

## Radicalization at the University of Zagreb during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939

*This article examines the political radicalization and polarization at the University of Zagreb during the period of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Although the conditions responsible for the appeal of radical politics were created by the social and economic grievances felt across Croatia under the authoritarian Yugoslav regime, the conflict in Spain served to channel frustration into tangible causes and movements. It did not directly generate the violence or the political divisions at the University of Zagreb, but it did serve as a focal point for the opposing groups to articulate, and support, their ideological positions. Furthermore, the powerful ideas and concepts stirred up by the war, such as freedom, democracy, internationalism, and antifascism, appealed particularly to young people who had grown up not having experienced those ideas themselves. Other students at the university, influenced by anticommunist ideas and supported by radical Croatian nationalists, engaged in fervent debates with pro-Republican students that eventually led to physical violence and the murder of a student, Krsto Ljubičić, at the university.*

**Keywords:** Spanish Civil War, University of Zagreb, political radicalization

On 14 April 1937, a group of students at the University of Zagreb, associated with right-wing organizations on campus, ambushed and murdered Krsto Ljubičić, a fourth-year law student and an active communist, as he returned to his dorm room. The killing shocked Zagreb, and prompted Vladko Maček to issue a speech condemning the influence of foreign ideas among students at Croatia's main university. The event was particularly disturbing for the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) because it was not a case of the regime violently repressing Croatian nationalists, which had been common under the royal dictatorship. Instead, Croatian students had fought among themselves. The polarization of Croatian political life had permeated Zagreb's premier institution of higher education, where ideologically antagonistic students had flocked to rival academic clubs and published their own rhetorically charged newspapers. The dynamism of both communism and fascism, two political

movements whose ardent followers were actively fighting in the war raging across Spain, appealed to the youth attending the university, where they were often exposed to the world beyond Croatia for the first time. The murder of Ljubičić came after a period of gradual escalation in the tensions between rival student groups, and coincided with a general increase in both communist agitation and pro-Ustaša propaganda.

Although the conditions responsible for the appeal of radical politics were created by the social and economic grievances felt across Croatia under the authoritarian Yugoslav regime, the conflict in Spain served to channel frustration into tangible causes and movements. The war in Spain did not directly generate the violence or the political divisions at the University of Zagreb, but it did serve as a focal point for the opposing groups to articulate, and support, their ideological positions. Furthermore, the powerful ideas and concepts stirred up by the war, such as freedom, democracy, internationalism, and antifascism, appealed particularly to young people who had grown up not having experienced those ideas themselves. The observations of Fernando Claudin, a leader of the Spanish communist youth movement, on why communism appealed to young people could easily be applied to the Croatian youth: “[T]hey were attracted by the party’s military virtues and by a simplified ideology in which the idea of revolution was identified with antifascism mingled with patriotism.”<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Civil War was an issue that divided the university as much as it did the rest of Croatia, and illustrates the power of that conflict in arousing ideological passions across Europe.

What began as an attempted coup by Spanish army officers rapidly escalated into a civil war that threatened to engulf all of Europe. The Nationalists, led by General Francisco Franco, rebelled against the Popular Front government in July 1936, fearing that Spain was in danger of disintegrating under leftists who had granted significant autonomy to Catalonia and the Basque lands. Monarchists, fascists (Falange), conservatives, and the Catholic Church rallied behind Franco. Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy quickly intervened, sending equipment, advisors, and even troops to help the Nationalists. The democratically government, whose supporters were known as the Republicans, was a coalition of liberals, socialists, communists, anarchists, and regionalists, was abandoned by Western democracies afraid of setting off a broader European war. The Soviet Union was the only major power to provide support for the Republican cause, which came at a high price; subservience to Soviet dictator Josef Stalin and the notorious NKVD. The Spanish Civil War

1 The police initially banned the club for its overtly communist character, but the students appealed to the dean and it was reinstated shortly thereafter. Publication of *Novi student* began on 24 May 1935, and had a circulation of approximately 3,000 copies, while the first issue of *Glas omladine* came out on 15 August of the same year, and averaged about 7,000–8,000 copies per issue. See Mladen Iveković, *Hrvatska lijeva inteligencija, 1918–1945*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1970), pp. 252–255.

polarized societies across Europe, captured the imagination of idealists who sought draw lessons from either side in the war, and sparked fervent debates even in the halls of Zagreb's university.

### University of Zagreb in the 1930s

The University of Zagreb was important not only for Croatia, but for all of Yugoslavia, in educating its future political and economic elite; one-third of the students studied law, many with the intention of securing a position in the bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1669 under a decree from Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, it was the oldest university in the country, which boasted only two others in the inter-war period: the University of Belgrade, established in the nineteenth century, and the University of Ljubljana, founded after the unification of Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup> Although many students from Croatia and other parts of Yugoslavia studied abroad in Paris, Vienna, or Prague, the student population at the University of Zagreb grew from 2,800 in 1920, to almost 7,000 on the eve of World War Two.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to get the ethnic breakdown of who attended the university, but apart from the Croatian elite, poorer students from underdeveloped regions of Croatia, as well as other parts of Yugoslavia (modern day Bosnia, Macedonia, and Montenegro), were given scholarships to study in Zagreb.<sup>5</sup> About 20 percent of the student population came from peasant backgrounds, although the sons of workers found it difficult to get into the university.<sup>6</sup> Like many universities in Europe, the University of Zagreb did not have a campus, but was housed in a number of buildings throughout the city. In the late 1930s, the main colleges (law, philosophy, theology) and administration were located in the center of the city (today Trg maršala Tita), which meant that student life was intricately connected with the events in the city, and conversely, student demonstrations and brawls drew the public's attention.

The conflict between the right wing students, or Frankists (who belonged to the *August Šenoa* student club), and leftists at the university (members of the legal Marxist student organization *Svjetlost* [*Light*]), had been brewing for nearly a year before Ljubičić's death. There were a total of fifty-six different student organizations at all of the various faculties of the university; in addition to *August Šenoa* and *Svjetlost*, the Peasant Party organized the Student League of the HSS (at times referred to as the *Matija Gubec* club), Independent Democratic Party (SDS) youth were members of the student version of *Seljačko kolo*, religious students supported the *Domagoj*

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2 *Novi student* (1 October 1936), pp. 2–3.

3 *Glas omladine* (1 October 1936), p. 2.

4 *Novi student* (10 June 1936), pp. 1–2.

5 Supek, *Krivovjernik na ljevici*, p. 49.

6 Hrvatski državni arhiv, fond 1368 (Kominternu), box 7, spis 457.

club, as well as many others.<sup>7</sup> Although there is little evidence that professors were directly involved in the student organizations, some of them certainly expressed support for those groups with either pro-Ustaša or leftist tendencies. Unlike the University of Belgrade, which had essentially become a communist stronghold because its autonomous status within the city of Belgrade protected the students from the police,<sup>8</sup> the University of Zagreb had a student body that was considerably more divided. Furthermore, the students at the University of Belgrade were not immersed in the political atmosphere of the pervasive national question that colored seemingly every aspect of Croatian society in this period.

While the strength of the HSS was undisputed in most aspects of Croatian life, at the university it was much weaker. According to the memoirs of Ivan Supek, a renowned Croatian intellectual,

*the youth did not like the passivity, provincialism, and pacifism of Radić's successors, and aspired for more radical options. The more militant groups of students thus committed themselves to revolution, either communist, or nationalist in the sense of creating an independent Croatian state.*<sup>9</sup>

Out of approximately 5,000 students at the university, about half were involved in some kind of organization. *Novi student (New Student)* reported in October 1936 the following numbers for membership in the various clubs: 150 in the Student League of the HSS; 300, along with fifty “leaders” (*vode*), in the Croatian Academic Nationalist League (Frankist); and 400 in *Svjetlost* (communist).<sup>10</sup> The students, many who came from less developed parts of Croatia and had been directly exposed to the abuses of the regime’s gendarmes, seemed more eager to embrace the ideologies of the extreme left or right than the political mainstream. This was expressed not only by membership in the various academic clubs, but also included participation in university council elections, the distribution of flyers, and the publishing of newspapers.

7 *Nova riječ* (16 April 1937), p. 2.

8 *Omladina*, vol. 20, no. 5 (January 1937), p. 199. Members of the *August Šenoa* club were also suspected of publishing a number of nationalistically extreme (and short-lived) papers such as *Grudobran*, *Njiva*, *Hrvatska zemlja*, *Orač*, and *Sijač*, which were censored by the authorities for their Croatian separatist content.

9 *Ibid.* *Omladina* mocked HSS members who refused to comment on the events in Spain because of it allegedly being a struggle between communism and fascism, at the same time claiming they had a unique »Croatian« ideology.

10 *Glas omladine* (22 October 1936), p. 3.

## The Spanish war and the student press

*Svetlost*, established on 5 April 1935, issued *Novi student* and distributed *Glas omladine* (*Youth Herald*), another pro-communist paper.<sup>11</sup> In addition to discussing issues relevant to university life, both papers devoted considerable attention to world events, including the antifascist struggle in Spain. Echoing the arguments laid out by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), *Novi student* argued that

*[f]rom a political perspective, the war in Spain is a struggle between fascism and democracy. Any other interpretation is a gross fascist inversion of reality. The simple fact that the [Republican] government gives full political and cultural freedom to all the nations of Spain, while the rebels continue the centuries-long oppression of those peoples, should be sufficient for us Croats to place our sympathy on the side of the government in Spain.*<sup>12</sup>

*Glas omladine* likewise portrayed the Republic as representing democracy and freedom for the Catalans and Basques, while the Nationalists were servants of Hitler and Mussolini.<sup>13</sup> In an earlier article describing divisions in the student government at the university, *Novi student* used similar language in writing about the “fascist and democratic wings” of the student body, the former who allegedly wanted to take the Croatian people “into fascist darkness and medieval barbarianism.”<sup>14</sup> The distribution of *Novi student* by young communists among the university’s scattered buildings were “often a cause for attacks by truculent rightists.”<sup>15</sup> On 12 October 1936, the editors of *Novi student* wrote to the rector of the University of Zagreb complaining about attacks against the distributors of the paper:

*It is disgraceful and inappropriate gesture against the students’ personal safety and freedom of opinion and the press in Croatian university ... one should condemn this incident in which the democratic word clashed with the fascist clubs.*<sup>16</sup>

According to an article in *Nova riječ*, the leading SDS paper, rightists had formed a “Frankist student terrorist organization” under the cover of the legal Croatian

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11 *Omladina*, vol. 20, nos. 8–10 (1937, no month given), pp. 305–309.

12 Vojo Rajčević, *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u Hrvatskoj, 1929–1941*, vol. 2 (Zagreb: Centar društvenih djelatnosti, 1980), p. 147. Written during communist Yugoslavia, Rajčević’s book, like many others from this period, should be viewed critically regarding interpretations of the KPJ’s activity (and characterizations of the KPJ’s enemies) in the interwar period.

13 *Novi student* (1 October 1936), p. 2.

14 *Novi student* (9 December 1936), p. 1.

15 *Glas omladine* (22 October 1936), p. 3.

16 Speech reprinted in *Danica* (14 February 1937), p. 7. Buć never used the term »fascism«, although it was clear what ideology his notion of militant nationalism was referring to.

Academic Nationalist League in the summer of 1936.<sup>17</sup> This Nationalist League included members from several of the other clubs at the university, such as *August Šenoa*, *Eugen Kvaternik*, the student association of Matica hrvatska, and *Domagoj*. The right-wing element at the University of Zagreb, apparently under the influence of *Hrvatska straža* and individuals tied directly to the Ustaša movement, became increasingly active politically in the student government. They published their views in a journal, *Omladina* (*Youth*), sponsored by Matica hrvatska, Croatia's most prominent cultural organization. Their position on the Spanish Civil War was clear:

*As a matter of principle, we as nationalists and anti-communists have to declare ourselves in favor of the insurgents. Whoever does not do so, is politically naïve and confused, or is secretly a Marxist, in other words, a Popular Frontist, who out of tactical reasons must remain hidden and cover himself with the mask of 'neutrality' or 'objectivity'.*<sup>18</sup>

The Nationalist League prided itself on establishing the first official contact with Franco's "New Spain" by sending a telegram congratulating the lifting of the siege of the Alcázar, and lashed out against HSS passivity in *Omladina* even more openly than other critics of Maček.<sup>19</sup> Whereas *Glas omladine* published photographs of bombing victims under the heading "Fascists and Clericalists Kill Children in Spain,"<sup>20</sup> *Omladina* countered with large articles praising the Spanish fascist movement, the Falange, which "characteristically promoted the idea of sacrificing everything to save the homeland, including innocent victims and one's own life."<sup>21</sup>

17 *Podravske novine* (Koprivnica), 20 February 1937, reprinted in Željko Krušelj, *U žrvnju državnog terora i ustaškog terorizma* (Koprivnica: Hrvatski zemljopis, 2001), pp. 282–283.

18 Presumably remnants of the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) and other political parties banned under King Aleksandar were active in funding extremist newspapers and booklets, as well as organizations both in and outside of the university. John James Meily, the American consul in Zagreb, wrote in a report to Washington that it was »an open secret« that the Frankists were well financed from outside, most likely from the Axis powers. Quoted in Jure Krišto, *Sukob simbola: Politika, vjera i ideologija u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Globus, 2001), p. 19. See also Ivo Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2001), p. 61.

19 Communist books were disguised with fake covers such as *Vegetarianism*, *Kozmopolita: A French Language Workbook*, and *Law on Apartments*. A number of these materials captured by the police can be found in Hrvatski državni arhiv, fond 1369 (Meduratni KPJ), box 2.

20 »Studentski izbori za Klub pravnika na univerzitetu«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. br. 2951/1937 (31 January 1937), Hrvatski državni arhiv, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 506, no. 3412/II.

21 Ibid.

### Polarization at the university

Initially, the ideological clash at the University of Zagreb, in addition to newspaper polemics, was limited to elections for the student government and Interklub, the body that oversaw the functioning of the various student organizations. According to Vojo Rajčević, who wrote a comprehensive account of youth organizations in interwar Croatia, “Franco’s rebellion in Spain emboldened the Frankist elements to show their hand.”<sup>22</sup> On occasion the Frankists disrupted events at the university, for example, shouting “We don’t recognize Dr. Maček as a leader, our leader is Pavelić!” during a demonstration organized by the HSS club for granting amnesty to all political prisoners.<sup>23</sup> They also allegedly called for demonstrations of their own against “Jew-Marxists and Popular Frontists,” but it is not clear if these actually took place.<sup>24</sup> *Glas omladine* warned that “some people (Radić would say ‘corrupt gentlemen’) have been sowing fascist slogans among the Croatian youth,” and that “these ‘Croatian’ fascists have been showing their great sympathy for international fascism, claiming that it is their model, and trying to transplant its ‘cultural’ methods here.”<sup>25</sup>

In February 1937, Stjepan Buć, a fervent Nazi sympathizer and a frequent contributor to the radical right press, gave a lecture to the Croatian Academic Nationalist League, contrasting nationalism with communism and democracy. Alleging that the latter two political concepts were both generated by Jews, Buć offered an alternative:

*Modern nationalism is a firm hand, relying on the nation and national will – in the interest of the people!...Militant nationalism does not differentiate, as was the case in the Jewish-communist understanding of pre-war “democracy”, between workers, the peasantry, townspeople, etc. – it only knows the whole, the totality....Militant nationalism knows only the nation and its members, who place all their energy into service for the nation – and the enemies of that nation.*<sup>26</sup>

Apparently, Buć was able to give his talk without any problems at the university, and was well received by the audience. In contrast, when he attempted to give the same speech several days later in the town of Koprivnica, HSS supporters turned out to disrupt the event. The local paper, *Podravske novine*, reported that “the whistling and the clamor, from exclamations such as ‘Down with Dr. Buć! Down with the Frankists! We won’t allow the Frankists to break the unified Croatian ranks,’ etc., was so

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22 Ibid.

23 Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. br. 3016/1937 (2 February 1937), Hrvatski državni arhiv, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 506, no. 3412/II.

24 Supek, *Krivovjernik na ljevici*, p. 49.

25 Vojo Rajčević, »Titova uloga u reorganizaciji SKOJ-a 1937«, in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1977), p. 22.

26 *Jugoslavenske novine* (3 December 1936), p. 11.

loud that it was not possible to make out a single word of Dr. Buć.”<sup>27</sup> Although the exact individuals or organizations behind the financing of the pro-Ustaša youth groups at the university, as well as the numerous anti-Semitic publications that appeared under different names after being banned by the regime, remain unclear, there is evidence that the resources were substantial.<sup>28</sup> Communists in Croatia were likewise well-funded from abroad, that is, from the Soviet Union, which in addition to financial support included the smuggling of communist books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other propaganda material.<sup>29</sup>

The boldness of the pro-Ustaša groups grew as they took control of certain university organizations. After the right-wing candidate, Franjo Nevistić, beat his HSS opponent 142 votes to 60 in elections for the Law School’s club (*Klub pravnik na univerzitetu*) in January 1937, a police report claimed that in his victory speech Nevistić “attacked communists, among others, and mentioned that he would firmly and resolutely fight for a free and independent state of Croatia.”<sup>30</sup> The police agent observing the elections added that during the speech, Nevistić’s supporters shouted phrases such as “Long live our leader and chief Dr. Pavelić,” “Long live a free and independent Croatia,” and “Down with the Yugoslav front.”<sup>31</sup> This was followed by everyone singing “Lijepa naša” (the Croatian national anthem, banned by King Aleksandar.) with “their right hands outstretched,” presumably in a fascist salute. After the pro-Ustaša students sang another provocative song, “Zagreb is not Yugoslav, but rather Zagreb is for the Ustaše,” the HSS students, who had merely observed what had transpired, dispersed peacefully.<sup>32</sup> The provocative content of the Nevistić’s speech combined standard anti-Yugoslav aspects (such as the singing of the banned anthem, which was sung by HSS supporters in defiance of the regime) with overt references to the Ustaše, who were increasingly at odds with Maček. Although Nevistić apparently suffered no academic setbacks because of his speech, he was arrested by the police for the anti-regime content of his speech, fined 500 dinars, and sentenced to thirty days in jail.<sup>33</sup>

The confrontations between pro-Ustaša groups and leftist students escalated beyond the fiery rhetoric in the rival papers and student elections into physical melees at the university and in the dorms. Having been once knocked unconscious by a Frankist wielding a steel rod, Supek recalls that

*Since we were not allowed to carry revolvers, we would arm ourselves with sticks, which we would hide under our coats. We called these sticks our*

27 *Jugoslovenske novine* (8 October 1936), p. 13.

28 *Jugoslovenske novine* (3 December 1936), p. 11.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Transcript of speech in *Hrvatski dnevnik* (28 February 1937), pp. 1–2.

31 *Nova riječ* (25 February 1937), p. 7. The paper described the League as »totally fascist.«

32 See Rajčević, »Tito i reorganizacija SKOJ-a«, p. 25.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.



*arguments. Intellectual defense against equally fanatical Catholics and nationalists did not exist. Religiously and nationalistically overheated youngsters were enraged that an atheistic, materialistic, and Bolshevik publication [Novi student] was being spread around a Croatian university.*<sup>34</sup>

The extreme nationalist students had another reason to attack communists at the university – many were not Croats. While the number of Croats in communist organizations at the University of Zagreb had increased from around 40 percent before 1929, in 1937 they made up only about 60–65 percent of the total membership.<sup>35</sup> Student papers and even some Zagreb dailies carried reports of the brawls and fist-cuffs erupting at the university, and gendarmes were called in on several occasions to break up the fights.

The mouthpiece of the Yugoslav National Party (JNS), *Jugoslovenske novine*, smugly reported on the divisions among the student groups at the University of Zagreb. One article described the “compactness of the Yugoslav students and the discord among their opponents, who base their work on tribal Croatian nationalism.”<sup>36</sup> Similar articles about the internal divisions of the Croat national movement and the weakening of Maček’s leadership were published around the same time in *Jugoslovenske novine* as well as the ruling Yugoslav Radical Union’s (JRZ) *Glasnik*, apparently in an attempt to discredit the Croat opposition. This represented a shift from earlier articles, which had described two blocs at the University of Zagreb, a Croatian bloc (the HSS and nationalists) and a Yugoslav bloc.<sup>37</sup> The JNS press argued that political radicalization had somehow affected only the Croat students. While the Yugoslav youth was “organized in its professional and cultural associations without conflicts or friction,” and was “continuing with its solid and constructive work,” Croat students were reportedly divided into two ideologically antagonistic camps.<sup>38</sup>

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34 Ibid, p. 26. Mates would later serve in the central committee of the Communist Party of Croatia (KPH), and Lola Ribar remained head of the communist youth until his death in 1943, at which point he was named a National Hero.

35 Nearly 1,700 volunteers in the Spanish Civil War were of Yugoslav origin, about half of whom were from Croatia. Ivo Goldstein describes how the Spanish Civil War affected Zagreb’s Jewish community, from which ten volunteers went to fight in Spain. Ivo Goldstein, *Židovi u Zagrebu, 1918–1941* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2004), pp. 293–295.

36 Zora Gavrić, “Odlazak jugoslovenskih studenata iz Praga”, in Kapor (ed.), *Španija*, vol. 5, pp. 350–351. The leftist Yugoslav students had been members of the club Matija Gubec, the Society of Yugoslav Engineers, and the Cooperative of Croatian Academics. They eventually joined the Academic Society »Yugoslavia« once the old leadership had been replaced by a pro-communist one. About 200 Yugoslav students were studying in Prague at the time, the majority of who were situated in the King Aleksandar dorm that served as an organizational center for political activities. See Djuro Gajdek, *Španjolski borci Siska i Banije* (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1985), p. 144.

37 The letter was printed as part of the article »To Spain, to Spain!« in *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 3 (May 1937), p. 7, although it is likely that it was distributed as a flyer or published in another paper at an earlier date.

38 Ibid.

Both sides were negatively portrayed, since they both rejected the current political system. *Jugoslovenske novine* presented the following two “fronts” active at the university, which it associated with movements present in Croatian society at large:

*One group is clerical fascist, while the other formation is a Popular Front. So that is how the “free-thinking” youth marches into mutual battle with two contradictory convictions, bringing the unwanted phenomenon of the fatal conflict between two fronts into our political life.*<sup>39</sup>

Although a weakening in the unity of the Croatian national movement certainly pleased Yugoslav nationalists, at the same time the fact that the youth at one of the country’s leading universities was drifting into radicalism was worrisome for the pro-regime parties.

The HSS leadership also began to take note of the troubling news coming out of the university. Speaking to the HSS youth organization at the University of Zagreb on 26 February 1937, HSS vice president August Košutić warned of the dangerous influence of foreign ideologies, especially because it was becoming clear at this time that the bloody war in Spain was intensifying ideological divisions among Croats. Relying on the imagery of transplanting thorns from someone else’s garden to argue that foreign ideas amounted to a betrayal of Croatian national interests, Košutić described how some students had been so impressed by German and Italian propaganda that “in their enthusiasm [they] think and speak that somehow a free Croatia would resemble those countries.”<sup>40</sup> But despite the occasional speech from an HSS representative, it seems that the party devoted little energy to mobilizing the youth, creating a vacuum that allowed more radical forces to step in. The leadership of the Croatian Academic Nationalist League was allegedly made up of former HSS youth who had been expelled from the HSS student club.<sup>41</sup> Tito, who was organizational secretary of the KPJ at the time, and writing reports on the reorganization of the communist youth movement SKOJ, noted the HSS student club lacked followers because the “HSS leadership shows no initiative at all in trying to gather the youth.”<sup>42</sup> Although at the political level the HSS wanted nothing to do with the communists, at the university it was common for the HSS and SDS youth to work

39 Čedo Kapor (ed.), *Krv i život za slobodu: slike iz života i borbe studenata iz Jugoslavije u Španiji*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belgrade: Unija-publik, 1978), p. 42. I would like to thank Hrvoje Klasić and Djuro Gajdek for providing background information on Šiprak and other volunteers from the Banija region.

40 Gajdek, *Španjolski borci*, p. 151. He is buried in a large family plot in a Sisak cemetery, and his death in Spain is noted on his gravestone.

41 Kapor, *Krv i život za slobodu*, p. 42. The eulogy was printed in the book about Yugoslav students fighting Spain in Barcelona in 1938, but it is likely that it was included in communist propaganda at an earlier time, because *Proleter* and legal communist publications frequently mentioned those who fell in battle. Unfortunately I have been unable to verify if that is the case.

42 *Nova riječ* (16 April 1937), p. 2.

with the more left-oriented students, in an attempt to challenge the gains made by the increasingly militant fascist groups.

Tito's criticism of the HSS failures in mobilizing the youth in Croatia was also applied to the communist youth organization, which had been dissolved in late 1936. A lack of discipline, the impact of the massive police arrests in 1935 and 1936, and a general state of "chaos" had led the KPJ leadership to reorganize the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ) in Croatia in order to combat the growing influence of pro-Ustaša elements, particularly at the university.<sup>43</sup> Tito himself spent the early part of March 1937 in Zagreb, appointing Leo Mates as head of the youth organization in Croatia, and Ivo Lola Ribar as head of the entire SKOJ organization.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the KPJ's recruitment of volunteers for Spain was in full swing, not only among workers, but students who would be likely to be inflamed by the passionate struggle of the Spanish people against fascism. Eventually some 40,000 leftist volunteers from over fifty countries joined the International Brigades, units under the control of the Comintern that fought for the Republic.<sup>45</sup>

The emotional intensity of the Spanish conflict affected not only the students in Zagreb and Belgrade, but also the Yugoslav students studying abroad, notably in Paris and Prague. The departure to Spain in early 1937 of a large group of Yugoslav students, including several from Croatia, who had been studying in Prague received significant attention, especially in right wing newspapers, which used the example to illustrate how spiritually corrupt some Croatian youth had become. For others, the Prague students served as an inspiration to become active in something much bigger than everyday life. They had been part of the Academic Society "Yugoslavia" in Prague, initially an organization with close ties to the Yugoslav regime, which by 1936 had been taken over by pro-communist students supported by the KPJ.<sup>46</sup> The students were also a vital link between the KPJ leadership in exile and communist cells inside Yugoslavia, facilitating the smuggling of propaganda material into the country and serving as couriers for various assignments. Considering the close ties to the KPJ, it is not surprising that a number of the Prague students decided to answer the call to defend the Republic and go as a group to Spain. In a letter from 25 January 1937, addressed to the "Youth of all the Peoples of Yugoslavia" and signed

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43 Rajčević, *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret*, p. 153. Kolman told Rajčević that both he and Ljubičić had carried Croatian flags during demonstrations against Nazi Germany, and that the pro-Ustaša students had likely singled them out for attacks at that time.

44 *Nova riječ* (16 April 1937), p. 2.

45 As noted by Ivo Goldstein, *Mlada Hrvatska* was the first periodical in Croatia which presented »modern anti-Semitism« along with a totalitarian ideology, i.e. »based upon the perception of Judaism as a racial problem.« See Goldstein, *Židovi u Zagrebu*, pp. 387, 397–399.

46 The flyer contended »the existence of these little fascist groups is not only antidemocratic, anti-peasant, and anti-worker, it is also directly anti-Croat.« For several versions of the events on 14 April 1937 as recounted by some of the participants, see Rajčević, *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret*, pp. 154–156.

by nineteen of the students, they declared that “Leaving for Spain we believe it is our duty to direct our greetings to you, regardless of your political or religious beliefs, with a message that you must also persevere in the struggle for freedom and democracy.”<sup>47</sup> Many students did heed the call of the Prague volunteers, and while quite a few made it to Spain, others were caught in the attempt or focused their efforts in raising support for the Spanish Republic at their universities.

The fact that the students came from all different parts of Yugoslavia was characteristic of the “Yugoslav” nature of the volunteers in Spain, and ultimately the Partisan armies in World War Two. Ivan Turk, Mirko Horvat, Ivan Ropac, Ivan Vejvoda, and Matija Šiprak were among the Croats who had been studying in Prague that decided to “join the Spanish students, peasants, and workers,” arguing that “defending their freedom we are defending the freedom of our own nations.”<sup>48</sup> Šiprak provides an interesting example of a volunteer in Spain, precisely because he was not a typical communist activist mobilized by the Party. He came from a relatively wealthy and devoutly Catholic family from the outskirts of Sisak, and “as a student of the deceased Stjepan Radić, he was a staunch supporter of the Croatian Peasant Party.”<sup>49</sup> He was also, however, a devoted antifascist, and joined his communist colleagues in traveling to Spain, where he was killed in battle at the Jarama River on 14 February 1937 as a member of the newly formed Dimitrovac Battalion of the XVth International Brigade.<sup>50</sup> In his eulogy, the leader of the Prague students, Veljko Vlahović (who lost a leg in the same battle in which Šiprak was killed), wrote

*We are convinced that the entire Croatian nation together with us will solemnize and avenge your heroic death, helping us in our struggle against fascism and condemning that group of misguided children at the University of Zagreb, who think that politically and nationally they are closer to you, comrade Šiprak, than us – followers of other parties and sons of different nations – and who extended their hand across your grave to the murderer of the Spanish people, the enemy of the Croatian people, General Franco. We are convinced that the entire younger generation of the Croatian people is not going to follow their example, but yours, comrade Matija. May your glory be everlasting, worthy son of the Croatian nation!*<sup>51</sup>

47 Quoted in Mario Jareb, *Ustaško-domobranski pokret: od nastavka do travnja 1941. godine* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2006), p. 482.

48 *Nova riječ* (16 April 1937), p. 2. Ljubičić's friends later stated that he had decided to return to his dorm alone because he believed the day's fighting had ended, and he had no reason to suspect further violence.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

50 *Hrvatski dnevnik* (18 April 1937), p. 5. Francisco Largo Caballero was the leading socialist politician in the Popular Front government and an active union organizer.

51 *Ibid.*

Not only was the eulogy meant to stir up antifascist sentiment in Croatia, but it specifically addressed the situation at the University of Zagreb. On one hand it appealed directly to Croatian nationalism, and on the other it reflected the KPJ's efforts to reach out to all of Yugoslavia's ethnic groups regardless of political persuasion, except of course the extreme right. It is also significant that Franco is not only identified as "the murderer of the Spanish people," a common enough phrase in the pro-communist press, but he is explicitly portrayed as "the enemy of the Croatian people." In other words, the consequences of Franco's victory would have an impact on the future of the Croatian struggle for national rights. Šiprak was one of the earliest examples of a Croatian student to die on the Spanish battlefields, and his martyrdom was used in communist propaganda to inspire even more youth from Croatia and other parts of Yugoslavia to make the dangerous journey to distant Spain.

### Violence at the university

Death in the struggle against fascism was not just limited to the battlefields of Spain – in the spring of 1937 its victims would extend to the University of Zagreb. *Nova riječ*, whose editors disagreed with the communist ideology of *Novi student* but respected its coverage of issues dealing with the improvement of student life, reported on the attacks against the unarmed distributors of the paper. "With their gangster-like methods they have completely thwarted every ideological debate," an article in *Nova riječ* commented on the activities of the pro-Ustaša groups at the university, "because every democratic word they have replaced with a fascist cudgel, knife, and revolver."<sup>52</sup> On 9 April, Dragutin Kolman, at the time the president of *Svjetlost*, was stabbed half a dozen times following a demonstration by leftist students outside of a memorial service held for Stipe Javor, a political associate of Pavelić.<sup>53</sup> Afterwards, in order to justify their attack, the extreme nationalists who perpetrated the crime "exploited the Germanic last name Kolman...by spreading false news around the city that Dragutin Kolman was a Jew, in other words, of Jewish background."<sup>54</sup> The anti-Semitic tone of newspapers such as *Mlada Hrvatska* and *Nedjelja*, and the shift towards fascism in the Croatian right-wing movement generally, had seemingly influenced the rhetoric of the ideological clash at the university.<sup>55</sup> On 14 April, students in the *Svjetlost* club, outraged at the escalating violence, printed and distributed flyers in support of Kolman, recuperating in a Zagreb hospital, and condemning the

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52 Maček's statement was originally published in *Hrvatski dnevnik*, and quoted in *Nova riječ* (16 April 1937), p. 2.

53 *Nova riječ* (29 April 1937), p. 1.

54 The full text of this flyer, signed by the Croatian Academic Nationalist League, is reprinted in Rajčević, *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret*, p. 159.

55 Ibid.

“Frankist terror” against students. Unfortunately, both sides had decided to settle their differences through physical means.

That April afternoon, large groups of both pro-Ustaša and pro-communist students gathered in front of the main university building in what was then Trg kralja Aleksandra (now Trg maršala Tita). Several *Svjetlost* members apparently provoked the Frankists by handing them flyers about Kolman and antifascism, at which point a large brawl broke out between knife-wielding Frankists and leftists armed with clubs.<sup>56</sup> One Frankist, Grga Ereš, estimated that thirty nationalists had fought about one hundred leftists.<sup>57</sup> The police, anticipating trouble, intervened, but merely broke the melee into smaller skirmishes that raged across Zagreb, resulting in several wounded on both sides. When Krsto Ljubičić, a fourth-year law student from Dalmatia and *Svjetlost* activist, returned to his dorm after participating in the running street battles, half a dozen right wing students ambushed him, struck him with a blunt object, and stabbed him to death.<sup>58</sup> The attackers, which included Franjo Nevistić, the student who had won the Law School elections in January and had been arrested for his pro-Ustaša comments, surrendered and cooperated with the police, intending to use the incident for further Frankist propaganda. Two days later, the front page of *Nova riječ* printed a large photograph of Ljubičić under the headline “Victim of Fascism.”<sup>59</sup> His death graphically illustrated to the Croatian public that serious ideological rifts were fracturing the alleged unity of all Croats under HSS leadership, particularly among the perceived future leaders of Croatia, the students of the most prestigious Croatian educational institution.

The HSS immediately reacted and condemned the murder, but instead of speaking strongly against the rise of fascism, it used the incident to reinforce its policy of neutrality and opposition to all foreign ideas. An editorial in *Hrvatski dnevnik* made an explicit connection between the violence at the University of Zagreb and the war in Spain. Chastising the Croatian youth for being divided and ignoring Croatian problems, it blamed the violence on “those who fight for Franco or [Largo] Caballero, those who argue about foreign political problems.”<sup>60</sup> The same editorial added that Croatian towns and villages “do not want to sacrifice any victims for ideas which have torn apart bloody Spain.”<sup>61</sup> Maček responded to Ljubičić’s death with his typical appeal for unity:

56 Ibid, p. 161. See also Jareb, *Ustaško-domobranski pokret*, p. 485.

57 *Nedjelja* (25 April 1937), p. 1.

58 Ibid, p. 2.

59 *Nedjelja* (2 May 1937), p. 1. The article was authored by Antimarks, a pseudonym frequently used in *Nedjelja*. I have been unable to identify the individual(s) behind Antimarks, but it was clearly someone with close ties to editors of the newspaper.

60 Ibid.

61 For example, in Jelić’s book on the history of the KPH, Ljubičić is depicted as «a victim of rightist terrorist actions», and is emblematic of the struggle to create a Popular Front by leftists students. See Ivan Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske, 1937–1945*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Globus, 1981), p. 210.

*Croatian youth! Free yourselves from the slavery of foreign ideas, which  
infuse poison into our healthy Croatian and peasant blood! Come back to  
your people! Come back to the path which the entire Croatian nation is  
taking!*<sup>62</sup>

Considerable attention was given to the fact that Ljubičić had been a member of *Svjetlost*, known to be under communist influence. The SDS, unlike its HSS ally, took a much stronger position in denouncing the open attacks by right-wing students, which reflected its generally more antifascist orientation. The editor of *Nova riječ*, Večeslav Vilder, rejected connections between Ljubičić and Marxism as justification for his murder, arguing that “not every antifascist [in Croatia] is immediately a Bolshevik,” and noted that in addition to the *Svjetlost* membership card found on his body, he had a “medallion of the Virgin Mary around his neck.”<sup>63</sup> For its solidarity with the family and friends of Ljubičić, the right-wing press automatically accused the SDS of secretly working for an alleged Popular Front in Croatia, which Vilder and the rest of the SDS leadership vigorously denied.

The right-wing students used the incident to further draw attention to themselves as patriotic Croats fighting against a foreign threat. Allegedly with the help of *Hrvatska straža*, they distributed flyers that claimed “Moscow and Belgrade, old allies, find themselves together again in battle against the Croatian people.”<sup>64</sup> Ljubičić was referred to as a “Serb-Albanian mongrel,” while leftists were collectively labeled as enemies of true Croats:

*In Croatian Zagreb...various foreigners, Serbs, Montenegrins, Jews,  
and Macedonian degenerates, former members of Orjuna [Serbian  
nationalist organization], četniks, and members of JAČ [Yugoslav student  
organization], united with the Zagreb branch of Moscow's Cheka, threaten  
the lives and security of Croat students and curse Croat national fighters at  
the Croatian university...*<sup>65</sup>

The entire affair was thus depicted as self-defense on the part of innocent Croat nationalists who represented the ramparts of civilization against the evils of the east, whether they be in the form of communism, Yugoslavism, or a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy. The Stojadinović regime, which tolerated the pro-Ustaša groups to some

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62 *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 6 (15 May 1937), p. 6.

63 Rajčević, »Tito i reorganizacija SKOJ-a«, p. 26. The Action Committee was not composed of only Croat students, but included Serbs and students from other parts of Yugoslavia who were studying in Zagreb.

64 Sirotković, »Studentska društva na sveučilištu«, p. 32. According to Rajčević, thirty-six students from the University of Zagreb fought in Spain, where fourteen of them were killed, while another four of that total died during World War Two. Vojo Rajčević, »Revolucionarni studenti zagrebačkog sveučilišta u Španjolskoj 1936–1939«, in Ljubo Boban, (ed.), *Španjolska 1936–1939* (Zagreb: Globus, 1989), p. 227.

65 *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 7 (June 1937), p. 12.

extent because of their anticommunism and potential to weaken Maček's control over a unified movement (and because of Stojadinović's pro-Nazi sentiments), handed out relatively light sentences; out of eleven accused individuals, only five served sentences between three and nine months.<sup>66</sup>

The Catholic paper *Nedjelja* responded in a contradictory manner to the incident, subtly revealing the ideological shift that had taken place among intellectuals writing in the Catholic press. Initially, on 25 April, the paper emphasized Ljubičić's communist background, and the non-religious character of his funeral procession in Knin.<sup>67</sup> At the head of the procession, which the paper pointed out was attended by a large number of SDS members but only a few priests, the mourners carried a wreath of red flowers (a communist symbol) and waved both Serbian and Croatian flags, but noticeably missing were crosses or other religious symbols. Most importantly, the article, titled "Neither Fascism nor Communism," applauded Maček's condemnation of foreign ideas and concluded that both fascism and communism were at odds with the "spirit of the Croatian people."<sup>68</sup>

However, in the next issue one week later, the editors scrambled to clarify their denouncement of fascism. In the article "For Healthy Nationalism," they claimed "even though in our *Nedjelja* we wrote the article 'Neither Fascism nor Communism,' it does not mean that with that article we meant to blame anybody regarding some kind of alleged fascism that is developing as a political movement here, because that would be more than funny."<sup>69</sup> Suddenly, fascism was removed from the formula as one of the "dangerous foreign ideas," and pro-fascist students became "healthy nationalists." What is more shocking, unlike the previous week's article that condemned any kind of murder, the new position of the paper actually justified the killing because Ljubičić represented a threat to the Croatian nation as both a communist and a Serb:

*[T]he sad events at the University of Zagreb were provoked precisely by the Marxists with their savage attacks against cultured and nationally proper Croatian students, forcing them into a necessary defense, and the only ones*

66 Blažo Jovanović, »Partija organizira odlazak«, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, pp. 212–215.

67 Čedo Kapor, »Jedan partijski zadatak«, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 1, p. 426.

68 »Dobrovoljci trupa španske vlade, način odlazka naših studenata u Španiju«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 37807-37 (28 December 1937), HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 535.

69 Pavle Gregorić, »Zagrebački punkt«, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 237. The police suspected Gregorić of being involved in the illegal transfer of volunteers, searching his apartment and arresting him in December 1937 after finding lists of »tourists«, the code word the KPJ used to refer to volunteers. This disrupted the KPJ's operations for some time, and reveals the relative success of the Yugoslav police in shutting down communist efforts in transporting volunteers to Spain. See »Verbovanje dobrovoljaca za Španiju«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. br. 8089/38 (21 March 1938), HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 3, no. 35.



*to blame are the instigators of the incident. That conflict at the university was incorrectly portrayed as a struggle between fascism and communism, because it was a struggle between destructive communism and healthy nationalism. Waging the battle against Marxism is the duty of every cultured and nationally proper citizen.*<sup>70</sup>

*Nedjelja* continued its anticommunist and anti-Semitic attacks on a regular basis, but fascism all but ceased to exist in the pages of this paper, replaced by a healthy nationalism whose models were Germany, Italy, and most explicitly, Franco's Spain. The voices of moderation were drowned out in the anticommunist crusade, as more and more Church intellectuals drew closer to the pro-Ustaša right wing.

For the KPJ, Ljubičić became a martyr and his murder a call for greater organization at the university. In communist historiography, decades after the event, the Ljubičić murder was cited as a turning point for communist youth at the University of Zagreb.<sup>71</sup> The event also underscored the KPJ's argument, propagated through both its legal and illegal press, that the battle against fascism in Spain was the same battle being waged in Croatia and the rest of Yugoslavia. Students were dying among the olive groves of Spain and on the doorsteps of their dorms in Zagreb. Commenting on the situation at the university, an article in *Proleter* declared that

*The Croatian nation, especially its youth, needs to know that the 'conscious Croatian nationalists' at the University of Zagreb are enemies of democracy, that is the government of the people, and are enemies of the oppressed nations in Spain. Whoever truly wishes for the freedom of his own nation, must respect and support the struggle of other nations for their freedom.*<sup>72</sup>

The thirty most active members in *Svjetlost* responded to the death of Ljubičić by forming another legal organization at the university, the Action Committee of Leftist Croatian Students.<sup>73</sup> It worked even more actively in organizing the antifascist movement at the university, despite continued pressure from both the police and the pro-Ustaša groups. The general efforts of Tito at the time, which included bringing

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70 Maks Baće, interview with author in Split, Croatia, 14 November 2003.

71 The complete list of Yugoslav volunteers in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 506, gives Baće's arrival in Spain as October 1937, which was confirmed by him during his interview. In the book *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*, however, it is claimed that he was one of the first Yugoslav volunteers in Spain, arriving there in 1936 after the outbreak of the war, which is evidently incorrect. *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Partizanska knjiga, 1983), p. 47.

72 Kapor, *Krv i život*, pp. 61–62. Communist propaganda certainly took liberty with Puškarić's motivations for going to Spain, but he had been active in international student organizations, so it is not inconceivable that much of what the communists later wrote about him was close to his actual beliefs.

73 For the Croatian Peasant Party's position on the Spanish Civil War, see Vjeran Pavlaković, »Vladko Maček, the HSS, and the Spanish Civil War«, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2007).

the KPJ's leadership back into the country and reorganizing SKOJ, seem to have helped to strengthen the communist cadres, and other antifascist groups, at the university.

### Croatian students in the Spanish Civil War

In the charged atmosphere at the university after the events of April 1937, a wave of students volunteered for Spain, helped in part by the Action Committee. Out of a total of nearly ninety students from Yugoslavia who fought in the Spanish Civil War, a third were from the University of Zagreb.<sup>74</sup> The group of Yugoslav students from Prague published a call to arms in the June 1937 issue of *Proleter*. "Discussing and supporting democratic Spain only with words is still not enough," the students wrote from the battlefield, adding that "in moments like this, it is necessary to give everything possible of oneself, which means putting one's life on the line and going with a rifle in hand against those who barbarously tried to choke and destroy justice and a nation's freedom."<sup>75</sup> The increased vigilance of the police and the failure of the KPJ to organize the mass transportation of volunteers from the Dalmatian coast following the capture of the ship *Le Corse* in March 1937 meant that the Party was more selective in who it decided to send to Spain.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the disorganization of SKOJ throughout 1937 meant that the youth were not mobilized to their full potential, even though there seems to have been considerable enthusiasm to volunteer, especially in Zagreb and Dalmatia.

According to veteran Čedo Kapor, being chosen to go to Spain "was the greatest reward that a communist at that time could wish for."<sup>77</sup> Students and others with no police records used legal routes to travel to Paris, the gathering point for volunteers to the International Brigades, while communist activists familiar to the police and gendarmes were smuggled illegally across international borders. A police document from December 1937 about students volunteering for Spain noted that many had applied for passports to France where they were allegedly planning on studying, but instead had crossed the Pyrenees to join the army of the Republic.<sup>78</sup> Other students used the Paris Arts and Techniques Exposition (May–November 1937) as an excuse for seeking legal means to travel to France. Pavle Gregorić, a leading KPJ functionary for Croatia known as "Speedy" (*Brzi*), operated a bookstore in Zagreb which

74 Sirotković, »Studenska društva na sveučilištu«, p. 33.

75 *Omladina*, vol. 22, no. 1 (September 1938), p. 23.

76 Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i NDH, 1941–1945* (Zagreb: SN Liber, 1978), p. 50. One of the leaders of the pro-Ustaša group at the University of Zagreb, Zdenko Blažeković, became a high-positioned Ustaša official in the NDH and the leader of the Ustaša Youth movement.

77 *Seljački dom* (25 November 1937), p. 4.

78 For a detailed discussion of these peasant guards, see Sabrina Ramet, »Vladko Maček and the Croatian Peasant Defense«, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2007).

served as the cover for the dispatch of volunteers from all parts of Croatia and other Yugoslav regions to Paris and then eventually Spain.<sup>79</sup> Maks Baće, a student of philosophy and a communist activist at the University of Zagreb, recalled how he had wanted to volunteer for Spain after the death of Ljubičić, but had been ordered by the Party to continue work in Zagreb.<sup>80</sup> It was only after Baće graduated and signed his name on a communist publication (which, incidentally, he did not author) that his continued presence in Zagreb became too risky, convincing Gregorić to allow him to volunteer for the International Brigades.<sup>81</sup>

But it was not only communist students who were affected by the radicalization of the university. Franjo Puškarić, a member of the HSS since the age of nineteen and the president of the HSS student organization at the University of Zagreb, volunteered to go to Spain in the aftermath of Ljubičić's murder. Like Matija Šiprak, Puškarić represented those Croats who were not communists, yet believed that the war in Spain had significance beyond its borders, and joined the antifascist struggle under the only political force in Croatia which openly supported the Republic, the KPJ. Unfortunately not much information exists on what channels Puškarić used to get to Spain or details of his experience there, since he was killed on the Brunete front in July 1937, less than two months after his arrival. The KPJ used his decision to fight in Spain as further support for their efforts to create a Popular Front in Croatia, claiming he "realized that party differences should not play any kind of role when it is a question of the struggle against fascism... a new and better life will sprout from his blood not only on the fields of Spain, but on the fields of Croatia."<sup>82</sup> The power of the Republican cause in Spain to draw HSS supporters into the communist fold is what made that conflict so dangerous to Maček, and partly explains why the HSS fought so hard to ignore it.<sup>83</sup>

Although the ideological debate over the Spanish Civil War continued unabated in Croatia, the violence at the university diminished after the spring of 1937 as the various groups worked on reorganizing and strengthening their student groups, while

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79 For example, see the »University Youth and the Nation«, in *Seljački dom* (18 November 1937), p. 5.

80 Maks Baće, interview with author in Split, Croatia, 14 November 2003.

81 The complete list of Yugoslav volunteers in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 506, gives Baće's arrival in Spain as October 1937, which was confirmed by him during his interview. In the book *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*, however, it is claimed that he was one of the first Yugoslav volunteers in Spain, arriving there in 1936 after the outbreak of the war, which is evidently incorrect. *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Partizanska knjiga, 1983), p. 47.

82 Kapor, *Krv i život*, pp. 61–62. Communist propaganda certainly took liberty with Puškarić's motivations for going to Spain, but he had been active in international student organizations, so it is not inconceivable that much of what the communists later wrote about him was close to his actual beliefs.

83 For the Croatian Peasant Party's position on the Spanish Civil War, see Vjeran Pavlaković, »Vladko Maček, the HSS, and the Spanish Civil War«, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2007).

the police restricted the excesses of the previous months with an increased presence at the university. Through their propaganda materials, the KPJ worked hard at recruiting youth who were opposed to the fascist tendencies of the Croatian right, using examples such as Šiprak and Puškarić to recruit from among the HSS's ranks. At the university, the Action Committee and the members of *Svjetlost* generally supported HSS candidates in order to defeat the openly pro-Ustaša students, who continued to control student organizations in the Law and Engineering Schools. (*Svjetlost* was banned on 20 May 1939, at which point most of its membership joined the Cultural Association of Student Pacifists.) In 1938, the KPJ published the book *Blood and Life for Freedom! (Krv i život za slobodu!)*, a collection of photographs, articles, memoirs, and eulogies of students from Yugoslavia who were fighting in Spain. Although by the time it was published its impact was minimal in mobilizing more student volunteers, due to the impending defeat of the Republic, it nonetheless illustrated the KPJ's efforts to recruit among the youth. The glorified communist role in the Spanish Civil War was not the only factor that drew new recruits into the KPJ's youth organizations, but it certainly contributed to their appeal for the generation that had grown up under the authoritarian Yugoslav regime. The membership of SKOJ grew steadily after 1937, and it is estimated that eventually over 2,300 students from the University of Zagreb participated in National Liberation War on the side of the Partisans.<sup>84</sup>

The pro-Ustaša groups at the university, while forced to suspend their violent attacks against their ideological enemies, continued to organize and contribute to the right-wing press. The relative peace at the university after April 1937 is deceiving, since the divisions among the students seem to have become even greater, and there is no indication that extremists on either the left or the right denounced the use of violence. An article in *Omladina* reminded its readers that there would eventually need to be some kind of settling of accounts with their ideological opposites: "The war which is taking place in Spain, is a war between two different world views, and that conflict must be resolved by every nation in its own way (whether violently or peacefully) on its territory."<sup>85</sup> The strength of the pro-Ustaša groups at the university was such that in 1940 an illegal Ustaša University Headquarters (*Ustaški sveučilišni stožer*) was established with the help of the organization *Uzdanica*, the nucleus of Ustaša activity inside Croatia after the return of Ustaša émigrés from Italy.<sup>86</sup>

The HSS seems to have taken some steps to strengthen its influence among the youth after the events at the University of Zagreb revealed to what degree more radical political movements were affecting the next generation of the Croatian elite, although most efforts were concentrated where the HSS was the strongest, in the countryside.

84 Sirotković, »Studentska društva na sveučilištu«, p. 33.

85 *Omladina*, vol. 22, no. 1 (September 1938), p. 23.

86 Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i NDH, 1941–1945* (Zagreb: SN Liber, 1978), p. 50. One of the leaders of the pro-Ustaša group at the University of Zagreb, Zdenko Blažeković, became a high-positioned Ustaša official in the NDH and the leader of the Ustaša Youth movement.

*Seljački dom* continued to warn the peasant youth of the dangerous communist and fascist propaganda being spread in Croatian villages in articles such as “Protect Our Peasant Youth from the Infections of Foreign Ideas.”<sup>87</sup> The paramilitary groups organized by the HSS in the late 1930s, the Croatian Peasant and Civic Guards, were used to defend villages from government repression, militant Yugoslav nationalists (“Četniks”), as well as communist infiltration in the countryside.<sup>88</sup> The HSS seemed powerless to stop the influence of the KPJ or fascist groups at the university, as evidenced by numerous articles in late 1937 lamenting the fact that the youth was still too preoccupied with foreign ideas.<sup>89</sup> The Civic Guards were also increasingly used in the cities and at the university to prevent incidents such as the Ljubičić murder, although this paramilitary force tended to attract the right wing elements of the HSS who, in most cases, transferred en masse into the Ustaša forces after April 1941.

### Conclusion

The polarization at the University of Zagreb paralleled, and was closely connected to, the general trends in Croatia during the course of the Spanish Civil War, although both communism and fascism seem to have had an even stronger following among the students than among the Croatian population as a whole. This is not surprising, considering the exposure to new literature, controversial ideas, youthful naivety, and active student organizations, all of which were prevalent at the university. The student publications of both the communists and pro-fascist groups looked to the example of Spain; the brawls in the university buildings and dorms were extensions of the international antifascist struggle in the minds of young communists, while extreme nationalists admired the way Franco dealt with his enemies and sought to apply the same methods at the university. The KPJ was relatively successful in reaching out to the HSS and SDS student clubs and other students with an antifascist orientation, a tactic used even more effectively during World War Two. The mobilization of volunteers, the distribution of illegal newspapers, communist publications, and flyers, the collection of aid for Spanish civilians and later Yugoslav veterans imprisoned in French internment camps, and participation in the various leftist organizations helped to develop an experienced urban cadre which the KPJ was to heavily rely upon during the war years. Out of the sharp ideological divide at the university, however, also emerged a militant nationalist youth who eagerly entered the Ustaša regime after it was established, contributing to its intolerant and fascist composition.

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87 *Seljački dom* (25 November 1937), p. 4.

88 For a detailed discussion of these peasant guards, see Sabrina Ramet, »Vladko Maček and the Croatian Peasant Defense«, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2007).

89 For example, see the »University Youth and the Nation«, in *Seljački dom* (18 November 1937), p. 5.

## SAŽETAK

**Radikalizacija na Sveučilištu u Zagrebu tijekom Španjolskog građanskog rata od 1936. do 1939.**

U članku se govori o političkoj radikalizaciji i polarizaciji na Sveučilištu u Zagrebu tijekom Španjolskog građanskog rata (1936-1939). Iako se sklonost ka radikalnoj politici javila uslijed društvenih i gospodarskih nedaća koje su se pod autoritarnim jugoslavenskim režimom osjećale diljem Hrvatske, sukob u Španjolskoj poslužio je kao instrument da se te frustracije usmjere na opipljive ciljeve i pokrete. On nije samo doveo do nasilja i političkih podjela na Sveučilištu u Zagrebu, već je služio kao centralna točka oko koje su suprotstavljene grupe artikulirale i branile svoja ideološka stajališta. Nadalje, snažne ideje i zamisli koje je ovaj rat pokrenuo – poput slobode, demokracije, internacionalizma i antifašizma, posebice su privukle mlade ljude koji tijekom odrastanja ove ideje nisu sami doživjeli. Ostali studenti na Sveučilištu, koji su bili pod utjecajem antikomunističkih ideja i podržavali hrvatske radikalne nacionaliste, uključili su se u žustre rasprave sa studentima prorepublikanske orijentacije, što je dovelo do fizičkog nasilja na Sveučilištu i ubojstva studenta Krste Ljubičića.

Dok ubojstvo Ljubičića 1937. godine, u jeku rata u Španjolskoj, predstavlja najveću eskalaciju sukoba između suprotstavljenih grupacija na Sveučilištu, ovaj članak govori i o različitim studentskim političkim organizacijama, njihovim publikacijama i reakcijama na daleki sukob koji su, s druge strane, političke elite u Hrvatskoj pokušavale ignorirati. Upravo je opasnost od radikalizacije među mladima najviše zabrinjavala Hrvatsku seljačku stranku (HSS), s obzirom da su proustaške grupe (poznate kao »frankisti«) i komunisti stjecali pristalice kako je rat u Španjolskoj sve više poprimao međunarodna obilježja i ideološke konotacije. Studentske tiskovine su na obje strane zastupale svoje ciljeve strastvenom retorikom i propagandom kakve su se koristile u izvješćima o Španjolskom građanskom ratu. Članci iz suvremene štampe, memoari koje su pisali sudionici tih dramatičnih događaja te arhivski materijal pomažu nam pri rekonstrukciji atmosfere na Sveučilištu i rastućeg nasilja koje je prethodilo brutalnom ratu koji je zatekao Jugoslaviju nakon 1941. godine.

Uz događaje na Sveučilištu, ovaj članak analizira i reakcije raznih političkih stranaka, kako legalnih tako i ilegalnih, na sukob koji je doveo do Ljubičićevog ubojstva. Hrvatska seljačka stranka nastavila je s pasivnom politikom, ostajući neutralna u odnosu na rat u Španjolskoj, dok je njezin politički saveznik, Samostalna demokratska stranka, ukazivala na potrebu za razvijenijom svijesti o jačanju fašizma i pružanju otpora nasilju. Komunistička partija Jugoslavije zauzela je proaktivnije stajalište, regrutirajući studente ljevičare za tjeskoban put u Španjolsku i borbu u međunarodnim brigadama. Gotovo četrdeset studenata sa Zagrebačkog sveučilišta konačno se pridružilo republikancima u Španjolskom građanskom ratu. Nekolicina su kasnije postali važni članovi partizanskog pokreta otpora tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata.

**Ključne riječi:** Španjolski građanski rat, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, politička radikalizacija