi agenda, was translated into Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian, with 20,000 copies each printed. Though banned immediately, it led to foreign pioneers' expulsion and legal charges, seeking 10–15 years' imprisonment for its publishers. Despite the risk, 60,000 copies were swiftly distributed.[39] Sociologist of religion Aleš Črnič observed that Jehovah's Witnesses represent "the most obvious example of a religious

[39] *2009 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, 2009, Lands of the Former Yugoslavia, 145–64, https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/2009-Yearbook-of-Jehovahs-Witnesses/.

group that has been subjected to many years of severe direct repression and has never reacted violently."[40]

(Dominant) Religious Communities During World War II (1941–1945)

On 6 April 1941, Germany invaded Yugoslavia, which capitulated. It was divided between Germany (North Slovenia, Banat, and Serbia south of the Danube), Italy (South of Slovenia, Dalmatia, Ljubljana, Kosovo, and west Macedonia and Montenegro), Hungary (Prekmurje and Medžimurje, a part of Vojvodina) and Bulgaria took over the rest of Macedonia. The Independent State of Croatia was established (NDH).[41] It united Slavonia and parts of Dalmatia. Also, Bosnia and Hercegovina was established.[42]

In May 1941, a new law was passed rendering it easier to change religion.[43] People could fill in a form and simply submit it to the authorities, which then issued a certificate of religion. Many people who had previously converted to Orthodoxy now returned to Catholicism.[44] In the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), an ally of Germany, the Ustashe[45] regime implemented brutal policies targeting the Serbian Orthodox population. To avoid persecution, massacres, and expulsions, an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Orthodox Serbs converted to Catholicism. There was a broad effort to suppress and eliminate Orthodox identity in the region.[46] Cyrillic was banned together with the name Serbian Orthodox religion, and Orthodox supported kindergartens, primary and secondary schools were closed. Financial support

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40 Črnič, *Na vodnarjevem valu*, 128.

41 NDH – Nezavisna država Hrvatska.

42 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 9–11.

43 Zakonska odredba o prijelazu od jedne vjere na drugu – A legal decree about changing religion.

44 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 26.

45 The Ustaše were a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist movement that ruled the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during World War II. Allied with Germany and Italy, they sought to create an ethnically "pure" Croatian state, implementing policies of genocide, forced conversions, and expulsions against Serbs, Jews, and Roma.

46 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 30.

for the Orthodox Church was withdrawn. Serbs had to wear coloured armbands and began to be deported from the NDH, many were sent to concentration camps.[47] Thousands of Serbs were killed by the Ustashe, and there are records that certain Catholic priests also joined in the killings, some of whom were excommunicated, but not all. The estimated number of Orthodox believers killed ranges from 300,000 to 750,000.[48]

In the NDH, the Catholic Church was led by the Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, who did not protest the new state.[49] However, from 1942 he spoke out publicly against injustices such as forced Catholicisation and the persecution of Jews,[50] Serbs and Roma, and he publicly criticised the authorities. Stepinac was arrested and convicted in September 1946, as he was considered at least partly responsible for the Ustashe violence against the Serb population.[51] In 1951, the government released Archbishop Stepinac from prison and sent him to his home village, where he was confined to the village and people could visit him.[52] He remained under house arrest for the rest of his life.[53] Stepinac died in February 1960 and was buried in the Zagreb Cathedral.[54]

In Slovenia, Bishop Gregorij Rožman of Ljubljana and his diocese condemned the communist-led Liberation Front of Slovenia (OF) and collaborated with the occupying forces.[55] Early in the war, Rožman established ties first with Italian and later German authorities, expressing his opposition to the Partisan resistance movement. After Italy's surrender in September 1943, the German occupiers took control of the region. With the support of General Leon Rupnik – who sought to secure Slovenia's place in Hitler's envisioned "New Europe" – and with the blessing of Bishop Rožman, the Slovene Home Guard (*Domobranci*)

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47 Among the most notorious was Jasenovac.

48 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 28–29.

49 *Ibid.*, 19.

50 *Ibid.*, 35.

51 Josip Jurij Strossmayer, Croatian diplomat, politician, priest, Catholic bishop, who worked for the rapprochement of the South Slavs and the unification of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

52 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 102–20.

53 *Ibid.*, 136.

54 *Ibid.*, 150.

55 Dušan Nećak and Božo Repe, *Oris sodobne obče in slovenske zgodovine: Učbenik za študente 4. letnika* (Ljubljana: Oddelek za zgodovino Filozofske fakultete, 2003), 157–59.

was formed. This auxiliary force, operating under German command, grew to approximately 17,500 men and was actively involved in anti-partisan operations.[56] Rožman's collaboration, particularly his endorsement of the *Domobranci*, drew criticism even from within the Catholic Church. A petition signed by 283 clergy members called for his dismissal and replacement.[57] As the war neared its end, Rožman and his associates fled from Slovenia to Austria and found refuge in Swiss monasteries.[58] In 1946, Rožman was tried *in absentia* by a Yugoslav court.[59]

In Serbia, by 1942 the situation had calmed down to the point where they were able to hold masses, and in an Easter message their Metropolitan called for unity among Serbs, united by language, blood, and religion. The clergy were pressured by the occupiers to declare their obedience to them. Some of them began to resist, others waited to see how the situation would turn. In 1944, the Partisans gained strength in Serbia, and Tito accepted an agreement with Russia for Red Army troops to join the Partisans.[60]

During World War II, communism gained strength in Yugoslavia, with its leaders critical of all religions for dividing people and rivalling their goal of a unified state.[61] The Orthodox and Catholic Churches were hostile to unrecognized or pacifist Protestant communities, encouraging local governments to restrict and harass smaller groups. Tensions were particularly severe between Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim communities. Despite their criticisms of religion, the Communist-led Partisans sought to prevent alienating the largely religious peasant population, which is why they allowed priests to hold masses for soldiers and permitted conscientious objectors to serve in non-combat roles.[62]

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56 Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia*, 129.
57 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 130.
58 *Ibid.*, 56.
59 *Ibid.*, 86.
60 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945,* 12–18.
61 Paul Mojzes, "Religious Liberty in Yugoslavia: A Study in Ambiguity," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 6, no. 2 (1986): 24, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol6/iss2/2.
62 Aleksandra Đurić-Milovanović, "Alternative Religiosity in Communist Yugoslavia: Migration as a Survival Strategy of the Nazarene Community," *Open Theology*, 3 (2017): 450, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0035.

Resolutions passed at Partisan meetings in Bihać (1942) and Jajce (1943) extended an inclusive call to all Yugoslavs, irrespective of their religion or nationality, promoting equality and firmly denouncing any violations of religious and national rights.[63] The first Commission for Religious Affairs was established on 19 February 1944, on Slovenian territory, because of Boris Kidrič's[64] initiative. It aimed to guarantee religious freedom, resolve conflicts between the state and the church, and ensure that religion was not tied to political parties or nationality.[65]

The war period inflicted great material and human losses suffered by the various churches and it also damaged the reputation of religion in society, as the occupying forces (German, Italian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian) did not exhibit widespread hostility toward the churches, which is why they were accused of collaborationism.[66]

During World War II, communication between Jehovah's Witnesses in Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia was severely disrupted. The branch office in Belgrade was shut down, and the repression intensified. Fines and imprisonments escalated into concentration camps and death sentences, making discretion and secrecy essential for survival. In Serbia, Nazi forces established labour and concentration camps, where Jehovah's Witnesses faced persecution due to their refusal to serve in the military. More than 150 Hungarian Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in the Bor labour camp in Serbia because of their neutral stance. In Yugoslavia, Jehovah's Witnesses became direct targets of the Nazi regime, yet their preaching continued informally. Since importing literature was too dangerous, underground networks reproduced religious materials. Believers worked overnight at various secret locations to print and assemble magazines and booklets, ensuring the continuation of their faith. Due the severe repression, Jehovah's Witnesses in

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63 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 48–52.

64 Boris Kidrič (10 April 1912 – 11 April 1953) was a Slovene and Yugoslav politician and revolutionary who was one of the chief organizers of the Slovene Partisans. After World War II he was, together with Edvard Kardelj, a leading Slovenian politician in communist Yugoslavia.

65 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 46–47.

66 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 343.

Yugoslavia adapted their activities to the dangerous wartime conditions while maintaining their religious convictions.[67]

Early Post-World War II Period: Restriction of Religious Freedom (1945–1952)

Yugoslav laws on religious communities were among the most open in Socialist Eastern Europe yet still restrictive.[68] Local officials often applied laws arbitrarily, leading to the intimidation of communities.[69] The Communist Party persecuted larger religious institutions while allowing smaller ones to operate, to create competition and diminish the influence of the major religions. Many trials of Slovene and Istrian priests for wartime collaboration or anti-state activities took place, with harsh punishments, intended to frighten people. However, many were pardoned and released before serving their sentences.[70] By 1945, religious education became optional in schools and by 1952 it was removed, shifting instruction to parishes.[71] Religious publications were banned, despite the 1946 Constitution guaranteeing freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state.[72]

In 1946, the first constitution of the new Yugoslavia separated church and state, guaranteed freedom of worship, forbade the abuse of religion for political purposes or for spreading religious hatred and intolerance, and declared all citizens equal regardless of ethnicity, race, gender or religion. Despite this some of the most well-organised persecutions of religion took place between 1950 and the first half of 1953.[73] The government attacked religious communities and wanted to control

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67 *2009 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, 164–70.

68 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 354.

69 *Ibid.*, 358.

70 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 91–93. Immediately after the war, the most opportunities to attend mass were in prisons: in the prison at Ig, priests were woken up an hour before other prisoners on Sundays so that they could attend mass, while lay people were not allowed to attend. The prison even provided them with wine and bread.

71 Mateja Režek, *Med resničnostjo in iluzijo: 1948-1958: Slovenska in jugoslovanska politika v desetletju po sporu z Informbirojem* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2005), 95–97.

72 Đurić-Milovanović, "Alternative Religiosity," 451.

73 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 210–11.

the clergy by encouraging the organisation of priests' associations, which was resisted by both Roman Catholic and Protestant bishops, not wanting their priests to be controlled by the secret police.[74] Only members of the associations could obtain official permission to teach religious education in schools.[75] Publishing houses were forced to refuse printing religious publications.[76] Church taxes were abolished, church buildings were expropriated, and some demolished. Church property was frozen, monasteries and religious schools were closed, religious processions and public ceremonies were banned, and priests could not visit members of their congregation. Many religious leaders were murdered or imprisoned based on executive orders or arbitrary local initiative.[77]

In its letter to Tito, the Catholic Church listed its problems, including 243 dead priests, 169 imprisoned, 89 missing.[78] He rejected the accusation that religious leaders were being persecuted, saying that only guilty individuals were being punished.[79] The press both attacked and defended the clergy, especially Borba and Politika[80] attacked the Serbian Orthodox Church.[81]

Interreligious conversions that took place during the war were abolished in Croatia by decree of ZAVNOH.[82] Priests were told to accept all notifications from believers wishing to return to their original religion. In May 1946, the government took over the recording of births, marriages and deaths, which had previously been done by churches and divorce proceedings were transferred to civil courts.[83] Religious classes were available to children whose parents requested them, provided the children also consented to attend. After 1952, these classes were

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74 *Ibid.*, 124.
75 *Ibid.*, 126.
76 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 345.
77 *Ibid.*, 346.
78 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 70.
79 *Ibid.*, 73.
80 Serbian newspapers.
81 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945,* 170–72.
82 *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske,* National Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia.
83 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 78.

permitted on church property; however, local party officials, particularly in smaller towns, often obstructed their organization.[84]

Theological faculties were separated from universities, thus excluding the Catholic Church from education in 1952.[85] Pressure on religious people was exerted from time to time. At the end of 1951, it increased sharply, and in Slovenia for instance, the church was accused of interfering in civil affairs. Priests were attacked and arrested. Tito publicly condemned the violence against priests. Miha Marinko, the Slovenian Prime Minister, accused the Vatican of interfering in Yugoslav internal affairs. Thirty secondary school pupils were expelled from school for going to mass. Despite this, the 1953 Yugoslav census showed that only 12.4% of the population said they did not belong to any religious community.[86]

The treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in socialist Yugoslavia exemplified the state's broader approach to religious minorities. While the 1946 Constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FLRJ) guaranteed religious freedom, this right was conditional upon religious teachings aligning with constitutional principles. Jehovah's Witnesses, known for their conscientious objection to military service and their eschatological beliefs, were viewed as a subversive threat to the state. The government explicitly sought to dismantle the community, branding it as reactionary and anti-state, and employed systematic repression to curtail its influence. One notable case was that of Janez Robas, a retired railway worker from Ljubljana, who became an active Jehovah's Witness in 1947. He and his wife translated, reproduced, and disseminated religious literature while hosting weekly meetings in their home. The secret police (Udba) repeatedly arrested and interrogated Robas and his associates, confiscating religious materials, including the Bible. In April 1948, a raid on his home led to the arrest of eleven Jehovah's Witnesses, who were later prosecuted for allegedly organizing an anti-state group and inciting resistance to the socialist system. Robas was sentenced to four years and four months in prison, alongside a

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84 *Ibid.*, 159–63.
85 *Ibid.*, 122.
86 *Ibid.*, 135–36.

three-year suspension of his civil and political rights, including the loss of voting rights, public office eligibility, and pension benefits. Another significant case was that of Cecilija Koradej from Zagorje, who, along with several others, was convicted in 1949 on similar charges. She received a five-year sentence with forced labour, two years of revoked civil rights, and the confiscation of her property. Despite multiple appeals for clemency based on health concerns, all were rejected, and she died in prison in 1952.

The broader state policy towards Jehovah's Witnesses mirrored methods previously employed by the Nazi regime during World War II, with Yugoslav authorities preventing official registration, imposing surveillance, and utilizing psychological tactics to instil distrust among members. Udba orchestrated targeted arrests, often detaining Jehovah's Witnesses for three days on minimal sustenance to intimidate them, while economic measures such as job dismissals, withdrawal of food rations, and housing evictions further destabilized the community. Testimonies from secret police documents reveal calculated efforts to fabricate confessions, manipulate interrogations, and coerce members into signing contradictory statements, fostering suspicion within the group. Show trials played a crucial role in portraying the movement as a foreign-backed threat, and the combination of legal, economic, and psychological pressure ultimately forced many members into clandestine religious practice. Despite these measures, Jehovah's Witnesses remained steadfast in their beliefs, demonstrating the state's determination to suppress religious dissent while maintaining an illusion of religious freedom.[87]

[87] Neža Strajnar, "Zaprti zaradi verskega prepričanja: primeri krivično obsojenih pripadnikov različnih veroizpovedi v obdobju 1945–1955," in *V senci Beethovnove 3* (Ljubljana: Študijski center za narodno spravo, 2022), 224–28.

The Easing of Persecution of (Non-Dominant) Religious Communities (1953–1965)

State-religion relations in Yugoslavia focused on the Serbian Orthodox and Roman Catholic religions, whilst religious minorities remained under state control.[88] However in 1953, the Yugoslav government recognized the Jehovah's Witnesses[89] and in 1953 it introduced the Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities. This law established comprehensive guidelines to regulate religious practices and interactions between religious organizations and the state. It affirmed freedom of conscience, designating religious worship as a private matter, and ensured that citizens had the right to belong to any religious community or none, with all communities being treated equally. It allowed for the publishing and dissemination of religious publications, prohibited the use of religious functions for political purposes, and strictly banned incitement to religious intolerance. It also forbade the prevention of religious meetings or instruction and ensured that no individual could be forced to participate in religious activities or denied religious freedom. It also declared that no one's rights would be restricted or enhanced based on their religious affiliation. Religious communities were permitted to receive financial support from the state and to perform rituals in churches, churchyards, and cemeteries, provided local authorities granted permission. Baptisms and circumcisions were allowed at the request of parents, though children over the age of 10 had to give their consent. The law also ensured that individuals in hospitals, nursing homes, or similar institutions could freely practice their religion and be visited by clergy. Additionally, religious communities were allowed to organize their own religious education, provided both parents consented, and the children had completed primary education. Children attending church schools were granted the same rights

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88 Đurić-Milovanović, "Alternative Religiosity," 451.

89 Mirča Maran, *Rumunske verske zajednice u Banatu: Prilog proučavanju multikonfesionalnosti Vojvodine* (Vršac: Visoka škola strukovnih strudija za obrazovanje vaspitača "Mihailo Pavlov", 2011), 40.

as those in secular schools, ensuring equality in education. Various Yugoslav Republics adopted the law at different times.[90]

Notwithstanding this law, torture, imprisonment on false charges, and even murder was still occasionally carried out by the secret police. Regional differences in the treatment of religion became even more obvious.[91] But attempts at interreligious cooperation also continued. The 1959 Conference of European Churches gave new impetus to ecumenism. A breakthrough came in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council, where Pope Paul VI presented the idea that every sincere believer, whatever his or her religious affiliation, can attain salvation.[92] By 1965, there was a gradual easing of pressure on religious communities and on religious individuals[93] which was also felt by the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i community that continued to spread after World War II.[94]

As for Jehovah's Witnesses the political shift in 1952 resulted in the release of all imprisoned Witnesses, but media stigmatization persisted, portraying them as "mentally ill" and "fanatics." Despite legal registration as a religious community in 1953, authorities continued to view their activities as propaganda. The secret police closely monitored them, particularly in Slovenia, where strong Catholic influence led to frequent arrests and fines for engaging in Bible study.

Due to restrictions on house-to-house preaching, Jehovah's Witnesses adopted discreet methods, such as selling eggs, to engage in religious discussions. Small gatherings were held in private homes despite the risk of arrest. A meeting place for 160 people was later established in Zagreb, alongside an office for printing literature. In 1957, the first convention for Witnesses across Yugoslavia took place. Over the following years, they acquired properties in Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Sarajevo, solidifying their presence despite ongoing challenges.[95]

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90 Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*, 221.

91 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 348.

92 Gašper Mithans, "Religious Communities and the Change of Worldviews in Slovenia (1918-1991): Historical and Political Perspectives," *Annales: Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije = Annali di studi istriani e mediterranei = Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies, Series Historia et Sociologia* 30, no. 3 (2020): 421, https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.27.

93 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 348.

94 Maran, *Rumunske verske zajednice u Banatu*, 55.

95 *2009 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, 170–80.

The Era of Liberalization: Improved Relations between the State and Religious Communities (1965–1971)

The Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities brought greater security for religious communities.[96] Churches were once again able to publish magazines and books, theological schools could expand, priests could travel freely in and out of the country, and religious education on church premises was once again allowed. The new problem was the politicisation of the major religions: Catholic, Islamic and Serbian Orthodox.

Importantly for religious communities, in 1971 The People's Assembly ratified the UN 1966 Convention on Human Rights and the 1962 UNESCO Conventions against Discrimination. In 1977, it incorporated into its national legislation all the provisions of the Helsinki Accords and the United Nations Human Rights Declarations.[97] The ideas of the Second Vatican Council contributed to the signing of the Yugoslav Protocol in 1966. It made Yugoslavia the first socialist country to be recognised by the Vatican.[98]

Although Jehovah's Witnesses in Yugoslavia were less isolated than those in other Communist countries, they wished to connect with the global brotherhood. When the 1969 "Peace on Earth" International Assembly was announced, they sought and received permission from the Government to attend. The faith later also spread to Prishtina and Montenegro, with literature initially smuggled into Yugoslavia from Germany in cargo vans. Those involved risked imprisonment and the confiscation of their vehicles if caught.[99]

As for the Bahá'í community, the 1960s reflect a remarkable commitment by a small but determined community of Austrian Bahá'ís. From 1964, the Austrian Bahá'í community undertook a significant initiative to support the re-emerging Bahá'í community in Yugoslavia.

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96 Mojzes, "Religious Liberty in Yugoslavia," 28.
97 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 350.
98 Mithans, "Religious Communities," 426.
99 *2009 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, 180–89.

Their work exemplified a broader aspiration to contribute to the betterment of society, transcending cultural and ideological boundaries.

Over a decade of dedicated efforts, Austrian Bahá'ís regularly visited Yugoslavia, fostering relationships with individuals interested in the unity of mankind, cooperation and connecting with those eager for sustained contact, establishing a network of over 500 addresses across Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, including prominent Slovenians.

Visits were carefully planned to reconnect with existing contacts, establish new relationships, maintain ongoing communication, and distribute Bahá'í literature to local libraries. They sought translators to make Bahá'í literature accessible in local languages and encouraged Bahá'ís from other countries to visit Yugoslavia, equipping them with literature and contact information of interested individuals. By 1968, Dr. Dušan Nendl, a Slovenian Bahá'í living in Germany, had become an important contributor to these efforts. His translations of Bahá'í literature into Slovene marked a significant step in making the teachings of the religion accessible to a broader audience in the region.[100]

Selective Restrictions on Religious Life (1972–1982)

The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution marked a significant shift in the country's governance. Article 174 reaffirmed that the practice of religion was a free and private matter for each citizen. It emphasized the separation of religious communities from the state, granting them autonomy to conduct their religious affairs and observances. While religious communities were permitted to establish schools for the training of clergy, the abuse of religious activities for political purposes was deemed unconstitutional. Members of religious communities could provide material support, and within legal limits, these communities had the right to own property.[101]

Despite these constitutional guarantees, restrictions on religious life were re-imposed. Authorities increased their control over church

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[100] Dr. Nendl was a respected friend of the author who lived in Maribor for many years and together they studied many Bahá'í translations into Slovene.

[101] Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 351.

activities, and the previously promoted Christian-Marxist dialogue, which had been a platform for ideological exchange, was suspended.[102] Despite this, the same period witnessed a remarkable growth in religious publishing, from negligible levels in the 1950s, religious magazines and newspapers expanded to approximately 40 titles by 1977 and nearly 200 by the 1980s,[103] thus enabling believers to express their views more openly, marking a shift in the state's approach from violent repression to verbal critiques by government officials.[104]

In the Bahá'í community in the early 1970s an American Bahá'í, Stanislav O'Jack from California, relocated to Rijeka, Croatia, where he established a small yet vibrant Bahá'í community, gathering over 100 Bahá'í sympathizers. His efforts marked a significant step in expanding the Bahá'í community in the region, though his activities did not go unnoticed by local authorities. After two years in Rijeka, in a letter to Austrian Bahá'ís, O'Jack wrote of being under surveillance,[105] noting that his telephone conversations with Bahá'ís in Belgrade were monitored, his home had been searched and items moved during these inspections. Additionally, he was required to file reports with the police detailing his movements and associations whenever he left his residence. Despite these challenges, he experienced no difficulties crossing international borders, which allowed him to continue fostering connections and supporting the growth of the Bahá'í community in Yugoslavia.

Concerns among some local sympathizers about potential repercussions from authorities led to discussions about formally registering the Bahá'í Faith. However, after consultation among the local and foreign believers, registration was never pursued, as it was feared that it could result in the persecution of the community, like it happened in Czechoslovakia, where a local believer was imprisoned for two years because of the activities of some visiting Bahá'ís. The Yugoslav community thus continued to operate informally. Meanwhile, in Maribor and Ljubljana, the Bahá'í communities had matured to a level where they were self-sufficient and no longer required assistance from neighbouring

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102 *Ibid.*, 351.
103 *Ibid.*, 352.
104 *Ibid.*, 353.
105 Highest Bahá'í body in a country.

Austria, with local believers taking responsibility for community activities and growth.[106]

The 1980s: Navigating Autonomy, National Conflict and Religious Freedom (1982–1989)

After President Tito's death the country began to disintegrate, with confusion among federal and republican leadership and a worsening economic situation. Rising national conflicts, often linked to religion due to the close ties between ethnicity and faith, occasionally escalated into violence. Religious institutions failed to mitigate these tensions, and the communists tried to distract from economic issues by targeting churches.[107] Despite this, a trend toward greater autonomy and religious freedom emerged,[108] including the publication of religious literature[109] and clergy visits to hospitals and nursing homes but not prisons or the military. Social, economic, and non-religious activities for children and youth remained prohibited for religious communities.[110]

During this period, the number of religious prisoners in Yugoslavia declined, and sentences for mixed religious-political cases, such as the misuse of religion for political purposes, were shorter than before.[111] Both religious and secular press reported on abuses against religious followers, with few restrictions on the size, number, or nature of publications. Holy books, including the Bible, Quran, and Talmud, were newly translated, published locally, or imported and sold in bookstores. While some secular media criticized religion, such attacks were not widespread, and many journalists and officials advocated for more moderate policies toward religion.[112]

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106 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Austria, Vienna, Various, "Baha'i Activities in Yugoslavia in 1973," JUTA [Jugoslawischer und Tschechoslowakischer Ausschuss], 1973.
107 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 353.
108 *Ibid.*, 354.
109 *Ibid.*, 356.
110 *Ibid.*, 357.
111 *Ibid.*, 364.
112 Mojzes, "Religious Liberty in Yugoslavia," 36.

Pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, Mecca, Padua, and in Yugoslavia Marija Bistrica, Medjugorje and medieval Serbian monasteries took place in large numbers with the help of travel agencies. Masses and liturgies were provided in local and foreign languages and were publicised in prominent places.[113]

Priests were permitted to preach, visit colleagues, and occasionally meet with government officials. An annual international seminar on religion was held in Dubrovnik, and international societies and foreign missionaries were allowed to discuss, preach, or teach in Yugoslavia. The Christian-Marxist dialogue occurred publicly and in publications, fostering a more favourable climate for church–state negotiations, though they did not directly influence government-clergy relations. Religious construction projects were supported, including the St. Sava Cathedral in Belgrade, a church at the Jasenovac concentration camp area, and the Roman Catholic cathedral in Split. The government funded the restoration of historic religious monuments and allocated land for new church construction, particularly after the Skopje earthquake.[114]

Foreign financial aid was permitted for religious construction, and governments recognized the economic benefits of activities like pilgrimages to Medjugorje, particularly during economic crises. Theological schools could admit all applicants, with curricula managed entirely by the churches. Priests were allowed to form professional associations and received social security and health insurance.[115] The government ensured legal equality among religious groups, and several Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim theologians joined the Yugoslav Commission for the Protection of Human Rights.[116]

Regarding the role of religious communities in the nationalist processes of the 1980s it must be said that dominant religious communities played an important role, which contributed to the break-up of Yugoslavia. In the 1980s, religious communities often supported reinterpretations of history to legitimise the demands of their peoples. The Serbian Orthodox Church was a powerful symbol of Serbian identity,

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113 Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, 365.
114 *Ibid.*, 366.
115 *Ibid.*, 367.
116 *Ibid.*, 371.

often emphasising the idea of "Holy Serbianism."[117] In the 1980s, the Serbian Orthodox Church was actively involved in promoting the narrative that Serbs were victims of historical injustices, especially in Kosovo, it propagated the idea of genocide against Serbs during the World War II, which often included emphasising the role of the Ustashe (Croats) and Muslims. The Catholic Church in Croatia played a similar role in consolidating Croatian national identity. The church supported ideas about the historical uniqueness of Croats, often in opposition to Serbs. For Islamic theologians and politicians, the end of the 1980s also brought opportunities to establish closer ties between religion and national identity. The Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina stressed the importance of preserving Muslim identity in Bosnia as a separate and equal community. In the late 1980s, all groups used religious symbols effectively to rally support from their ethnic communities for nationalist goals. As the economic and political crisis weakened Yugoslavia, the revival of faith offered a new way to understand history, simplify a complex reality, and envision a future tied to the unity of their ethnic group.[118]

A telling example of how individual members of the Baha'i community adapted to the circumstances in Yugoslavia over time, particularly during the 1980s, is the Capari family. In the 1930s, Refo (Rifat) Capari returned to his native Albania from the United States to share his newfound faith. Known for his hard work and integrity, he became a respected member of the local community and maintained correspondence with Shoghi Effendi,[119] who provided him with guidance. Before World War II, Refo Capari passed away, leaving behind his wife Fiqrije and three children.

By the 1980s, the Austrian Bahá'í community discovered that Refo Capari's family had settled in Prizren, Kosovo, Fiqrije's hometown. A Bahá'í couple, travelled to Kosovo and met Fiqrije and two of her children. During their visit, the family shared that they had remained

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[117] The term "Holy Serbianism" is associated with Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, who used it in his 1935 speech to describe the intertwining of Serbian nationalism with Orthodox Christian values, emphasizing the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in shaping national identity.

[118] Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia*, 269–72.

[119] Appointed Guardian and leader of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921–1957.

steadfast in their faith, recounting how Shoghi Effendi had supported them during the war and later arranged for an American family to assist them materially.[120] Today, their descendants continue to live in Kosovo, carrying forward the legacy of their ancestors.[121]

This case study is interesting as it shows that the community was not really persecuted if an ordinary family managed to stay Bahá'is for so long, on the other hand it shows the resilience of this family, that kept its traditions for so long despite all the political changes.

Conclusion

This paper explores the role of major religious communities in Yugoslavia, examining the state's relationship with these communities, as well as their interactions with one another and with the state from the interwar years, through World War II, and until 1989. It highlights how the actions and influences of these prominent religious communities often contributed to challenges within the country. The Communist Party's approach to religion is also analysed, particularly its persecution of larger religious institutions while allowing smaller ones to operate. This analysis also highlights the conflicts and ambiguities surrounding religious freedom in Yugoslavia, attributing responsibility to both the government and religious communities. Religious groups often prioritized demands for their own religious freedom and human rights while refraining from advocating for others when necessary.[122]

The development of the Bahá'í community and Jehovah's Witnesses offers a unique case study of state–religion dynamics and demonstrates how factors such as national identity, legal compliance, and ideological compatibility with the state influenced their treatment within the broader context of religious freedom. By examining their interactions with the state, we can observe how these communities navigated evolving demands, laws, and restrictions. Contrary to assumptions that such

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120 Alex A. Käfer, *Die Geschichte Der Österreichischen Baha'i-Gemeinde*, 2nd ed. (Wien: Esselmont Verlag, 2020), 418–422.

121 The author's friends now live in Prishtina and are neighbours of Refo and Fiqrije Capari's grandchildren, and they participate in some of the activities together.

122 Mojzes, "Religious Liberty in Yugoslavia," 40–41.

groups might have disappeared under the pressures of an authoritarian regime, both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Bahá'ís demonstrated resilience and adaptability, maintaining their presence and even fostering growth amidst challenging circumstances and they both still exist and function today.

As for further research: Numerous smaller religious communities existed in Yugoslavia, whose study would be both significant and intriguing. However, such research presents considerable challenges due to the limited accessibility or non-existence of archival materials and official documentation. Many of these communities operated on the margins of society, often avoiding formal registration or recognition to evade state scrutiny, leaving little trace in state records or their communities' archives. The absence of systematic documentation hinders efforts to understand their organizational structures, membership dynamics, and interactions with the state. In this context, oral histories and personal narratives offer an invaluable resource for reconstructing their experiences.

To continue the research of the Bahá'í community, collecting testimonies from members and their descendants would provide nuanced insights into how these communities navigated a restrictive legal and social environment, preserved their beliefs, and maintained cohesion under pressure. The legacy of these communities in the post-socialist era also remains an underexplored avenue of research. Understanding how their experiences during the Yugoslav period shaped their identity, resilience, and integration into the religious landscape of the successor states could provide critical perspectives on their long-term development. The transition from suppression or marginalization to varying degrees of recognition and freedom in the post-socialist context presents an opportunity to examine how historical challenges informed their strategies for survival and growth in a radically altered sociopolitical environment.

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