
THE DYNAMICS OF ATHEIZATION IN POSTWAR COMMUNIST MONTENEGRO

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Introduction

The purpose of this article¹ is to present the process of atheization of Montenegrin society under communist rule from the immediate aftermath of World War II to the mid-1950s. We argue that the atheization of Montenegrin society was primarily the result of a planned policy implemented by the new communist authorities, which rested on several pillars, i.e. policies imposed towards religious organizations by the state, legal framework of religious practices, and practical measures of communist authorities. These measures, which we organized into several groups, included the removal of *zar* and *fredza*, the secularization of education, and the celebration of religious holidays. It is important to point out that Montenegro was the Yugoslav republic that was the most atheized, i.e. the state in which the share of atheists in the population grew the fastest and presented the highest percentage of the total population, of all Yugoslav republics. The atheization of Montenegrin society in the postwar period goes beyond, to a certain extent, the relationship of state authorities towards religious communities, and also includes the organized penetration of secularism into the everyday life of Montenegrin society.

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Existing scientific research on this topic predominantly analyzes the relationship between the new authorities and religious communities in other, larger republics of Socialist Yugoslavia. Research concerning the secularization of Montenegrin society is limited to a narrow circle of authors who have dealt with this topic, though they have made valuable contributions. Adnan Prekić² concisely analyzed the relationship of the communist regime towards religious communities from 1945 to 1955, and in a separate review³ he gave an overview of a special policy of secularization of the new regime towards Muslim women, concerning their clothing. Zvezdan Folić was the first – and, to our knowledge, remains the only scholar – to holistically present the relationship of the state authorities of communist Montenegro towards the three most protected religious communities in the state (Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim). His research spans two periods: 1945–1953⁴ and 1945–1965⁵ and, and in the second research in the period 1945–1965. A valuable secondary contribution to the study of the process of atheization of Montenegrin society are studies on religious communities in Montenegro, whose life, among other things, is followed during the communist rule. These studies include the works used in the research, especially the works of Aleksandar Stamatović,⁶ and a special study⁷ by Zvezdan Folić, Veseljko Koprivica, and Avdul Kurpejović. Equally valuable are the studies of Dragutin Papović, which can be useful for insights into the participation of intellectuals in the promotion of communist rule in the public

² Adnan Prekić, “The Religious Community and the Communist Regime in the Case of Montenegro 1945–1955,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 15, no. 44 (2016): 111–136.

³ Adnan Prekić, “Kampanja skidanja zara i feredže na sjeveru Crne Gore tokom 1947. godine,” *Glas Bihora*, no. 3 (2018).

⁴ Zvezdan Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori 1918–1953* (Podgorica: Istorijski institut Crne Gore: Društvo istoričara Crne Gore, 2001).

⁵ Zvezdan Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori 1918–1953* (Podgorica: Istorijski institut Crne Gore: Društvo istoričara Crne Gore, 2001).

⁶ Aleksandar Stamatović, *Istorija Mitropolije Crnogorsko-Primorske 1918–2009* (Podgorica: Unireks, 2014).

⁷ Zvezdan Folić, Veseljko Koprivica and Avdul Kurpejović, *Istorija muslimana Crne Gore 1918–2007, II* (Podgorica: Matica Muslimanska Crne Gore, 2015).

sphere of life in postwar Montenegro,⁸ the relationship of religious communities towards nationalisms in Montenegro,⁹ and a special work on the relationship of religious leaders with communist authorities from 1965 to 1990.¹⁰

However, there remains a lack of research that would concisely link, on the one hand, the planned policies of atheization of the communist authorities in Montenegro and the relationship of the authorities with religious communities, and on the other hand, the reception of these policies by the population. Most of the scientific research on the atheization of Yugoslav society, as we have mentioned, is dedicated to the larger Yugoslav republics.¹¹ In this sense, Montenegro is not viewed as a separate unit of analysis, and the Christian religious communities operating on its territory – the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church – are investigated within the framework of their activities at the Yugoslav level. Some studies¹² concerning the communist treatment of religion in Montenegro are related to the experiences of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro during communist rule. However, a more detailed comparative analysis of the communist attitude towards all three dominant religions in Montenegro is lacking.

Finally, Montenegro is a unique research example because it is a state that until the mid-19th century had integrated spiritual and secular government – Montenegro was ruled by Orthodox metropolitans, and a century later it became a state in which the process of atheism took place most strongly compared to the rest of Yugoslavia. Most scientific studies¹³ on this topic, which concern Montenegro, are focused

⁸ Dragutin Papović, *Intelektualci i vlast u Crnoj Gori 1945–1990* (Podgorica: Matica crnogorska, 2015).

⁹ Dragutin Papović, *Vjerske zajednice i nacionalizmi u Crnoj Gori (1965–1991)* (Podgorica: Matica crnogorska, 2023).

¹⁰ Dragutin Papović, “Vjerski poglavari u SR Crnoj Gori,” *Matica crnogorska* 20, no. 79 (2019): 133–160.

¹¹ See: Radmila Radić, *Država i verske zajednice 1945.–1970. Vols. I & II* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2002).

¹² See: Amfilohije Radović and Pavle Kondić, *Ljetopis raspete Mitropolije crnogorsko-primorske: vremena mitropolita Danila Dajkovića: 1961–1990* (Cetinje: Svetigora, 2008).

¹³ See: Vladimir Bakrač and Mirko Blagojević, “Religious Changes in Montenegro: From the Socialist Atheization to Post-Socialist Revitalization,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40, no. 7 (2020): 30–43, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss7/3/>.

on religious conversion in the post-communist period, as Montenegro once again became a statistical outlier after the 1980s, with the number of re-religious people growing rapidly. Other studies¹⁴ are focused on the largest religious community in Montenegro and its relations with the state in the 21st century. The aim of this study is to take a step back to re-examine the process of atheization in this small but unique Montenegrin society of three religious communities in the postwar period.

In this paper, the terms secularization and atheization are used interchangeably. The case of Montenegro and the communist attitude towards religion and faith after World War II implied both the secularization of society and the atheization of Montenegrin society. The secularization of society, education and the state, and the annulment of the privileged role that religious communities enjoyed in Montenegro until World War II, were formally present and implemented. However, further measures, which we will present in the paper, also led to the atheization of society, meaning the annulment of religiosity and the rejection of any theism itself. Therefore, along with the measures of secularization, the removal of the social significance of religious communities and religion, the atheization of society in Montenegro was also carried out by further means.¹⁵

Thus, the central research question of our work is therefore as follows: By what means did the Communist Party of Montenegro implement the policies of secularization and atheization of Montenegrin society in the postwar years, and to what extent were they successful?

¹⁴ See: Vladimir Bakrač, "Church and State in Montenegro: From the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Church of Serbia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 9 (2022): 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2394>; Danijela Vuković-Čalasan, Rajka Đoković, "Politics and Religion in Montenegro—From 'Theocracy' to a Civic State," *Religions* 14, no. 2, 251 (2023): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020251>.

¹⁵ Secularization and atheism in a two-way relationship with communism are the subject of extensive scholarly debate. For more information, see: David Herbert, "Christianity, Democratization and Secularisation in Central and Eastern Europe," *Religion, State and Society* 27, no. 3–4 (1999): 277–293, <https://doi.org/10.1080/096374999106485>; Vernon Pratt, *Religion and Secularisation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970). For more detailed findings in relation between Christian modernity and Marxist secularism in East-Central Europe see: Jure Ramšak, Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek, eds., *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2022).

Historical background

Until the mid-19th century, the Montenegrin state system was endemic compared to nearly all of Europe. From the 16th century until 1852, Montenegro was governed by church rulers – Orthodox bishops.¹⁶ Beginning in 1697, the title of prince-bishop became hereditary in the Petrović-Njegoš family. In the same period, until the second half of the 19th century, Montenegro fought a series of wars of liberation from Ottoman rule. Ultimately, this process resulted in the strong presence of the Christian-Orthodox determinant in creating national identity and the process of national liberation struggle. Additionally, until 1878, when it was internationally recognized at the Congress of Berlin, Montenegro was essentially a mono-religious society, with an absolute majority of Orthodox Christians.¹⁷ Orthodox Christians remain a majority of the Montenegrin population until today – see Table 1.

¹⁶ Gligor Stanojević and Milan Vasić, *Istorija Crne Gore. Knj. 3, Od početka XVI do kraja XVIII vijeka* (Podgorica: Istorijski institut Crne Gore, Pobjeda, 2006).

¹⁷ See: Živko M. Andrijašević and Šerbo Rastoder, *Istorija Crne Gore: od najstarijih vremena do 2003* (Podgorica: Centar za iseljenike Crne Gore, 2006); Jagoš Jovanović, *Istorija Crne Gore* (Podgorica: CID, 2001).

Table 1: Percentage of believers in Montenegro from 1931 to 2011

Religion	1931 ¹⁸	1953 ¹⁹	1991 ²⁰	2003 ²¹	2011 ²²	2023 ²³
Orthodox Christians	75.4%	45.8%	69.1%	74.2%	72.1%	71.1%
Catholics	7.2%	4.8%	4.4%	3.5%	3.4%	3.3%
Muslims	17.2%	17.7%	19.2%	17.7%	19.1%	20%
Others (Atheists and Minor Groups, Combined)	0.2%	31.7%	7.23%	4.6%	5.4%	5.6%

Even after the separation of ecclesiastical and secular power in Montenegro after 1852, the Orthodox Church maintained a strong influence in Montenegrin society. However, until 1918 it was subordinated to secular power, under the monarchy. The church was also the largest landowner in Montenegro,²⁴ from where it drew its economic and political strength. The position of religious communities in Montenegrin politics is evidenced by the fact that the Orthodox metropolitan, Catholic archbishop and the mufti were automatically members of Montenegrin Parliament according to the 1905 Constitution. In addition, the hilly and mountainous terrain of Montenegro, and the underdevelopment and infrastructural isolation from the rest of the Balkans and Europe contributed to a Montenegrin society and political culture that were characterized by patriarchy, a strong identification with religion and religious leaders, and a prominent role of religious organizations in social and political life of Montenegro.²⁵

¹⁸ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 113.

¹⁹ Vladimir Bakrač, *Religija i mladi: Religioznost mladih u Crnoj Gori* (Podgorica: Narodna knjiga, 2013), 155. In subsequent population censuses in 1961, 1971, and 1981, there was no section on religious affiliation.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u 2023. godini, MONSTAT, 2024, <https://www.monstat.org/cg/page.php?id=2282&pageid=1992>.

²⁴ For more see: Branislav Marović, *Ekonomska istorija Crne Gore* (Podgorica: CID, 2006).

²⁵ More on this.: Branko Pavičević, *Istorija Crne Gore, Sazdanje crnogorske nacionalne države: 1796–1878* (Podgorica: Istorijski institut Crne Gore, Pobjeda, 2006).

After becoming part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes²⁶ (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), religious organizations retained a dominant role in the social and then the spiritual sphere of the individual, with all the economic privileges, and society remained highly religious with insignificant cases of atheism.

Originally, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) was an ideological follower of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in both political ideas and strategies. Two Leninist approaches dominated its stance on religion: first, the legal separation of church and state, declaring religion to be a private matter for each individual. Religious freedom was consequently understood as the freedom to worship or not to worship. The second principle was that the task of the Marxist party was to help the working class turn away from religion,²⁷ which was considered superstitious and exploitative – a relic of the past.²⁸

Since its founding congress in 1919 in Belgrade, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had supported full secularization of society. This meant the separation of church and state, the abolition of public functions of the church, the confiscation of property belonging to churches and monasteries, and endowments, and the consequent agrarian reform on the properties of religious communities. During the local election campaigns of the Montenegrin communists in the interwar era, the clergy were equated with the bourgeoisie.²⁹

With the beginning of World War II and the subsequent occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by Axis powers, Yugoslavia was shaken by a parallel civil war that also had key elements of an inter-religious war

²⁶ Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije: 1918–1988, knj. 1, Kraljevina Jugoslavija: 1914–1941* (Beograd: Nolit, 1988).

²⁷ Josip Broz Tito specifically declared himself an atheist. During the war, however, he tried to give the impression that his partisan movement belonged to the religious tradition of the people; therefore, in a series of orders, he invoked the saints, such as on Saints Sava, Blaž, and George, and allowed the veneration of Cyril and Methodius. (Katrin Boeckh, “Vjerski progoni u Jugoslaviji 1944. – 1953.: staljinizam u titoizmu,” *Osteuropa Institut* 38, no. 2 (2006): 409.

²⁸ Paul Mojzes, “Religious Liberty in Yugoslavia: A Study in Ambiguity,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 6, no. 2 (1986): 25, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol6/iss2/2>.

²⁹ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 90.

and resulted in massive civilian deaths.³⁰ After the end of World War II, after which the Communist Party emerged as the victor, it got the opportunity to lead the policy of “brotherhood and unity” and suppression of the influence of religious organizations from the position of power.³¹

The peculiarity of the Montenegrin climate in the study of the tripartite relationship between the state, Communist Party and religious communities lies in the peculiar phenomenon that communist ideas managed to penetrate even within the church itself before World War II. These ideas were particularly expressed among the students of the seminary in Cetinje, the only school for Orthodox priests in Montenegro.³²

Secularization during the period of communist rule rested on several pillars, among which the relationship between the state and religious communities, the normative regulation of the position of religious communities, and the cultural and educational policies of the Communist Party should be emphasized.

Clergy, party, and war

Apart from Marxist-Leninist doctrinal views on religion and the relationship between state and religious organizations as promoters of the interests of the bourgeoisie, the religious policy of the new communist authorities was also determined by the fact that among both Christian and Islamic clergy there were collaborators of the occupying authorities. However, the attitude of the local and central clergy towards the occupier was not uniform. It ranged from a complete rejection of cooperation with the occupier, to tacit agreement, all the way to active

³⁰ For more on Yugoslav civil war during World War II see: Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije: 1918–1988, knj. 2, Narodnooslobodilački rat i revolucija: 1941–1945* (Beograd: Nolit, 1988).

³¹ Pero Morača, *Istorija Saveza komunista Jugoslavije: kratak pregled* (Beograd: Rad, 1977).

³² Atheistic tendencies were also present in the seminaries in Prizren and Sarajevo, but they were most strongly expressed in the seminary in Cetinje. The reason was that most of the children entered the seminary because of scholarships, and most of the children came from extremely poor families. Groups of seminary students were even arrested for spreading communist propaganda (Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 83; Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 93).

collaboration and helping the occupier in the fight against anti-fascist forces in all parts of Yugoslavia. Examples of this range of behavior can be found among the clergy of all religions in Montenegro throughout the war.³³ The most discussed topic during and after the war was the position of the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro during the war, that is, the priests of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (MCP). On March 27, 1941, a majority of 198 priests and 33 monks of the MCP took an openly anti-fascist stance.³⁴

The organized resistance of the anti-fascist forces in Montenegro began on July 13, 1941, marking the first organized uprising against the occupiers in Europe. During the uprising and practically until the end of 1941, MCP clergy collaborated with partisans – insurgents. The first national liberation movements formed on the liberated territory of Montenegro were inclusive. Some committees were even headed by clergy, such as the People's Liberation Committee in Berane.³⁵ Among the insurgents, there were 55 clergymen (theologians, theology students, and seminary students), including 25 Orthodox priests of the MCP.³⁶

³³ Folić et al., *Istorija muslimana Crne Gore 1918–2007*, 140–142. Thus, the imam from Podgorica, Sulejman Begović, was among the first Islamic priests to openly side with the Italian occupier. He was also the president of the Muslim-Catholic fascist organization. His conception of cooperation with the occupier was also supported by the local leadership of the Islamic religious community in Podgorica. On the other hand, the majority of Muslim youth from Podgorica thwarted their plans, siding with the Communist Party. *Ibid.*

Part of the Catholic clergy in Montenegro also got involved in the war, alongside the occupier or collaborating with him, which resulted in the murder of some of them, sentencing to death or long-term imprisonment or simply fleeing from Montenegro just before the end of the war. Nevertheless, some Catholic priests, including the Archbishop of Bar, Nikola Dobrečić, and the canon of the Cathedral Chapter in Kotor, Don Niko Luković, worked to help the people and prisoners of war along the coast of Montenegro. See: Šerbo Rastoder and Novak Adžić, *Moderna istorija Crne Gore 1988–2017.: od prevrata do Nato pakta* (Podgorica: Daily Press - Vijesti, 2020), 33. In the reports of the occupation authorities, such as that of Franko Scasellati, the Italian prefect in Boca dated September 8, 1941, it can be seen that both the Catholic and Orthodox clergy had an anti-occupation influence on the citizens (Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 73).

³⁴ Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 79–80.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 72.

The first central government body for the territory liberated after the 1941 uprising was the Assembly of Montenegrin and Boka patriots held in the Orthodox monastery Ostrog, in February 1942. Of the 65 delegates of the anti-fascist movement, five were priests.³⁷ The meeting, where the majority of delegates were communists, was blessed by a priest in front of an Orthodox icon and lighted candles.³⁸ At its conclusion, the so-called Ostrog Oath was adopted, which called for loyalty to the fight against the occupiers, with a spiritual undertone reminiscent of the oaths that marked centuries of struggle against various occupiers.

Even the partisan-communist units included clergy in their organizational structure. From the summer of 1942, there was a so-called religious officer in all partisan eateries, with medical staff.³⁹ All Christian priests wore a cross on their left hand and the Islamic crescent if they were Muslims, and below that the insignia of a brigade or battalion. In addition to religious ceremonies, they also had the obligation to keep a register of the dead.⁴⁰

In the winter of 1941, a higher stage of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) struggle began, including the fight against the counter-revolutionaries. Up until April 1942, 14 priests of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (MCP) had been killed in Montenegro. This change in the KPJ's attitude towards the clergy, particularly the Orthodox, was also related to the arrival and emergence of the Chetnik movement in Montenegro, which, as a royalist and anti-communist force, was supported by the Metropolitan of MCP Joanikije (Lipovac).

Since July 1944, the governing institution of communists in Montenegro was the Montenegrin Anti-Fascist Assembly of People's Liberation.⁴¹ The Religious Commission was established under it, which took over the jurisdiction of religious communities in managing religious issues in the last stage of the war and immediately after it.

³⁷ Dimo Vujović, "Ostroška skupština," *Istorijski zapisi*, no. 1 (1967): 115–146.

³⁸ Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 80.

³⁹ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: Politics, Culture and Religion in Yugoslavia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1992), 83.

⁴⁰ Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 83.

⁴¹ It is important to mention that, as the war was coming to an end, the communist authorities in the liberated territory of Montenegro began to dispose of monastery lands, by leasing uncultivated land to poor families. (Stamatović, *Istorija Mitropolije Crnogorsko-Primorske*, 186).

This activity was necessary for the MCP, as many Orthodox priests had died during the war, while others – along with Metropolitan Joanikije – left Montenegro with a large part of the population. They went to Western Europe to try to escape from the expected repression of communist units whose victory in the war was likely. However, the authorities managed to prevent their escapes. Communist forces stopped them in Slovenia, carrying out numerous executions, including the killing of Metropolitan Joanikije (Lipovac).

During the war, the MCP lost its metropolitan and 96 priests.⁴² The Archdiocese of Bar, i.e. the Catholic clergy in Montenegro, had suffered severe losses, with one-third of its clergy gone. This decline in personnel was largely due to the fact that in September 1945, the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia, through the Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Episcopate, excluded the possibility of sharing the revolutionary achievements of the new authorities, while condemning the crimes against the Catholic clergy.⁴³

Postwar relations between the state and religious organizations as a determinant of secularization intentions

The communist authorities regarded religiosity as a retrograde social force (and the ideology of defeated social movements) and worked on its marginalization. The first decade after the war was marked by efforts to exclude religious communities from all major social processes, a process that in Montenegro was decided at party congresses.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, the attitude of the new communist authorities towards religious communities was also a generator of the population's attitude toward religion.

⁴² Stamatović gives a longer list of priests, monks and churchmen who were killed, classified into several categories depending on how they died. See: Stamatović, *Istorija Mitropolije Crnogorsko-Primorske*, 194–207; Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 65.

⁴³ It is interesting that one of the signatories of the Shepherd's Letter was precisely Bar Archbishop Dobrečić, who later distanced himself from the letter. Rastoder and Adžić, *Moderna istorija Crne Gore*, 34.

⁴⁴ Prekić, "The Religious Community and the Communist Regime," 112.

The influence of religious organizations was undoubtedly exaggerated by the new authorities. Besides the decimated clergy at the end of the war, religious organizations had a hard time recovering from the war. The prejudices of the authorities were stronger than the facts, and this was the cause of suspicion towards all three religious communities. This mistrust was further reinforced by KPJ propaganda, which inspired certain segments of the population to attack the priests, and every form of priestly activity was closely monitored.⁴⁵

The period from 1945 to 1953 is generally recognized as the period of the greatest physical violence by the state and individuals against religious communities. However, social criticism of religion also came from within religious circles. Priest Simo Radunović wrote about the harmfulness of celebrating Patron Saints (*slava*),⁴⁶ while many imams criticized superstition, quackery, and fortune-telling among members of Islam. Lectures were held on the harmfulness of religion, and thousands of brochures were distributed explaining the incompatibility of religion with social reality. The communist leadership, in coordination with Blažo Jovanović, Montenegro's first postwar prime minister, advocated the need for the anti-religious campaign to focus on youth, an agenda strongly promoted at party meetings.

In the statute of the KPJ, it was emphasized that the profession of religion and the performance of religious ceremonies were incompatible with membership in the party (in a one-party system). Prekić⁴⁷ states that the exclusion of religious communities from social life in Montenegro can be traced on two levels – institutionally and through the direct influence of the party on its members. Party members were forbidden from practicing religious rituals or visiting temples, and religious buildings. For those who would not respect the instructions of the party, the punishment was a warning and expulsion from the party.

On the other hand, the activity of the clergy was controlled. Prekić states, referring to the instructions of the Central Committee of Religious Ideas in Titograd in 1952, that the activists of the party

⁴⁵ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 368–369.

⁴⁶ Family's veneration of their patron saint taking place annually, exercised in both Christian communities.

⁴⁷ Prekić, "The Religious Community and the Communist Regime," 118.

followed how conscientious persons interpreted religion. Prekić also cites an example of how school trips and manifestations were deliberately organized on religious holidays in order to avoid celebrating them.

In Montenegro, after 1952, every channel of communication with the population was specially used to condemn all forms of religiosity, namely the celebration of baptisms, baptism itself, fasting during Ramadan, or chanting in temples and mosques. Every visit of a party member to these places was recorded and condemned.⁴⁸

The main strategy employed by the new communist authorities to reduce the influence of religious communities and economically isolate them was the expropriation of their property.

The relationship between the state and religious communities in Montenegro was complementary to the agrarian reform plan.⁴⁹ The communist authorities planned a complete transformation of the agrarian policy, which required the accumulation of large land holdings that were not under state ownership. The land was mostly owned by religious communities and legal entities.

The reason for large land holdings in the hands of religious communities – mainly the SOC, lay in the fact that not only did the Church govern Montenegro until the middle of the 19th century as noted earlier, but also that it acquired the property by purchasing or by individuals bequeathing property to the church.

After communists seized power in Montenegro, agrarian reform could be implemented. Any landholdings that exceeded 10 hectares were confiscated from the local religious community. Religious institutions of greater importance or historical value were allowed to own up

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁹ The Communist Party propagated the secularization of education, the separation of church and state, and agrarian reform even in the interwar period. By 1945, the Yugoslav revolution had taken on a military and then later an economic character. As early as April 1945, the draft instructions for the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization were drawn up. Elaborating on the draft, Minister of Colonization Sreten Vukosavljević explained that the agrarian reform would lead to conflicts with all three religious communities, and that the one with the Catholic community may spill over into the international arena, so that it would be much easier for conflicts to take place at the level of the federal unit, i.e. that the decentralization of the agrarian reform amortizes the resistance of religious communities (Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 294).

to 30 hectares of arable land and 30 hectares of forest. The exception were endowments, which were stripped of everything.

The legal construction of “higher significance or historical value” was subject to interpretation, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was responsible for defining these terms. It interpreted that the religious buildings of greater importance included monasteries: Ostrog, Piva, Morača, the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, and subsequently, Savina. Of the other religious communities, the agrarian reform affected only the possessions of the Diocese of Kotor, due to the specific way it carried out its mission through endowments, foundations, and charities, which entailed complete expropriation (182 hectares, 21 ares, and 13 m²).⁵⁰

The SOC in Montenegro and elsewhere was the most affected by the forced nationalization of land.⁵¹ In total, 4,387 hectares, 80 ares, and 43 m² of its land were confiscated, which means that church properties constituted 44.80% of all land intended for agrarian reform in Montenegro.⁵²

The black box of the young communist state's policy towards religious communities was the Commission for Religious Affairs under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia. The commission's primary function was to maintain contact with religious community bodies, providing opinions and proposals, and ensuring the implementation and application of all legal norms. Given that other religious institutions in Montenegro – except the

⁵⁰ Rastoder and Adžić, *Moderna istorija Crne Gore*, 29; Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 293–315.

⁵¹ Islamic properties remained more or less intact due to coincidence – local authorities in predominantly Islamic municipalities treated the property of the Islamic religious community as a public good and temporarily ceded it for use by the local population, so the land of certain mosques of over 10 ha was hidden. A completely different circumstance occurred after the adoption of the Basic Law on Expropriation in 1947, when immovable property was confiscated, based on the relevant act of the competent state authority. Thus, a mosque was demolished in Harem, near Beran, and 35 acres of *wagfl*and were confiscated. In 1949, the main mosque in Berane was demolished due to the architectural reconstruction of the town. The compensation for the demolition of the mosque was paid only in 1962. In other places, the property of the Islamic religious community was reduced by a little more than 100 ares (Rastoder and Adžić, *Moderna istorija Crne Gore*, 29; Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 293–315).

⁵² *Ibid.*

Archdiocese of Bar – had vacant positions of religious leaders (priests were either killed or left the country during the war as noted earlier), the Religious Commission did the job of assigning clergy and meeting the religious needs of the population during the war.⁵³ However, they reported problems with some priests who were suspected of being close to the Chetnik movement, and they were prohibited from retaining their positions after the war.^{54,55}

Another type of influence of the communist government on religious communities was through the so-called priest associations, which were supposed to be a substitute for religious communities.⁵⁶ Priest associations had a double function. On the one hand, they would consist of those clergy who were actively or passively loyal to the communist authorities. On the other hand, through the association of priests, the government would control the work of religious organizations.

Clergy associations in Montenegro constantly received state subsidies. Between 1948 and 1956, the Orthodox clergy association received over 4 million dinars. The Islamic association, from 1951 to 1956,

⁵³ The communist authorities also performed the task of determining and appointing religious leaders after the war. In May 1945, the Religious Commission presented to the Holy Synod of Bishops its candidates for administrators of the MCP. The Holy Synod rejected the personal proposals of the Religious Commission after only 5 days as a whole, appointing persons whom it considered should form the administration of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro (Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 233–234). Already from the beginning of 1947, the placement of priests was under the responsibility of the church authorities. The Holy Synod of Bishops appointed Arsenije Bradvarević as the head of the SOC in Montenegro without consulting the authorities, which caused the state authorities to refuse his admission to them after the elections (*Ibid.*, 233–234).

⁵⁴ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 229.

⁵⁵ One exception in relation of religious communities to the new authorities is the Islamic clergy in Montenegro. As Prekić states: “The attitude of the Islamic religious community towards the new authorities and their acceptance of the values of the new system were confirmed on the occasion of the adoption of the Constitution of the Islamic Religious Community in Montenegro. In the message sent to the President of the Government, Mr Blažo Jovanović, after its adoption, representatives of the Islamic clergy stated that they were ‘deeply faithful and loyal to the democratic people’s authorities.’ The clergy of the Islamic Community said that they would do everything together with the Orthodox and Catholic populations to fulfill all the tasks that the reconstruction of the country entailed and the execution of the five-year plan.” See: Prekić, “The Religious Community and the Communist Regime,” 123.

⁵⁶ Srđan Barišić, “Srpska pravoslavna crkva i Jugoslavija,” *YU historija*, 2017, accessed November 21, 2024, https://yuhistorija.com/serbian/kultura_religija_txt00c5.html.

was allocated 900,000 dinars, while the Roman Catholic association received over 1.3 million dinars from 1953 to 1956. These grants fluctuated depending on the clergy's stance on contemporary political and social issues.⁵⁷

The most controversial of these was the Association of Orthodox Priests. It is important to note that the establishment of this association and its work proceeded slowly due to the opposition of the Metropolitan of MCP Arsenije, but in fact, the entire church leadership of the SOC in Yugoslavia was opposed to the existence of such a parallel organization. It is worth saying that one of the lowest percentages of membership of Orthodox priests in the association was precisely in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By the end of 1949, only 37.5% of the 120 Orthodox priests in Montenegro were members of the Association, most of whom were retired clergy. The irreconcilability of Metropolitan Arsenije towards the priest's association and other issues also led to his conviction in 1954. This year marked a turning point in the relationship between the state and the MCP, as cooperation and communication between the two became more intensive after that. By the end of 1954, over 90% of Orthodox priests in Montenegro had joined the Association.⁵⁸ At the Yugoslav level, the SOC continued to oppose the Association of Orthodox Priests strongly until the collapse of Yugoslavia. The Association of Priests, which effectively functioned as a mouthpiece for the communist authorities, sought to "democratize" the church hierarchy and reorganize the SOC, particularly concerning the status of the Church in Macedonia – a highly contentious issue. These efforts, however, were met with resistance from SOC bishops across Yugoslavia.⁵⁹

At the same time, the authorities organized an association of Islamic priests, known as Ilmia. It was founded in Titograd on November 20, 1951. The task of the association was to take care of the material status of Islamic priests, lead activities for their political and cultural upliftment, encourage Muslim women to attend school, and prevent abuse

⁵⁷ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 339–354.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 207–215.

⁵⁹ Đoko Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve III* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1991), 187–203.

of faith for political purposes and mockery. In fact, the relief provided material support for the imams, facilitating the action of removing the *zar* and *feredza*, etc. Almost all Islamic clerics were included in the membership.⁶⁰

The establishment of associations of Roman Catholic priests was somewhat slower. Eventually, it was founded in Kotor in 1953, and the competencies were similar to the other two associations, where co-operation with the state authorities was again emphasized on the platform of preserving and consolidating the achievements of the National Liberation Struggle. However, its membership was significantly smaller.

Legal framework of secularization policies

Every constitution of Yugoslavia from the communist period explicitly guaranteed freedom of religion. The Constitution of 1946 stipulated fully secular principles, guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion, and freedom of activity of religious schools, as long as their teaching is not against the Constitution. The freedom of activity of schools for priests, which were placed under the general supervision of the state, was determined, and the possibility of state aid for religious communities was legally provided.

Under the further policy of secularization, religious marriages were rendered null and void, because Article 46 stipulated that only marriages concluded before competent state authorities were considered valid. Immediately after the beginning of the secularization of Montenegrin society and the prohibition of the validity of church marriages, the number of such marriages dropped dramatically.⁶¹ The strongest

⁶⁰ The instruments of influence of the communist authorities on the Islamic community in Montenegro also had normative channels. For example, social insurance could only be obtained by those who were appointed by the competent bodies of the Community, with the condition that religious service was their only profession. This was done, knowing that a large number of mosque imams were also engaged in agricultural and commercial occupations. Due to the strictly established criteria, as many as 40 priests lost their jobs after 1954, 19 retired, so only 23 imams remained active. See: Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 235–240; *Ibid.*, 214–216.

⁶¹ For example, in the Archdiocese of Podgorica, there were 56 marriages in 1945, 25 in 1946, and only 5 church marriages in 1947. See more in: Stamatović, *Istorija Mitropolije Crnogorsko-Primorske*.

opposition came immediately from the MCP. The Islamic community had a slightly milder response to the normative regulation of the relationship between the state and religious communities. It was finally the most satisfied with these provisions, because all three groups were equal in Montenegro, in contrast to the unequal position of the Islamic community in Montenegro before the war.⁶² The Catholic Church had the most objections to the restriction of the activities of religious communities outside the spiritual sphere of activity since it traditionally had the most developed charitable and socializing role in Catholic environments.

The provisions of the first Constitution were insufficiently clear in many segments, which gave state authorities broad discretionary power in their interpretation, such as the provision on the possibility of financing religious communities, which in perspective clearly depended on loyalty to the state or the authorities.⁶³

In the Constitutional Law adopted in 1953, the collective practice of religion was spatially limited – permitting it only in religious institutions or surrounding areas such as churchyards or grocers, which could be limited for reasons of public order or of health. Exceptions were funerals or weddings that did not require prior administrative permission.⁶⁴

Compared to the adoption of the constitutions, work on the first Law on the Position of Religious Communities was much more dynamic. Almost all religious communities in Yugoslavia reacted negatively to the original law from February 1953 – except the Christian Adventist Church. The final version of the law did take into account some of the criticisms of religious communities (such as the removal of the position that prescribed that teaching in schools must be based on scientific achievements, that the acts of baptism and circumcision could

⁶² The progress that the Islamic community and Muslims in Yugoslavia felt during the communist period refers to literacy, the cancellation of the agrarian measures of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and material assistance to refugees in Muslim areas.

⁶³ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 159–161.

⁶⁴ Marko Božić, “Ni sekularna država ni laička republika? Pravni položaj verskih zajednica u Komunističkoj Jugoslaviji - normativna analiza zakonskog okvira,” *Pravni zapisi* 10, no. 1 (2019): 43–44, <https://doi.org/10.5937/pravzap0-21203>.

be performed with the consent of only one parent, and other positions) were rejected requests of religious communities to recognize religious holidays as state holidays, and students in religious schools were not granted the same rights as other students of state schools. Priests were not allowed to visit prison inmates. The law allowed the free establishment of religious communities.⁶⁵ State or local authorities could ban processions, gatherings or similar activities in the form of religious gatherings of religious communities.⁶⁶ This law not only declared religion a private matter of the citizen, but also reduced the church to a self-financing institution.

However, as the church traditionally relied on state aid, this had a great impact on its functioning. The social and economic activity of the church was narrowed – a significant part of its activities was completely taken over or limited by the state, such as marriages, registers, and baptisms and other rites. In the same year, due to the aforementioned activities of the state, relations between the SOC and state authorities were terminated. Subsidies, set out in the contracts on the social insurance of priests, were absent for that year. That year, nineteen Orthodox priests were convicted throughout Yugoslavia, among them four priests and, as we noted earlier, the Metropolitan of MCP Bradvarević for cooperation with opponents of the national liberation movement (partisan movement during the war and for inciting religious hatred with statements during the war about how the Roman Catholic Church had done great harm to the Orthodox population). In July of the following year, an indictment was brought against the seventy-year-old metropolitan and he was sentenced to several years in prison. He remained incarcerated until 1958 when he was placed under house arrest.⁶⁷

The Constitution of 1963 provided that religious communities could have, within the limits set by federal law, the right of ownership of immovable property, but nowhere was it stipulated that they were spared from possible further expropriations.

⁶⁵ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice*, 168–169.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶⁷ See: Aleksandar Stamatović, *Suđenje mitropolitu Arseniju Bradvareviću* (Nikšić: Institut za srpsku kulturu, 2017).

The Constitution of 1974 similarly shaped the boundaries of the activities of religious communities and again left certain ambiguities regarding the interpretation of certain articles. For example, Article 174 maintains that the practice of religion is an individual affair, so that no one may be forced to join or be prevented from joining a church, and it recognizes religious communities as legal persons which are free to conduct worship services, rites, and religious affairs (the latter was left undefined). However, the government may provide financial support for specific purposes, and religious communities may own property within the limit of the law.⁶⁸

Secularization in practice

I. Removal of *zar* and *feredza*

The attitude of the communist government towards women's agency, especially regarding Muslim women, warrants separate scholarly analysis. For the purposes of this study, it is important to point out that Muslim women in particular were the subject of modernization during and after World War II. Many Muslim women participated in the work of the Antifascist Women's Front in cities in the north and southeast of Montenegro, where Muslims predominate. For them, this was the first time they had participated in social decision-making. During the war, the Communist Party also organized numerous literacy courses for Muslim and other women in order to eradicate illiteracy among this demographic. Less well known, and discovered by Folić, is that Muslim women also participated in craft work and construction for the first time.⁶⁹

A completely peculiar phenomenon in the secularization of Montenegrin society was the policy of removing the *zar* and *feredza* of Muslim women, sponsored by the communist government. The Islamic religious community was the only community in which the process of

⁶⁸ *The Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (Ljubljana: Delo, 1974).

⁶⁹ Zvezdan Folić, "Škidanje zara i feredže u Crnoj Gori 1947–1953," *Istorijski zapisi* 72, no. 3–4 (1999): 73–90.

secularization (as a consequence of modernization) could be targeted at women, through educating them or through specific measures like prohibition of the *zar* and *feredza*.

The prohibition of the *zar* and *feredza* (a long, hooded overdress and outer dress worn by Muslim women) would be one of the most effective Party actions that were focused on the elimination of religious influence in society. The KPJ interpreted the religious covering of Muslim women as a form of cultural and gender backwardness and thus supported the removal of those features as a form of emancipation. The religious covering was interpreted as “remnants of the dark past.” This feature of women’s social isolation prevented them from accessing education, getting involved in the community, and – what was especially important to the Communists – becoming involved in the reconstruction of the country.⁷⁰

According to Prekić, the removal of the *zar* and *feredza* was as much an emancipatory and ideological campaign as it was economically motivated. Prekić thus states that it should be noted that the campaign took place amid the reconstruction of the war-torn country, during the period of implementation of the First Five-Year Plan, which began at the end of April 1947. The Party structures needed every single person, and the population of 10,000–15,000 women who cover their faces no doubt fits into those plans.⁷¹ Already during the war, there was a recorded case of four girls from the predominantly Muslim town of Gusinje who crossed over to the liberated territory of Berane and took off their *feredzas* and cut off their braids. Later, in 1950, a law was passed, banning the wearing of turbans and *feredzas*. Women who would cover their faces were fined. However, until 1953, due to the activity of the Islamic clergy, the ban quickly became effective, as a result of this approach, moving from punishing women to educating them.⁷²

The communist campaign to influence Muslim women effectively began in mid-1947 and was predominantly directed towards the Muslim-populated north and northeast of the country. Meetings

⁷⁰ Prekić, “Kampanja skidanja zara i feredže,” 51–52.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Folić, *Vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 140–144.

were held where representatives of the Islamic community, prominent Muslims and members of the Party, explained *that taking off the veil is the duty of every Muslim woman*. The largest part of this work was carried out through local organizations of the Anti-Fascist Women's Front. In just six months, about 6,300 Muslim women took off their *zar* or *feredza*. The best results were achieved in the Berane, Bijelo Polje and Andrijevisa counties, where the original plan was implemented, according to which 90% of Muslim women would remove the *zar* or *feredza*.⁷³

It is not surprising to note that the campaign to remove the *zara* and *feredza* was most effective where the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had its strongest foothold in Muslim communities. Thus, the greatest resonance of the campaign in 1947 was in Plav, Gusinje, Rožaje, Bijelo Polje and Berane (northern Montenegro, predominantly agrarian and underdeveloped) and did not gain momentum in the Titograd district (a small town of Tuzi), Bar and Pljevlja (cities that were more developed than the aforementioned). In all districts, except for the Titograd district, Muslim women from the countryside were more likely to remove the veil than those from the city. In 1947, 6,400 Muslim women even rejected the veil, and the following year 6,167 of them, which means that in two years, as many as 12,567 Muslim women, or over 85% of them, rejected the traditional veil. In 1950, as a domino effect resulting from the Bosnian authorities, the process to pass a law banning the traditional veiling of Muslim women was also initiated in Montenegro. Such requests were submitted by Muslims from Pljevlja, followed by those from Bar and Ulcinj.⁷⁴

Overall, the campaign was extremely successful in Montenegro, but it should be noted that there were cases in which women refused to leave their courtyards, thus not risking a fine for refusing to remove their traditional veils.

⁷³ Prekić, "Kampanja skidanja zara i feredže," 52.

⁷⁴ Folić, "Skidanje zara i feredže," 85–90.

II. Secularization of education and religious holidays

In general, the attitude of the KPJ towards religion during the war was an attempt to convince the people that it was not against religion per se. Indications of the secularization of education in Montenegro came in November 1944 at the Conference of Educational and Cultural Workers in Nikšić, where the need for schools to turn to the future was emphasized. That step was followed by the decision of the Committee for Education of the Montenegrin Assembly of People's Liberation, which declared religious education a subject that students could attend only with the consent of their parents.⁷⁵ The next stage in the process of secularization of education came in 1952 when the Politburo of the Central Committee of the KPJ decided that religious instruction could be conducted in religious institutions but not in private homes.⁷⁶

In the first postwar year, religious education was conducted in all three religious communities, but the poor financial situation prevented the full extent of such teaching. Religious education in Montenegrin schools was abolished by a decision of the Ministerial Council of the People's Republic of Montenegro on March 16, 1946, and the reaction of all three religious communities was extremely negative. This led them to attempt to hold religious classes in private homes. That failed because the priests, especially the Orthodox ones in Titograd, had difficulty finding people willing to provide rooms in their houses for religious teaching. In addition to the declining interest of youth, the indifference of some Orthodox priests to religious education was also exemplary.

By separating the church from the state, the secularization of education, i.e. the separation of the school from the church and the prohibition of religious education in public schools, the state directly weakened the economic, public, political, and cultural power, and influence church hierarchy and religion on the population.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Miloš Starovlah, *Istorija školstva u Crnoj Gori* (Podgorica: CID, 2017), 236.

⁷⁶ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 380–382.

⁷⁷ Šerbo Rastoder, "Vjerske zajednice i Jugoslavija 1918–2006," *YU historija*, accessed November 10, 2024, https://yuhistorija.com/serbian/kultura_religija_txt00.html.

The place of religious education in schools has not been fully replaced by other moral education for children. Thus, looking at the curriculum of primary schools from 1958, religious education was replaced with the Basics of Socialist Morality course, but only in that year.⁷⁸ Following that year, this subject can no longer be found on the list of yearly courses.

When it comes to Islamic believers, immediately after the war, religious education was conducted in their communities in *mektebs* in Ulcinj, Bar, and Rožaje, but it was abolished in 1947. However, among Islamic believers, the issue of conducting religious classes was still occasionally raised. Thus, the persistence of Islamic believers led the Commission for Religious Affairs to decide in 1962 that religious education should be taught in Ulcinj, Pljevlja, and the village of Rosulje near Pljevlja. Despite the initial great interest, the desire to attend classes decreased over time among believers.⁷⁹ It is interesting that the desire for religious education was most pronounced among younger Muslims, but they were obstructed in the implementation of the opening of new schools by Islamic priests from the Islamic religious community. The hard-earned possibility of conducting religious classes soon began to lose its appeal. In addition to the declining interest during the 1960s, high dropout rates were also caused by irregular teaching. Religious education was conducted most regularly in Catholic communities in Boka Kotorska. The only growth trend in children attending religious classes was recorded in the Catholic community, especially in the 1960s.

In general, the communists view the performance of religious teaching as evidence of non-acceptance of teaching such content in schools. Several cases have been recorded in which local authorities prevented the performance of religious classes. Furthermore, the government found ways to obstruct the missionary and teaching work of religious workers in other ways as well. For example, in Bar, in May 1948, the authorities confiscated 450 catechisms intended for elementary school children,

⁷⁸ It is interesting that the work plan for this course was mainly based on the equality of peoples, the harmonization of individual and social interests, private and social property, and the development of love for the socialist homeland. Starovlah, *Istorija školstva u Crnoj Gori*, 285.

⁷⁹ Folić, *Istorija Muslimana Crne Gore*, 247–248.

even though their use was approved by the Ministry of Education in neighboring Croatia.⁸⁰

Education of the clergy was not available for the SOC in Montenegro. The work of the seminary in Cetinje which was stopped during the war, was not restored. The lack of teaching staff, which had been decimated by the war, influenced the members of the Religious Commission to agree to postpone the decision on the reopening of the seminary. The education of the Catholic clergy was difficult in the shadow of the cooling of relations between Yugoslavia and the Holy See. For example, the Committee for Science under the Government of Yugoslavia refused to grant study in Rome (which was free of charge) to four candidates from the Archdiocese of Bar, arguing that they could study at the Faculty of Theology in Zagreb. Despite these obstacles, the Archdiocese of Bar still received young and educated priests even until the beginning of the 1950s – only in the period 1946–1952, the influx was five priests. By comparison, by far the largest religious community, the SOC in Montenegro, received only one priest during this period.⁸¹ Despite the material benefits, especially for Orthodox students from Montenegro who could study in seminaries in Rakovica or Prizren, interest was low.

Quite unexpectedly, the number of Roman Catholic nuns in Montenegro increased after the war. The reason for this was their dismissal from health institutions in Slovenia, and at the request of a well-known Montenegrin doctor, Cvjetko Popović, who was specializing in tuberculosis in Slovenia, the nuns were allowed to come and live in Montenegro and work at the hospital in Cetinje. Nuns dismissed from Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina found refuge in Montenegro. They worked in all major hospitals in Montenegro, including the nursing home in Perast. Most likely, the Montenegrin authorities viewed their arrival positively precisely because of the lack of trained medical personnel in secular institutions at the time.⁸²

⁸⁰ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 380–382.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 387–389. In Yugoslavia, there was a rather small number of religious schools. In 1953, there were only 21 in the entire country, of which 9 were at the college level, and 12 were at the secondary school level. Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 391–392.

⁸² Zvezdan Folić, “Rimokatoličke redovnice u Crnoj Gori 1945–1965,” *Croatica Christiana periodica* 36, no. 70 (2012): 172–175.

The issue of religious holidays was also taken into account by the communists. During the celebration of the liberation of Bar on December 1, 1944, the celebration was attended by citizens and the most visible communist or state leadership and clergy of all three religions, and as part of the ceremony, religious services were held in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Islamic churches. Likewise, on January 13, 1945, a ceremony was held in the Cetinje monastery on the occasion of the liberation of Montenegro. After the Orthodox liturgy, arch-priest Jovo Radović, president of the Religious Commission, enthusiastically spoke about Stalin, and pan-Slavism, and criticized the activities of Metropolitan Joanikije during the war.⁸³ In Kotor, from January 27 to February 3, 1945, the St. Triphon festivities were held. On November 18, 1945, Abdulah Hodžić congratulated Muslims in Montenegro on Eid al-Adha, calling for the legitimacy of the new Yugoslav state.⁸⁴

However, with the adoption of the new constitution, a new era began. Religious holidays suddenly lost their importance and gave way to national holidays, which was the organized policy of the communist leadership. The slowest interruption of the celebration of holidays and the slowest loss of the mass of such celebrations was among the believers of Islam. The secularization of the calendar followed in 1948 – on December 22 of that year, the Presidency of the Government of Yugoslavia sent a confidential letter to the lower authorities, according to which Christmas was no longer officially recognized. The Montenegrin authorities consistently followed the party line. On Roman Catholic Christmas in 1948, all schools and administrative bodies had to work. There are also cases in Montenegrin practice where people lost their jobs because of their beliefs – Tomo Marić and Špiro Marić from Herceg Novi received a decision to terminate their employment relationship because they refused to work on Saturdays, in accordance with their Adventist beliefs.⁸⁵

⁸³ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 152–153.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 439–441.

Impact of Secularization Policies

The pace of secularization of society also followed the dynamics of the work of the Central Committee of the KPJ. Thus, at the meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee in January 1952, Tito himself emphasized that the fight against religion does not go beyond administration and that in practice the principle of the separation of the church from the state should be strictly adhered to, criticizing the work in that field. The conclusions of this session of the Politburo marked the beginning of an organized, managed anti-religious campaign in Yugoslavia. The official press also supported the campaign. Religious dogmas were criticized, and a fight was waged against religion, religious morality, and religious teachings in general.⁸⁶

The paradigm of the new reality, way of life, and attitude towards religion was represented through the system of functioning of Titograd (formerly Podgorica, renamed in honor of Tito). Titograd was the newly established capital of socialist Montenegro. The transfer of the capital from Cetinje – the seat of the MCP – to Titograd, was also a symbolic spiritual departure. Titograd, which rapidly industrialized, urbanized, and represented the melting pot of Montenegro, was also the subject of attempts to marginalize religious customs. For example, the district committees in Titograd actively worked to suppress the celebration of Saint Patron.⁸⁷

Research into the religiosity of Communist party members from March 1951 showed that one in four communists practised some form of religious practice daily. Of those, 0.37% of the membership baptized their children, while 0.03% of the membership entered into a spiritual marriage – only 7 members.⁸⁸

The process of secularization went drastically well.⁸⁹ Thus, the population census from 1953 (see Table 1) showed that about 132 thousand

⁸⁶ Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 370.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁸⁸ Prekić, "The Religious Community and the Communist Regime," 119.

⁸⁹ Lidija Jovanović, the wife of Montenegrin communist leader Blažo Jovanović, and the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Montenegro member on June 11, 1954,

inhabitants, or 31.5%, had no religious affiliation. For comparison, the Yugoslav average was 12.5%.

Although the process of secularization was going on intensively, certain micro-areas resisted it. For example, the most intensive religious life was still conducted in both the Catholic and Orthodox communities of Boka, the Orthodox communities in Zeta (Golubovci and Mahala), Pljevlja, and the surroundings of Bijelo Polje. In general, secularization penetrated the population of Orthodoxy the fastest, for which there are many reasons. One of the frequently mentioned is the experience of religion nominally, such as the "ancestral faith," adherence to new times, urbanization, the school system, and finally, the indifference of part of the Orthodox clergy in Montenegro. The feeling of insecurity existed among all believers. Still, the discontinuity in cultivating religious life was the least present among Islamic believers, especially the youth, who continued to show considerable devotion to the faith.⁹⁰

The extent of defection from the religion of the Orthodox population is most noticeable from the analysis of the reports that the MCP metropolitans wrote to the Holy Synod in Belgrade. The analysis is facilitated by the fact that from 1961 to 1990, the position of head of the SOC in Montenegro was held by one man, Metropolitan Danilo (Dajković).

The first report⁹¹ that Metropolitan Dajković submitted to the Holy Synod in 1962 after taking office indicates that there was a generally low interest among people to participate in church services (except in Boka Kotorska), and that the church discipline of priests had disappeared or was disappearing, and that there were complaints about the misconduct of some priests. In the first report, Dajković also stated that religious education and the manifestation of religiosity were at a low level. For example, the practice of fasting was very rare among the population. In a report from 1965, he cites an example of the Church of St. Sava in Tivat, the construction of which began even before the

stated, "In our country, the influence of the clergy and religion is not a problem like it is in other republics." (Folić, *Država i vjerske zajednice u Crnoj Gori*, 373).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁹¹ All reports to the Holy Synod are presented in: Radović and Kondić, *Ljetopis raspete Mitropolije*.

war, that although they had managed to collect the money for construction through donations from the diaspora and locals, everyone from the contractor to the supervising engineer and the workers were Catholics, because no one who was Orthodox wanted or was allowed to accept the job. In the report, Dajković cites two exceptions to the religious passivity of the Orthodox people, namely the presence of the believers in the Cetinje Monastery on Christmas, and the traditional pilgrimage to Ostrog Monastery. However, he adds that a large part of the faithful on the pilgrimage was from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In his report on his work in 1975, he noted that Montenegrins were eager and aggressive in proving their nationality and faith, but preferred to go to a pub than to church. In the same report, Dajković offered his understanding of the absence of the tradition of the people towards the church.⁹² In that report, he stated that material interests prevail over church culture. The Metropolitan also complained about the low interest of young people in priestly education, which goes beyond the borders of Montenegro. Thus, he compared priest service in Montenegro to exile in Siberia. Apart from the previously mentioned Titograd section, the poor situation can also be seen in the rest of Montenegro.

In 1979 in Nikšić, the largest municipality by area in former Yugoslavia, only four baptisms and one church funeral were held for a population of 40,000. In his last report for 1989, Metropolitan Danilo stated that future priests first want to know what their salary will be.⁹³

Although the focus of the work is on the period from the war to the mid-1950s, a brief overview of relevant sources from the later period serves to assess the measures of secularization and atheization. Polls from the postwar period show that, compared to other Yugoslav areas,

⁹² Criticism of the metropolitan in the reports was directed more towards the population than towards the communist authorities. Metropolitan Danilo states that until 1968, the relationship between the communist authorities was good, but then it worsened due to the beginning of the so-called chapel affair – the decision and subsequent demolition of the chapel of Metropolitan Petar II Petrović Njegoš and the construction of the mausoleum where his remains were transferred. This decision produced great dissatisfaction among the clergy of the MCP. See more in: Radović and Kondić, *Ljetopis raspete Mitropolije*, 97–101.

⁹³ Radović and Kondić, *Ljetopis raspete Mitropolije*, 245–297.

the degree of classical religiosity was the lowest in Montenegro, not exceeding 19% until 1985.⁹⁴

In Montenegro, the success of secularization policies is most visible through the analysis of the growth of the number of atheists by 1991 (see Table 1). The tabular representation of the numerical increase of atheists after 1953 confirms the earlier thesis about the stronger efforts of the authorities to work more diligently on the secularization of society after the first postwar population census in Montenegro.

The empirically-recorded record of departure of people from religion and the SOC in the Orthodox-dominant (Montenegro and Serbia proper), or multi-confessional area (Vojvodina and Croatia), was operationalized by the loss of the importance of Orthodoxy as a moral thread or motivation for people's practical behavior, the reduced participation of people in church rituals and church life in general.⁹⁵ The "sudden and terrible falling away from faith," or "fallen piety" was pointed out by Patriarch German in 1970.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, despite these variations, the identification and religious activities of believers declined in all religious communities.⁹⁷ The part of the Orthodox population that remained religious in defiance of secularization policies mostly lived in the countryside, it was the unemployed population, agricultural workers, poorer population, and women more often than men.⁹⁸

The reasons why atheism found more favorable ground among the Orthodox population in Montenegro, and in general among the Orthodox population in Yugoslavia, than among other religious communities are complex. According to Blagojević,⁹⁹ the reasons for this should be sought in internal and external church-related factors. In

⁹⁴ Alexander Mirescu, "Religion and Ethnic Identity Formation in the Former Yugoslavia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 23, no. 1 (2003): 6, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol23/iss1/2>.

⁹⁵ Mirko Blagojević, *Religija i crkva u transformacijama društva: sociološko-istorijska analiza religijske situacije u srpsko-crnogorskom i ruskom (post)komunističkom društvu* (Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju: Filip Višnjić, 2005), 174.

⁹⁶ Rastoder, "Vjerske zajednice i Jugoslavija."

⁹⁷ Ramet, *Balkan Babel*, 140.

⁹⁸ Blagojević, *Religija i crkva*, 179–180.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175–180.

addition to the fact that the clergy of the SOC was decimated during and immediately after the war, and the church was also economically exhausted, as the economic base of its strength and the basis of its functioning – arable land was taken away. In addition, an undoubtedly important factor is the fact that the treatment of the SOC by foreign communist authorities was somewhat worse than the treatment of other religious communities because the SOC was brought into connection with Greater Serbia – bourgeois and even imperial ideas, as the latter claimed Serbian socialists of the 20th century. To this list, one more factor can be added – the strength of the communist party in the country.

A 1985–86 survey on Montenegrin public opinion recorded 19% of respondents identifying as religious.¹⁰⁰ However, with the weakening of communist rule, and especially after the death of Tito in 1980, religiosity began to increase. The last survey on religiosity in Yugoslavia, conducted in 1989 by the Consortium of Public Opinion Polling Institutions, found that 39% of Montenegrins identified as religious, reflecting a substantial rise compared to the mid-1980s.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated why Montenegro serves as a particularly compelling case study in the analysis of planned secularization and atheization in the post-World War II communist era. Within less than a century, Montenegro transitioned from a state ruled by Orthodox clergy to the Yugoslav republic with the highest proportion of atheists – more than twice the Yugoslav average.

As outlined, secularization efforts began during the war and gradually evolved into explicit atheization measures by the late 1940s and 1950s. This study has reviewed existing research, showing that secularization policies were primarily formal and normative, while atheization measures were largely informal. Further studies could explore parliamentary speeches from both the national assembly and the women's

¹⁰⁰ Blagojević, *Religija i crkva*, 226.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

antifascist organizations (AFŽ) to gain deeper insights into how these policies were articulated and promoted.

One particularly notable pillar of secularization was the campaign to abolish traditional Muslim dress for women. This phenomenon suggests that in Montenegro, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Macedonia, a specific form of women's agency was at play in post-war communist social policies. This topic warrants further research, particularly regarding women's roles in communist-era modernization efforts.

The sources cited in the paper – especially the Yugoslav population censuses and the annual reports of the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro – suggest that Montenegro's high rate of atheism was not only a result of state policy but also reflected a genuine decline in religious engagement. The research presented here confirms the thesis that the most pronounced apathy toward religion occurred within Montenegro's largest religious community—the Orthodox population. While Muslims and Catholics in Montenegro exhibited some resistance to this trend, their overall trajectory was not drastically different.

In conclusion, the communist authorities implemented secularization and atheization through a normative, i.e. constitutional and legal framework, the secularization of education, and the promotion of new national holidays of the new state, as well as planned campaigns aimed at Muslim women.

These policies proved highly effective, but their success was facilitated by an important underlying factor: the strong influence of the Communist Party, which had deep societal roots dating back to World War II.

Finally, the trend of atheization was strongest in regions most affected by the National Liberation War. This enabled the dismantling of previous governance structures, including religious authority, and effectively gave the Communist Party a *carte blanche* to reshape Montenegrin society.

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