Conversions in Central and Eastern Europe

The Politics of Religion and Nonreligion across the 20th Century

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Introduction

This study explores religious conversion in interwar Slovenia,[1] an overwhelmingly Catholic society where shifts in religious affiliation carried profound social and national implications. It argues that conversion possesses dynamic capacities, enabling it to transform individual identities and reshape communal boundaries while also generating new ones, thereby challenging the notion that religious identity is immutable. Focusing on two minority communities – the German Evangelical Church (GEC)[2] and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) – the chapter analyzes how conversion, as shaped by individual agency, communal norms, and institutional power, illuminates the intricate interplay of personal, social, and political forces.

Historical research into conversion in this region has been hindered by scarce and fragmented sources. Yet subjective accounts, such as writings by clergy, including parish chronicles, and biographical records, provide valuable insights into contemporary perceptions. These narratives show that conversions – often driven by pragmatic concerns, such as social mobility, economic advantage, or political convenience – were viewed with deep suspicion by the Catholic majority. The prevailing discourse, shaped by the theologian Anton Mahnič's assertion that the essence of Slovenian identity is inextricably linked to Catholicism,[3] framed converts to the GEC or SOC as potential threats to national unity. Even if converts did not understand their conversion in absolute terms, their former co-religionists – upholding an absolutist view of faith – might not have hesitated to brand them as a special kind of traitor, labeling them "apostates" (Wolters 2019, 71).

Employing a conceptual framework that situates conversion within broader social, political, and cultural contexts, this chapter compares the reception, recruitment, and assimilation strategies of the GEC and the SOC. It contrasts conversion processes primarily involving members of the German minority with those in which most converts were Slovenians joining an ethnically distinct religious tradition. Furthermore, it examines how both Churches navigated state pressures, manipulated national loyalties, and responded to internal divisions. In doing so, it illuminates the broader transformation of religious identities during a period marked by intense ideological conflict and state intervention, ultimately revealing

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how religious change was intricately linked to the construction of national identity in interwar Slovenia.

Religious Conversion – In Context

The study of conversions in the past is inherently challenging. With interlocutors gone and historical sources – archival material, biographical accounts, parish chronicles etc. – scarce and scattered, it is rare to be able to conduct an in-depth analysis of conversion narratives beyond a few individual cases documented in (auto)biographies. Research into religious change in interwar Slovenia is therefore limited. Scholars are often left with either raw numbers of converts – and even these are few and far between, because the data were not systematically collected in central institutions and may have been lost or dispersed in various archives – or analyses of the sociopolitical contexts underlying these conversions.

This chapter aims to reconstruct the main characteristics of conversions within two minority religions. Although the primary sources (including a German Evangelical pastor's depiction of German Evangelicals in Slovenia, the chronicle of a Serbian Orthodox parish, and a Roman Catholic bishop's diary) are subjective and often biased, they remain valuable representations of attitudes and reactions to conversion – perceptions that influenced both the immediate community and the wider majority Catholic society. The prevailing opinions, expressed from positions of authority, shaped how converts were viewed – especially since Catholicism was the primary faith abandoned by most, though some converts returned later, particularly from 1935 onward.

My conceptual understanding of conversion embraces definitions that emphasize the importance of the context in which conversions are embedded. Lewis Rambo, for instance, depicts conversion as a process involving multiple, interactive, and cumulative factors, asserting that "conversion is contextual and cannot be extricated from the fabric of relationships, processes, and ideologies which provide the matrix of religious change" (Rambo 1989, 48). In a similar vein, Henri Gooren's "conversion career" approach includes all individuals engaged in a multilevel process – preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation (Gooren 2010, 3, 50) – although it does not necessarily follow a linear progression. Such a definition encompasses those who remain at the affiliation stage without expressing full religious commitment (for instance, those converting for strategic reasons such as obtaining a divorce or remarrying, or in cases of forced conversions followed by subsequent reconversions) as well as people who leave the religion they were born into without formally changing their affiliation or belief. Deconversion itself can be viewed as a process marked by stages such as "distancing" (as in the aforementioned case), "de-ritualization," "deconversion," and "secularization" (Szpiech 2019, 262; cf. Streib, Hood, and Keller 2016, 19–20; Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen 2019). While the decision to leave religion and adopt nonreligion – what might be called "atheization" in state socialist regimes (see Borowik, Ančić, and Tyrała 2013, 622–37; cf. Paloutzian 2005, 401; Mithans and Režek 2025) – constitutes a change of meaning system and therefore a conversion.

Ines W. Jindra's definition, which considers conversion as changes in a person's religious beliefs – whether sudden or gradual, including shifts from one religion to another, from no religious commitment to faith, or even the renewal of faith within the same religious group (Jindra 2014, 10) – contains nearly all the aforementioned varieties of conversion, as does Lewis R. Rambo's notion that "conversion is what a group or person says it is" (Rambo 1993, 7), at least as long as we maintain the primacy of self-ascription over attribution.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on conversion over the past two decades, historical research remains on the margins, typically aligning with broader trends in sociology, anthropology, and the psychology of religion (Baer 2014, 25), albeit with certain methodological adjustments informed by the nature of historical sources and a distinct temporal perspective. Historians like Marc D. Baer have also questioned the notion of conversion as a totalizing experience, arguing instead that it is both an event (or series of events) and a gradually unfolding, dynamic, yet frequently incomplete process (Baer 2014, 25–26; see also Streib and Keller 2004, 186).

The focus of the chapter is on the social dimensions of conversion. Conversion is not merely a personal journey; as argued by Andrew Buckser, it is a phenomenon with significant implications for the social groups involved. One does not simply join a new faith or meaning system but enters a network of relationships with its members. Consequently, conversion alters not only the individual but also the collective fabric of communities that must either accommodate or contest the new convert (Buckser 2003, 69). The contribution particularly focuses on social or pragmatic conversion (Wolters 2019, 60; Buckser 2003) – often motivated by practical, conformist considerations such as social, economic, or political benefits – and, more specifically, "statement conversion." In such cases, conversion is not driven by an abrupt inner transformation but is a strategic choice that publicly challenges established power relations and dominant religious discourses (Rimestad 2024).

Religious Minorities in a Dominantly Catholic Society: The Question of National Loyalty

Interwar Yugoslavia was a multiethnic, multireligious state, and the incorporation of Slovenian lands in 1918 brought significant religious changes. Previously part of the majority-Catholic Habsburg monarchy, Slovenia now formed part of a kingdom characterized by three major religious communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church (46.6%), the Catholic Church (39.4%), and the Islamic Religious Community (11.2%) (Šircelj 2003). Although the constitutionally guaranteed equality of recognized religions was enshrined in law, in practice this principle was not upheld, and the SOC, in particular, enjoyed certain privileges, including the open recruitment of new members, although it still had to adapt to a new reality marked by competition, particularly from the Catholic Church.

In interwar Slovenia, the religious landscape remained overwhelmingly Catholic, with approximately 97% of the population identifying as such in both the

1921 and 1931 censuses. However, urban areas began to show increasing religious plurality. Judaism and Protestantism were present, with Protestantism emerging as the largest minority religion, accounting for 2.6%[4] in 1921. After World War I, the SOC gained the most by founding parishes and erecting churches in the largest urban centers. Although it was the third-largest religious group overall, by 1931 it comprised merely 0.6% of the population. The Old Catholic movement[5] was also a new phenomenon in the region, as was Islam, though, at slightly under 0.1%, the number of Muslims was minimal, albeit slightly increasing at this time, comparable to the number of Jews (Šircelj 2003; Cvelfar 2017; Cvirn 2005). Despite the modest numbers of non-Catholics and the resulting low level of scholarly interest in the subject, the slowly changing religious landscape had a discernible societal impact.

The dominant Catholic Church and its political proponents tended to associate both "old" and "new" religious minorities with non-Slovenian nationalities – such as German Evangelicals and Orthodox believers – or tended to dismiss them as the outcome of rare, insignificant, and largely pragmatic decisions by individuals who had not been good Catholics to begin with. This consistent rhetoric is illustrated by the 1928 diocesan ordinariate's request for data on conversions to Serbian Orthodoxy (specifically, Orthodox Slovenians[6]), which indicates deep-seated discomfort with religious mobility that cannot be ignored.[7]

Mass conversions had already occurred in the region as part of the "Away from Rome" movement (*Los-von-Rom-Bewegung*) during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[8] However, these were largely confined to German Catholics and were not a common occurrence among Slovenians, as was the case with conversions to the SOC, the Old Catholic Church, and other denominations. When it came to the GEC, some Germans sought national consolidation within a single religious community. For most converts – predominantly people dissatisfied with Catholicism – the act of conversion was in many respects a manifestation of anti-Catholic sentiment, echoing variants of the "Away from Rome" movement.[9]

Slovenian political Catholicism further reinforced the link between the Catholic faith and national identity. Influential voices such as the chief ideologue of Slovenian political Catholicism, Anton Mahnič, contended in the late 19th century that Catholicism was an inseparable part of Slovenian identity and that any deviation from it would be detrimental. This so-called either-or principle was later adopted by much of the Catholic discourse and, in the interwar period, even radicalized by Mahnič's successor, Aleš Ušeničnik, who argued that anyone abandoning Catholicism was stripped of their true Slovenian identity (Ušeničnik 1925, 53). This discourse, disseminated through the media and politics (with the influential Slovenian People's Party at the forefront), vehemently opposed any form of religious persuasion by minorities, thereby fueling widespread distrust of converts.[10] That said, the concerns over the Marxist "threat" had always been their prime occupation (cf. Ramšak, Mithans, and Režek 2022).

Although Catholic Church officials and prominent politicians exchanged correspondence regarding measures to curb religious recruitment by minority religions – particularly those not officially recognized – the link between the

Catholic Church and the state was never as entrenched as in, say, fascist Italy, Estado Novo, Spain under Franco, or Austria under Dollfuss and Schuschnigg. The Catholic Church had the upper hand in Slovenia based on Austrian legislation, which was still in force and also hindered religious conversions from Catholicism, as there was not enough political will to pass an interreligious state law (Mithans 2017, 101–3).

Both the SOC and the GEC invoked (supra)national loyalty in their recruitment efforts. They portrayed the Catholic Church as antagonistic toward the Orthodox (Buchenau 2007, 251) or as more supportive of the Slovenians (Cvirn 1997, 239; Jenuš 2011, 216), thereby depicting it as non-patriotic, non-Yugoslav – especially given the perceived influence of the Pope and his dependence on fascist Italy – or as biased toward the Germans because it did not respect their supposed superiority.

The German Evangelical and Serbian Orthodox Churches in Slovenia: A Historical Overview

In a comparative analysis of the conversion characteristics – particularly sociopolitical – of the two religious communities in question, an in-depth contextualization will be undertaken. To this end, a brief overview of the foundational scholarship on both the GEC – and by extension, the German minority in Slovenia – and the SOC in interwar Slovenia is necessary.

The first post-Counter-Reformation German Evangelical parishes in the Slovenian lands of Cisleithania were founded in the mid-19th century by immigrant Protestants, primarily from German lands and Switzerland: Ljubljana in 1850, Celje in 1854 (independent by 1901), and Maribor in 1862 (May 1927, 3–4; Zajšek 2010, 30–47). These parishes, declared to include only German members, initially comprised recent immigrants but increasingly drew from integrated converts – particularly after the "Away from Rome" movement, which gained momentum in Lower Styria, notably in Maribor and Celje. Between 1897 and 1914, a total of 1,796 German Catholics in the Maribor Diocese joined the GEC (Kovačič 1928, 419). From 1903 to 1918, Maribor's German Evangelical community nearly quadrupled (see Figure 10.1), as many Germans embraced German Evangelicalism to assert their ethnic identity. Pastor Ludwig Mahnert became a prominent figure of the movement beyond the region. Still, only about 10% of Germans in Slovenian lands were German Evangelical: 3,670 in 1918, dropping to 2,450 by 1925 (Zajšek 2010, 149; Wild 1980, 37, 87), and although most Germans were Catholics, German Evangelicalism remained strongly linked to German identity. During the "Away from Rome" movement, German Evangelicals even adopted a propagandist slogan "To be German means to be Lutheran," (Zajšek 2010, 73), although locally, "To be Lutheran means to be German," would be more accurate.

Mass emigration following the 1918 turnover and aggressive Slovenization[11] drastically reduced the size of the German minority. We cannot determine the exact number of Germans in Slovenia, as Austro-Hungarian censuses recorded the language of communication, while Yugoslav ones recorded mother tongue. Thus, the drop from 106,377 in 1910 to 41,514 in 1921 was not solely due to emigration.

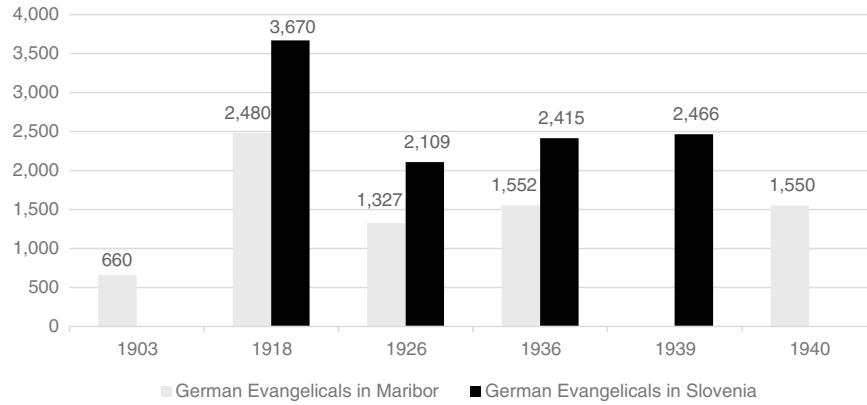

Figure 10.1 German Evangelicals in the Maribor parish and Slovenia (1918–1941)[12]

However, the continued decline – especially to 28,998 native German speakers in 1931 – also reflected efforts by the Slovenian authorities to "return the stealthy German-thinking individuals who, because of their upbringing, weakness of character, or economic dependence, have served the foreigner, to the nation they had abandoned" (Nećak 2002, 61). Such circumstances also led to a decline in German Evangelicals of more than 40% – despite notable early interwar conversions. In the 1930s, the parish grew only slowly, reaching about two-thirds of its 1918 size (Zajšek 2010; Potočnik 1999; Jenuš 2011; Rahten and Suppan 2025).

Despite the discriminatory nation-building policies of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes – which particularly affected the public administration and teachers – the German minority retained an important role, especially in Maribor. Although politically weakened, they remained a socioeconomically robust minority until 1945. In the 1920s, they were deeply attached to their school system, social life, and language, maintaining these spheres through organizations such as the German Party (*Deutsche Partei*), the Kulturbund, a specialized political-economic association (*Politisch-ökonomischen Verein für Deutsche*), newspapers, and the Seniorate of the GEC in Slovenia, which maintained connections with other German Evangelicals across the kingdom.

The *Kulturbund*, in particular, emerged as a forum for pro-Nazi tendencies, with Maribor becoming a center for supply, propaganda, and liaison activities between the Third Reich, Austrian Nazis, Nazi refugees, and the Yugoslav authorities. After 1933, the German minority's National Socialist orientation intensified, and by 1941 it increasingly operated as a fifth column. Although banned in 1935 for exceeding its remit and recruiting Slovenian children, the *Kulturbund* continued to work underground, reopened in 1939, and resumed open agitation among Slovenians. Some Slovenians were sympathetic toward Hitler and Nazism and even saw the annexation as an opportunity to restore order and solve their economic issues, thereby blurring the boundaries of imagined nations and (again) reinvigorating

the significance of regional identity. The German minority welcomed the German occupying forces in 1941, even seizing control of Maribor before their official arrival (Ratej 2021, 11–13, 17; Potočnik 1999; Rahten and Suppan 2025).

After the occupation of Yugoslavia, most of the German minority collaborated with the occupation authorities. However, their postwar fate had long been determined, echoing the Allied views on the future of the German minorities in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Yugoslav laws stipulated the confiscation of the property of the German Reich and German nationals (except for a few resistance supporters) as well as the assets of war criminals. The majority of the German minority – 15,000–16,000 people – had already withdrawn with the German army before the war's end. Between late 1945 and early 1946, up to 9,500 were deported; at least 529 perished in camps or were victims of extrajudicial killings. Most refugees resettled in Austria. By some estimates, only about 2,000 ethnic Germans remained in Slovenia (Režek and Burz 2025, 451; Tominšek Čehulić 2012, 75–79; Baš and Baš 1999).

Except for a few "Uskoki" villages,[13] Slovenia was largely uncharted territory for Eastern Orthodoxy. After the unification, however, according to official censuses from 1921 and 1931, as well as parish data before World War II, the number of Orthodox believers in Slovenia quickly grew to 6,611 by 1921 – with a third residing in Ljubljana – and then remained stable. Among the newly formed Serbian Orthodox municipalities, Ljubljana was the most significant, followed by Maribor and Celje, mirroring the locations of German Evangelical parishes. The military played a key role in organizing these parishes, funding chapel construction and appointing army chaplains to serve as priests, due to the high number of Orthodox soldiers. It was not until 1938 that Ljubljana got a permanent Orthodox priest. Despite the wish to be directly subordinate to the Patriarch, Slovenian Orthodox communities fell under the jurisdiction of the Eparchy of Gornji Karlovac and, from 1932, the Eparchy of Zagreb, except for Marindol. After World War II, efforts to establish a Slovenian eparchy resumed, led by Gorazd Dekleva, the first Orthodox priest of Slovenian descent (Cvelfar 2017).

By the late 1930s, tensions between Serbian and certain Slovenian Orthodox believers intensified. A group within the Brotherhood of Orthodox Slovenians pushed for greater use of the Slovenian language in religious practice, opposed the exclusive use of the Cyrillic script, and demanded a Slovenian Orthodox priest in Ljubljana. These disputes, rooted in national identity but not entirely nationally predetermined, were evident in all three church municipalities but came to a head in Ljubljana, where supporters unsuccessfully sought to take control of the church municipal administration in the 1939 elections. The SOC parishes operated in a predominantly Catholic environment, with army chaplains covering large areas and also performing parish functions, including religious instruction for children, hospital visits, and civilian religious rites. Russian refugees also contributed to Orthodox life, particularly in Ljubljana. The Brotherhoods of Orthodox Slovenians, starting in Celje in 1934 and forming a union in 1935, aimed to promote Orthodoxy among Slovenians. However, they often clashed with parish priests and church administrations (Cvelfar 2017; Mithans 2022).

Initially, Orthodox services were held in military barracks, with state and private donations funding church construction. In all three cities, prime land was allocated for churches, only in Maribor encountering some local opposition that led to unsuccessful legal challenges. The churches elicited mixed reactions from the locals. Beyond their religious significance, these monumental structures conveyed – or at least were supposed to convey – a strong symbolic dimension, both national and Yugoslav. The first church was completed in Celje in 1932. Ljubljana's church was inaugurated in 1936. In Maribor, financial difficulties delayed interior completion, and construction was ultimately halted by the German occupation. The occupying forces, viewing these churches as symbols of Yugoslavism, targeted them deliberately, demolishing those in Celje and Maribor (Cvelfar 2017).

Expression of Religion Through Conversion: The German Evangelical and Serbian Orthodox Church Compared

To analyze how conversions to the GEC and the SOC manifested in Slovenia, basic – often intertwined – elements and circumstances of conversion will be showcased: religious recruitment ("proselytization"), reasons of conversion, perception of converts by/in the religious community being left and the one being joined, as well as the state authorities (legislation, spatial positioning) and relations between the two Churches.

The Churches found themselves in starkly different positions regarding the recruitment of new members. The SOC enjoyed full state support, at least from Belgrade, while the GEC faced significant postwar obstacles due to border tensions and the shift in power to the Slovenian majority. Hostile conditions confined GEC recruitment largely to church premises – pastors being the chief agitators – and underground efforts, of which there are limited records. As the pastor in Celje, Gerhard May, wrote in 1927, the new circumstances prevented missionary and propaganda work among the German minority, forcing activities into secrecy to avoid political scrutiny (May 1927, 21). Unlike at the time of the "Away from Rome" movement, agitation through newspapers such as *Deutsche Wacht* and *Marburger Zeitung* was no longer possible. Pro-German cultural societies, such as *Südmark* and *Deutscher Shulverein*, were abolished in 1919 (Jenuš 2011, 119).

Between 1918 and 1921, a total of 564 predominantly German Catholics converted to the GEC in the Maribor parish alone, accounting for nearly half the total membership by 1926, with around 1,000 conversions during the whole interwar period (see Figure 10.2). Vicar Hubert Taferner reported that every convert in Maribor was interrogated by the police to check that the reason for conversion was not political,[14] reflecting the state's oppressive stance. Although, I have not found any police archive documents on this subject so far, political or national motives played a pivotal role in these conversions (cf. Trauner 2006, 475, 503–4). Rivalry with Catholicism remained, though "soul-hunting" lessened. As Zajšek noted, both the Catholic Church and the GEC engaged in recruitment efforts to (re)convert (former) German Catholics. Both Catholic and German Evangelical clergy occasionally resorted to morally dubious practices in their "hunt for souls," including

threats directed at German converts, attempts to persuade women to switch confession, performing baptisms or weddings without proper consent or authorization, conducting mixed-faith weddings without the approval of the other pastor or priest, and even blackmailing converts on their deathbeds (Zajšek 2010, 46, 50–51, 150).

Gerhard May identified the primary reason for these social conversions as the preservation of nationality in the face of state and majority pressure. The GEC had to be "insistently national-missionary, national-shepherding, national-political," fostering unity even without explicitly mentioning politics or nationalism (May 1934, 124).

On the other hand, the SOC had ample resources and various incentives for recruiting and mobilizing new members. The most common interwar conversion was from Catholicism to Serbian Orthodoxy, framed as a patriotic act, inasmuch as Catholicism was seen as connected to Rome. The SOC and the GEC endorsed anti-Catholic sentiment as a unifying factor, fostering both German and Yugoslav consolidation.

Thanks to the military, the SOC's "proselytization," though voluntary, was well funded. Its clergy, as state officials, received substantial allowances. Slovenian liberals, ardent supporters of Yugoslavism – which increasingly revealed itself in practice as largely Serbian-centered – and long-standing opponents of political Catholicism, often endorsed the spread of Serbian Orthodoxy in Slovenia, particularly through media propaganda. The Liberal journal *Nova doba* (New Age), published in Celje, was the most active promoter of conversions, even listing the names of "patriots" who had left the Catholic Church in protest against the Vatican's perceived inaction over the forced assimilation of Slovenian and Croatian minorities by fascist Italy. Indeed, the Holy See responded to pressure from the fascist regime by forcing Slovenian and pro-Slavic bishops in Venezia Giulia to resign, citing the "higher interests of the Church" (Pelikan 2022, 234; Cvelfar

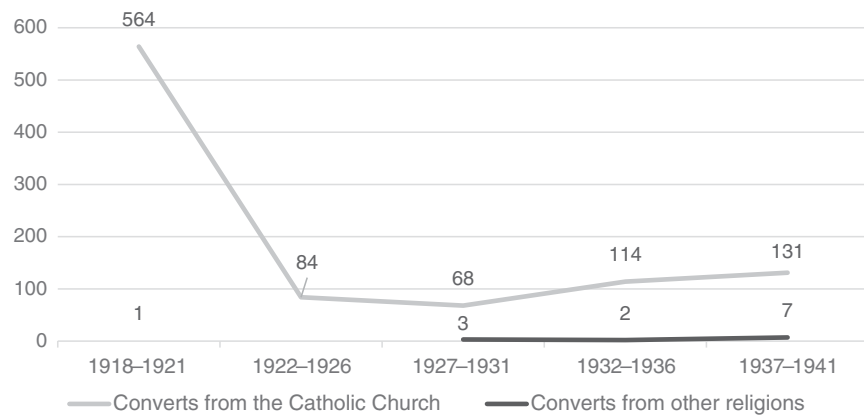

Figure 10.2 Data on new affiliations in the German Evangelical parish in Maribor (1918–1941)[15]

2017, 119). In the face of growing criticism, the Papal Nuncio in Yugoslavia, Ermenegildo Pellegrinetti, acknowledged the risk of defections, identifying Slovenian Catholic immigrants from Venezia Giulia as especially "vulnerable" to conversion to Serbian Orthodoxy.[16] Nevertheless, the Serbian Orthodox community often failed to accommodate converts' needs. Many conversions were driven by opportunistic considerations – such as divorce, remarriage, legitimizing children, or career advancement, particularly within the public administration and the military. The 1929 Law on the Serbian Orthodox Church granted its ecclesial courts nationwide jurisdiction, enabling the dissolution of Catholic marriage upon conversion, a privilege similar to that afforded to Sharia courts (Mithans 2017). This legal advantage, allowing former Catholics to divorce and remarry – a clear example of pragmatic conversion – was not granted to the GEC, thereby likely depriving it of more converts (May 1927, 23).

Available statistical data for two of three large Serbian Orthodox parishes illustrates conversions in the interwar period: in the parish of Ljubljana 1,036 people converted, in Celje 398 (see Figure 10.3) (Cvelfar 2017, 116–18, 124–25, 521; Bulovan 2010; Buchenau 2007, 251; Mithans 2022), which is a relatively large share, given that Slovenia had fewer than 7,000 Orthodox. However, many converts never attended church, as clearly their motives were circumstantial rather than religious. Indeed, according to the estimations of the Orthodox parish priest of Celje, Ilija Bulovan, this applied to up to 80% of converts (Bulovan 2010, 72). Some did join Brotherhoods of Orthodox Slovenians promoting Serbian Orthodoxy. In late 1939, the SOC in Ljubljana was preparing a manual *Šta treba da zna onaj, koji želi da pređe u pravoslavlje* (What people who want to convert to Orthodoxy should know), but the outbreak of war prevented it from being completed (Cvelfar 2017, 120).

The vital aspect of conversion lies in how a convert is treated by both their new and former religious communities – especially in an era when religion permeated

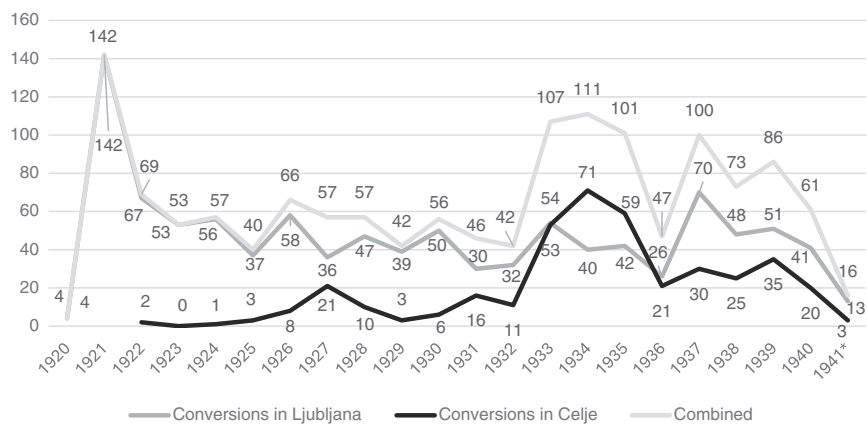

Figure 10.3 Conversions to Serbian Orthodoxy in Ljubljana and the Celje parish[17]

every sphere of life. Catholic circles – including the prince-bishop of Ljubljana Anton B. Jeglič – consistently condemned conversions from Catholicism to the GEC and the SOC, the Old Catholic Church and to other religions, using the same discourse since the "Away from Rome" movement, namely that the converts were not good Catholics anyway and that their numbers were negligible (Jeglič 2015, 998). However, as Fran Kovačič observed – his words resonating also with the spirit of the interwar era – despite the loss being minor, numerically speaking, "this movement seriously wounded religious consciousness; the constantly recurring apostasy undermined religious conviction even in those who had not apostatized themselves because it gave the impression that religion was like a dress that changes with the weather" (Kovačič 1928, 420). Many Slovenian converts to Orthodoxy were repeatedly challenged by the Orthodox clergy for showing insufficient commitment and remaining Catholics "at heart" (Bulovan 2010, 72–73, 127). Consequently, reconversions to Catholicism occurred much more frequently among SOC than GEC adherents.

The experience of those joining the GEC was markedly different. While Orthodox Slovenians formed a distinct group within the SOC, resulting in tensions over language and autonomy, German Catholic converts sought to assert their German identity and distance themselves from the predominantly Catholic Slovenian majority. They integrated more readily with fellow Germans, who generally welcomed them, despite acknowledging that these converts required additional instruction. A pastor observed with satisfaction the growing attendance at communion services, noting that in Away from Rome parishes – where traditional church customs were absent – converts, who had seldom attended Catholic worship since marriage, were gradually adapting to Protestant rites and parish life (May 1927, 22).

The GEC, a singular religious and national entity, was in a better position to accept new members, having already evolved past the Away from Rome phase. Although internal party conflicts hindered conversions on the "German language island" in Kočevje (cf. Biber 1966, 33), the GEC generally embraced converts, even though their main motive was not religious. In contrast, the Serbian Orthodox parishes struggled to integrate converts, some of whom even developed separatist ideas, partly due to their ethnic orientation and failure to position themselves as an all-Yugoslav church. Priest Budimir tried to convince Brotherhoods that there were no Serbs or Slovenians in the Church, only Orthodox, while criticizing them for wanting to be something special (Cvelfar 2017, 220). High numbers of pragmatic conversions reinforced negative perceptions of the commitment of the converts.

Having relocated from military barracks, the newly built Serbian Orthodox churches not only sought to reinforce Yugoslav identity but also transformed urban centers by occupying the best available sites, commonly on the edge of the old towns. In contrast, Protestant buildings in the region were not nearly as remarkable nor did they usually occupy such prominent positions. Interestingly, though, in all three cities – Ljubljana, Maribor, and Celje – the churches of the SOC and GEC and a high school were built in proximity to one another.

Pastor May observed that the traditional friendship between Orthodox and Protestant groups in Eastern Europe was instructive, Eastern Orthodoxy generally being

more favorable to Protestants than Catholicism. Protestant churches maintained a friendly stance, even hosting Orthodox congregations for large events, albeit under strict safeguards. Nevertheless, there were persistent rumors that the Orthodox intended to seize Protestant churches, a danger that – at least at the time – was averted (May 1927, 21).

These good relations eventually floundered. Under German occupation, Serbian Orthodox churches in Celje and Maribor were demolished, and many Orthodox Slovenians were deported to Serbia, where they gathered in Belgrade around Slovenian priest Gorazd Dekleva. The latter founded the "Association of Orthodox Slovenians" in Belgrade, which grew to 1,400 members despite financial struggles and repression by occupying forces following denunciations by Catholic Slovenians. In Italian-occupied Ljubljana, the approach toward the SOC was more considerate; Italians even provided some financial support (Episkop Anastasije 1990), although reconversions and occasional coerced conversions occurred.[18]

After liberation, the Association expanded across Slovenia and, according to some estimates, consisted of 70% Slovenians, 20% Russians, and 10% Serbs. The Protestants and the SOC experienced (temporary) Slovenization. Unlike the state-established Croatian Orthodox Church in the NDH after ending forced conversions, the initiative for a semi-autonomous Slovenian Orthodox Church – an episcopal vicariate directly subordinate to the Patriarchate – came from the faithful and was backed by the Communist Party. This is evidenced by the arrest of the Serbian priest Bogdan Matković by the Yugoslav secret police and the temporary installation of Dekleva in Ljubljana in 1949 (Episkop Anastasije 1990; Cvelfar 2017, 100–1), after a similar arrangement in Maribor, with the aim of establishing "progressive" religious communities.[19] Despite the support of the Holy Synod, the Eparchy of Zagreb opposed the reform. The restoration of the Orthodox parishes was hampered by the state, a lack of resources, and (re)conversions to Catholicism,[20] ultimately failing to meet the expectations of Slovenians (Cvelfar 2017, 100–1). Peculiarly, in Maribor, after the German Evangelical churches were reopened (following the ban of German Evangelical worship there from 1945 to 1952), it shared the premises with the SOC until 1999. After the war, however, hardly any *German* Evangelicals remained, eventually being replaced largely by Slovenian settlers from Prekmurje (Zajšek 2010, 151).

Conclusion

To conclude, religious conversions in interwar Slovenia often raised suspicion, particularly among the Catholic majority. Converts who left the Catholic fold were seen as rare and "aberrant" figures, and their decisions were viewed not only as religious deviations but also as acts of national disloyalty. As demonstrated, converts sometimes faced legislative barriers and social marginalization (impelling them to reconvert), and systematic police interrogation was reported; conversely, some were perceived as leveraging conversion not only to exploit lacunae within the statutory framework but also to enhance their prospects for professional advancement or to strategically align themselves within a national minority. At the same time,

such departures were often downplayed as insignificant, with converts portrayed as never having been true Catholics to begin with and thus no great loss. Indeed, converts can shatter ideal-typical perceptions of religion as something someone is born into and expected to remain within – a fixed identity with impermeable boundaries.

Within the Catholic Right, there were increasing demands for ethnoreligious exclusivity, driven by a deepening perception of Slovenian national identity as inherently linked to Catholicism. Conversions to German Evangelicalism or Serbian Orthodoxy further disturbed this dynamic, as both groups employed nationalist rhetoric to attract new members, thereby reinforcing the strategic, increasingly political rather than religious nature of these conversions. German Evangelicals endeavored to recruit German Catholics, thereby strengthening ethno-confessional cohesion. Meanwhile, Serbian Orthodox propaganda framed Orthodoxy as the authentic custodian of Yugoslav patriotism, casting Catholicism as less compatible with the Yugoslav national ideal.

However, the rise of radical nationalism and open collaboration of the German minority, particularly German Evangelicals, with the occupying forces ultimately contributed to the GEC's dissolution following the end of World War II. The SOC – though in a markedly different position – also faced significant challenges under the new socialist authorities and narrowly avoided a similar fate, contending with both the pressures of Slovenization and severely strained financial circumstances. In the case of the GEC, Slovenian Protestants from Prekmurje eventually took over their remaining churches, while the temporary Slovenian Orthodox communities regained their exclusively Serbian character through migration from southern Yugoslavia.

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Press

Rimski katolik (The Roman Catholic), 1889, 1890

Notes

1 I will use the term Slovenia or interwar Slovenia for the Slovenian territory that was part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia.
2 In this region, the term *Evangelicals* is commonly used to refer to Lutheranism, specifically the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. Then as now it represented the largest Protestant community in Slovenia. *German* Evangelicals were exclusively members of the German minority who, unlike the majority of compatriots, adhered to the Lutheran faith rather than Catholicism. They typically had an ethnic German background, although some probably had Slovenian roots but opted for German identity (Jenuš 2011, 29).
3 See *Rimski katolik* [The Roman Catholic], no. 5, 1889, 466; no. 6, 1889, 589; no. 2, 1890, 149–150.
4 This percentage includes Evangelicals of the Augsburg and Helvetic confessions. A larger part of these are Slovenian Protestants from the region of Prekmurje, in the northeastern part of the Slovenian territory, which was in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy and were thus subjected to different administration and laws than the majority of Slovenians in Cisleithania, where Protestantism was almost exclusively a domain of the German minority.
5 The Old Catholic Church split from the Roman Catholic Church after the First Vatican Council, rejecting the newly introduced dogma of papal infallibility. In interwar Yugoslavia, it was a recognized and well-funded religious community, seen as more "national" than the Roman Catholic Church. In Slovenia, the Church began spreading more noticeably in the 1930s from Croatia, establishing its first parish in Ljubljana in 1936 (Dolenc 1998, 285).
6 The expression "Orthodox Slovenians" refers to Slovenian members of the SOC, mostly converts organized within Brotherhoods of Orthodox Slovenians. Immediately after the war, however, the term "Slovenian Orthodox" came to the fore, including in reports by the Yugoslav secret service referring to the Slovenian Orthodox parish (Archives of Slovenia (hereafter SI AS), 1931, II 0003349).
7 The Historical Archives Ljubljana (hereafter SI ZAL), LJU 489, 2012.
8 The movement was founded in the Austrian part of the Habsburg monarchy by the Pan-German politician Georg Ritter von Schönerer aimed at conversion of all Roman Catholic German-speaking people in Cisleithania to Lutheranism (also called Evangelicalism) or, more rarely, to the Old Catholic Church. It started with the introduction of the Language Decrees issued by Prime Minister Count Badeni in 1897, requiring civil servants in the Czech lands to be fully bilingual in German and Czech, which was strongly opposed by the Austro-German radical nationalists (Kovačič 1928, 419; Trauner 2006).
9 Buchenau also links conversions to the SOC to the "Away from Rome" movement. See Buchenau, this volume.
10 For example, the dean in Črnomelj, in response to the performance of a Baptist worship service, proposed to the diocese that Catholic Action should "include in its program the eradication of the heretical Baptist faith" (Ljubljana Archdiocesan Archives (hereafter NŠAL), V, 292).

11 Parallels can be made with the treatment of the Slovenian minority in Austria, where, just as with German minority in Yugoslavia, the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye pertaining to the protection of national minorities was largely ignored. See Rahten and Suppan (2025).
12 Based on Zajšek (2010, 149); Wild (1980, 37, 87).
13 Serbian Orthodox settlements in the parish of Marindol in the Bela Krajina region, established in the 16th century in the Slovenian-Croatian ethnic border area of the Military Frontier (*Vojna krajina*) (Promitzer 2015).
14 The Regional Archives Maribor (hereafter SI PAM), 1846, 63; 1846/001/001; cf. May 1927, 20.
15 Based on the data from SI PAM, 1821060/2; SI PAM, 1821060/3.
16 Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (hereafter AAV), Arch. Nunz. Jugoslavia, pos. 1209, b. 31. Pellegrinetti to Pacelli, Belgrade, 11 June 1936; AAV, Arch. Nunz. Jugoslavia, 1209, 31. Pellegrinetti to Pacelli, Belgrade, 8 August 1933.
17 Based on Cvelfar (2017, 124–25); cf. The Historical Archives Celje (hereafter SI ZAC), 0995.
18 NŠAL, V, 101.
19 SI AS 1931, MF II 0003609; MF II 0003489; MF II 0003350.
20 For the whole interwar period (1919–1940), 166 requests to officially convert from the SOC were sent to the Diocese of Ljubljana, while in the short period of 1941–1948, there were 143 (approx. half of which were due to divorce), along with several converts to the Old Catholic Church, making 313 in eight years (NŠAL, V, 100; 101).

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