

# Perceptions of Post-WWII Croatian Immigrants: The South Australian Case

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## **Abstract**

*In this article the author offers a historical overview of popular perceptions of Croats in South Australia since the end of the Second World War. This includes an analysis of the political and social factors which influenced the way sections of society approached the Croatian community. The author also draws attention to the manifold experiences of Croats in their adopted homeland, focusing on the social, educational, sporting and religious activities of the Croatian community.*

In a number of ways the Croatian migration experience since World War Two is like that of other European groups. But it is also different in that, to a large degree, the history and politics of Yugoslavia shaped Croatian patterns of settlement and association in Australia. The relationship between Croats' perceptions of their new and old homelands was, in the first instance, determined by international factors and international trends. But in due course national and local factors became enmeshed with those trends and in some ways superseded them. Croats often and, mostly, reluctantly, found themselves locked in struggles on many fronts in Australia. Yugoslavia and its communist evolution; the contours of Australian and South Australian political and social life; and the organisation of Croats themselves: all these factors shaped the history of Croats in post-war Australia. This paper examines the experience of Croats in South Australia with particular reference to public and official perceptions of Croatian political identity.

Any investigation of Croatian immigration that begins and ends with generalisations concentrating on social factors – the Croats' socio-economic standing predominantly as industrial workers, for example – will be found wanting. This is because their

perceived political culture and political history, rather than their professional or social status, has, for the most part, influenced the place of Croats in Australian society. That does not mean that social factors are not important. Indeed, Australian Croats' overwhelmingly and persistently low social status ought to be an important feature of any study of Croatian immigration.<sup>1</sup> In the period under review, however, it is the political that takes precedence and, it may be argued, even shaped the social experience of Croats in Australia. Further, I would suggest that the perception of Croats as outsiders and politically suspect had an impact on their capacity to become socially and professionally more mobile. It is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue that broader perspective, and I will focus here on the South Australian context to illustrate the fundamental premise of this paper regarding the important and understudied impact of local, national and international politics on Croatian immigrant life.

In many regards the achievements of the Croatian activists in South Australia stand as representative examples of Croatian energy, drive and resourcefulness in Australia as a whole. The Croatian Club in Adelaide was established in 1950. It was the first in Australia and continues to function. Soccer, as is well known, provided an opportunity for Croatians to make a political point when clubs assumed the name 'Croatia'. From 1952 they availed themselves of this opportunity in South Australia with vigour and success: 'Adelaide Croatia' was the first team of its kind in Australia. An ethnic school was established in Adelaide in 1966, and it is the longest continuously running Croatian ethnic school in Australia. When, in 1976, ethnic radio was established in Adelaide, Croats immediately formed a radio committee and have broadcast for twenty eight years in Croatian with Ethnic Broadcasting Inc. on 5EBI FM.<sup>2</sup> As has always been the case, music and dance draws many disparate individuals in Croatian communities together, and the folkloric ensemble in Adelaide, Lenek, attracts over a hundred children and young adults to weekly rehearsals. Prominent individuals dedicated several decades of voluntary service to the Croatian community in South Australia and the endeavours of three such individuals have been acknowledged through the national honours system. A fourth was the recipient of a Centenary of Federation Medal.<sup>3</sup> It was at the time of the war

leading to Croatian independence that South Australian Croats were mobilised as never before. They drew on their experience of years of activism in the face of hostility and indifference to manage vast shipments of aid in various forms, as well as rally moral and political support for the cause of Croatian sovereignty. It was a defining moment for regional and urban Croatian activism in South Australia and brought together in concerted actions Croats from around the state, including Port Lincoln, Coober Pedy and the Riverland. This overview tells a familiar story made special in Adelaide by the generally cohesive nature of formal Croatian association between the 1950s and 1990s. Up until the 1990s there was one structure (the Croatian Club or *dom*) which Adelaide Croats maintained and under whose auspices most formal activities were organised. Political differences within the Croatian community in Adelaide did not manifest themselves in the establishment of more clubs and competing associations until after Croatia became a sovereign state.<sup>4</sup>

Croats' views, like those of any immigrant group, span the political spectrum and the first lesson of Croatian immigrant history is to recognise that, in Australia, different Croats were working to different political ends. For example, in the interwar years Croats had established the Yugoslav Immigrants' Association. Many of these Croats were also to become very active during the Second World War as supporters of Tito's partisans. During the war they demonstrated their hostility towards the Yugoslav consulate in Sydney because of its royalist and Chetnik leanings, and sought to form a military unit which would fight under Tito in Yugoslavia.<sup>6</sup> There are strands of continuity linking this war-time lobbying in favour of Tito and the post-war association of Yugoslav-oriented Croats in every Australian state, and this was evident in the relative official distance between rival centres of Croatian and Croatian-Yugoslav activity. Croats who identified with Yugoslavia articulated a left-wing Croatian perspective on twentieth century Yugoslavism which, though strong for a number of decades, was finally discredited (or simply abandoned) in the 1990s, once Croatia became a sovereign state, and during the war with the Serbs who fought under the auspices of the Yugoslav National Army. But from the end of the Second World War to the fall of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it was the perceived association of

Croatian immigrants with the far right in politics that dominated public opinion as well as government investigations into Croatian activities and reports in the press.

This was the case from the first moment of Croatian activism in Adelaide. In 1952 ASIO investigated and reported on the Croatian Club in Adelaide with particular reference to its membership and goals. This report drew on communications from "reliable informers" who were close to the centre of Croatian community life. It also drew on comments emanating from the RSL and the Royal Yugoslav Club, both of which had noted that foreign organisations of the Croatian kind were "not healthy" for a number of reasons. These reasons included their "strong political outlook," their inadequate facilities, their lack of responsiveness to the "immediate needs and conditions for assimilation in Australia" and, finally, the "dissension" that existed among the members. Investigations into the activities of the Croatian Club in Adelaide, according to this 1952 report, revealed that some 60% of the (estimated 300-400) members were "said to be ex-members of the Ustachi [*sic*]." Then we read the following:

*The political aim of the Croatian Club is based on the assumption that Tito and Communism in Yugoslavia today, will eventually be overthrown and the old regime will be re-established. In preparation for this day of liberation, the Croats are organising their forces overseas so that they may reappear as the strongest element in the rebirth of Yugoslavia.<sup>6</sup>*

Not all Croats in Adelaide, the report continued, were of the same view or especially enthusiastic about the aims of the Club. Many Croats subsequently dissociated themselves from it, or were not attracted to it in the first place. However, the Club did remain the centre of Croatian association which, as I have already outlined, went from strength to strength and which was under close government scrutiny. ASIO reports on Adelaide Croats are odd, even chilling, to read. In them we find accurate information on matters like changes in membership of the Club's executive, which reveals informers did have very close affiliations with Croatian activists. (For example, I read with some interest a detailed ASIO report about a (then) well known local scandal of the early 1950s which related to funds allegedly going astray.) But we also find

in these reports a considerable amount of disinformation or errors, such as the unsubstantiated 'statistics' about the alleged Ustasha background of Club members in Adelaide mentioned above.<sup>7</sup> Fifty years on, the gross inaccuracies may perhaps seem relatively harmless, but the reports comprised a volatile mix for policy-makers in government agencies who depended on such information when devising strategies to manage matters of national security in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Was their intelligence vetted for accuracy? Moreover, did they question the motives of their informers, who, to say the least, would have been highly interested parties?<sup>8</sup>

The collective memory of first and second generation post-war Croatian Australians tends to focus on the 1960s and 1970s, notably the sensationalist coverage in the press and parliament of alleged Croatian terrorist activities in Australia. This has attracted much interest and attention for good reason – the sorts of things Croats experienced at the hands of the Commonwealth police and other government agencies was unprecedented and, often, humiliating.<sup>9</sup> However, in order to understand the context in which these events took place we must explore how these negative attitudes about Croats and their activism emerged, and why there was such a zealous association of all such activism with the Ustasha or with neo-fascism. On one level, the answer is fairly straightforward. In Croatian club rooms around the country hung pictures of Ante Pavelić, the wartime leader of the Ustasha and head of the puppet regime, the Independent State of Croatia, between 1941 and 1945. Why would one not associate the activities taking place within those clubrooms with the Ustasha, or at least with a tacit acceptance of the nature of the Ustasha regime? But what others outside Croatian club culture could not immediately perceive was the extent to which the presence of images of Ante Pavelić in Croatian clubs was a source of considerable tension among its members.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, significantly, the 1952 ASIO report, referred to above, had got it right, perhaps unwittingly, where it mattered most: the basic premise of most overtly Croatian activism in Adelaide, and probably Australia as a whole, in the post-WWII period was that communist Yugoslavia was stifling Croatian identity. All association was therefore directed at maintaining and

shoring up Croatian identity in the face of this perceived threat to its very existence. The error onlookers made, however, was to assume that most of this activity was generated by a backward looking right wing politics. Had it truly been the case that Croats yearned nostalgically for the establishment of a revived Ustasha state, then Croatian activism would have had only limited potential for growth and change. The (eventually) successful progress of Croats in South Australia was, in part at least, the product of their politically inclusive and democratic vision for a new Croatia, and that vision could not have been sustained by a mythical evocation of Croatia's regrettable wartime record.

The problem for Croats was one of popular perception: Croatian activists, by their very nature, were deemed 'extremists'. Worse still, they were making troublesome noises about a country that had become the focus of the positive attentions of the New Left in Europe and further afield. After Tito's split with Stalin (1948) Yugoslavia embarked on its own socialist path and, in time, represented the acceptable, indeed the attractive and humane face, of the new communism. Witness this 1964 memorandum from the Chargé d'Affaires in the Australian embassy in Vienna who was reporting on a meeting with the Yugoslav ambassador, at which the two men discussed the issue of visas for Australia issued to Yugoslav citizens residing in Austria. The Australian, evidently taken by the Yugoslav's demeanour, wrote:

*I found the Ambassador very easy and forthright to talk to, and he is clearly a man who is worth cultivating. He is quite highly regarded in the diplomatic corps, and he is refreshingly free of the dogmatism and rigidity which one usually encounters amongst the majority of Communist representatives.<sup>11</sup>*

As Australia forged closer diplomatic ties with Yugoslavia,<sup>12</sup> and as academics here aligned themselves with their colleagues in Europe and America, the Yugoslav state was projected in the best possible light, its detractors in the worst. There was a degree of inevitability to this process. It coincided with two features of intellectual and political life in Australia and abroad. First, the status of the international historiography of fascism and the Second World War which, until recently, labelled whole peoples and nations as 'fascistic' or 'collaborationist'. And, second, the in-

ternational standing of Yugoslavia, as a communist country that broke with the Soviets, meant the country was seen to be taking the middle way in its pursuit of a more egalitarian society.

As I have indicated, Australia was no exception to this trend. Carol Pateman's *Participation and Democracy*, published by Cambridge in 1970 and written in Australia, became a work of international significance. Pateman discussed various aspects of Yugoslav socialism, notably worker participation or self-management, in a positive light. Bruce MacFarlane, a senior member of the Politics Department of the University of Adelaide (and eventually Professor of Politics there), spent time as a visiting scholar in the Yugoslav Planning Office in the 1950s and wrote favourably about the economic model Yugoslavia had chosen and its reasons for doing so.<sup>13</sup> Don Dunstan, much loved and now lionised progressive premier of South Australia between 1970 and 1979, travelled overseas in 1976 and spent time in Belgrade. He had also been to Germany, Austria, Poland and the Soviet Union to study models of worker participation. But none struck him so much as the Yugoslav case. Dunstan gave the 1976 Chifley Memorial Lecture entitled *Social Democracy in the 1970s: The Struggle Against the Myths*. While delivering the lecture, he noted:

*Real decisions concerning policy are made not only at the factory level, but within the separate units in a factory or commercial process. And that is possible because Yugoslavia works within a market economy.*

This was not the case in the centrally planned economies of other communist states, and while the Yugoslav model could not simply be transposed onto Australian industry, Dunstan continued, there was nevertheless much that one could learn from its practices.<sup>14</sup> Such talk may seem oddly naive to us now, but Dunstan was the inspiration of many socially progressive and politically successful people in South Australia for well over a decade, possibly much longer. His views were popularised and then became entrenched. This evidence, and much more like it, shows the influence of Yugoslavism at the highest levels of administrative and political power in the state.

Thus a unique set of circumstances meant that South Australia became a path breaker in the area of worker participation in Australia, and this had an impact on the social and political standing of

South Australian Croats. In 1973 a worker participation branch was established in the Department of Labour. The following year it was expanded and also became known as the Unit for Quality of Work. Two members of the unit also visited several European countries. It was in August 1975 that the Worker Participation Branch transferred to the Premier's Department and was renamed the Unit for Industrial Democracy. This Unit continued to grow and proposed models for worker participation in the public service and in private industry. It generated a lot of paper work, some pilot projects, and a series of publications (two of which were devoted entirely to the case of worker participation and self-management in Yugoslavia). The following year (1976) Dunstan visited Yugoslavia and returned convinced that South Australia had the capacity to lead the way in this area of industrial reform.<sup>15</sup> This trip also inspired him to direct the Unit to organise a large international conference on Industrial Democracy to take place in Adelaide in 1978.

At this international conference there were two sessions on Yugoslavia conducted by two Belgrade academics and a local union official, Ted Gnatenko, education officer with the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights Union, South Australian Branch. Gnatenko reported on his study tour of Europe funded by the South Australian government. He wrote:

*The highlight of my overseas tour, without doubt, was the eight weeks spent in Yugoslavia. I sincerely believe that the socialist self-management system, as practiced in Yugoslavia, opens up new horizons for human, cultural, political and socio-economic relationships.*

He added that he had been a little apprehensive before arriving in Yugoslavia. But he quickly felt at ease.

*Not long after my arrival, all of my apprehensions were seen to be unfounded and I take the opportunity to dispel some of the slanders, lies and misconceptions being promulgated by some people in Australia about Yugoslavia.*

Gnatenko then proceeded to wax eloquent on the progress and advances achieved in Yugoslavia to such the extent that the two Belgrade academics, who thanked him for his illuminating exposé and positive recount of his time in Yugoslavia and its



system, replied that, perhaps, it was not entirely free of flaws and that there was still room for progress for the workers of Yugoslavia!<sup>16</sup> The point of this is that the people Gnatenko accused of 'slandering' Yugoslavia with their 'lies' were fairly easily recognisable in South Australia, indeed some of them at least were, in all probability, on Gnatenko's shop floor. Understandably this very public praise of the system that Croats apparently sought to destroy was a significant factor in the alienation of Croats from a number of areas of public life. For example, we are drawn to reflect on just how undermined was the perspective of those Croatian workers in manufacturing plants and elsewhere who deemed illegitimate the very state being used as a model to transform the landscape of industrial relations in South Australia by men like Dunstan and Gnatenko.

Thus it was an uphill battle for much Croatian activity in South Australia for much of the time. These were times of isolation and perseverance. The successes of Croatian associations enumerated at the start of this paper were hard won and all the more important because of that. Still, not all institutions were hostile to the expression of a Croatian identity separate from an overarching or synthetic 'Yugoslav' identity. The Good Neighbour Council, although an avowedly assimilationist organisation, nevertheless boasted a South Australian president who, in 1963, while calling for loyalty from immigrants, also said that it was important for newcomers "to retain their love for their own land of birth, its language and its culture."<sup>17</sup> A report on various ethnic groups submitted to the Good Neighbour Council in the early 1970s noted that Croats were exemplary in the loyalty exhibited towards their 'new land', and the high rate of naturalisations within the Croatian community provided at least partial evidence for this.<sup>18</sup>

The Catholic Church also publicly embraced Croatian religious and national identity. The father of South Australia's much admired Archbishop between 1940 and 1971, Matthew Beovich, was Croatian. This was a source of pride for new Croatian arrivals. Even though Beovich's Croatian background was rarely acknowledged outside Catholic circles,<sup>19</sup> the Church in general, and the Archbishop in particular, championed the cause of the so-called 'new Australians'. Beovich's activities

indicated a serious commitment to the immigrants' cause and a recognition of their history on the Church's part. (For example, Beovich had blessed the Croatian flag in 1955 after a service at the Cathedral.) The South Australian Catholic weekly, *The Southern Cross*, had monitored closely the post-war trial and subsequent house arrest of the Archbishop (later Cardinal) of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac. The persecution of the Church in communist countries was a subject of much discussion among Catholics internationally, and the local Church, unsurprisingly, tapped into that discourse.<sup>20</sup>

For their part, the predominantly Catholic South Australian Croats welcomed the opportunity to form a distinctive community in the diocese. It could be said that it was the Church that first enabled them to fulfil their desire to be visible and recognised as separate from 'Yugoslavs'. This was to become obvious public displays of Marian piety like the national Marian Congress which took place in Adelaide in 1951 and the annual Marian Processions. The Marian Congress was unlike any previous public display of Catholicism in South Australia, and members of the Croatian community luxuriated in the opportunity to proceed through the centre of the city behind a placard marked 'Croats' in the final procession. As was to be the case in the succeeding decades, the striking folk costumes worn by some of the women attracted favourable comments and generated a positive image. The event also boosted morale among Croats who embraced it enthusiastically: one Adelaide Croat, for example, had been in Australia for less than a month, and in South Australia for less than a week, before participating in the procession of the Marian Congress in 1951. News of the event had travelled fast and generated excitement; it remained a strong tradition among Croats to make a point of attending in full force as a group under the Croatian banner wherever and whenever it was possible to do so. Quite apart from this, the nature of these public displays of piety was in keeping with their own traditions of popular piety and suited their brand of Catholicism well.

There is still much to learn of the history of Croats in post-war Australia. As this paper has shown only very briefly, the Croatian immigrant story touches on themes that go to the heart of Australian political history as well as the more obvious topics relat-

ing to international patterns of migration and settlement. Thus, in many ways, the Australian-Croatian story is unique and textured, a fact that will be obvious once the findings of the more detailed regional and national research currently being undertaken comes to light.

<sup>1</sup> According to the 1996 Australian census the percentage of Croatian-born immigrants with post-secondary qualifications was 6.9%, compared with 16.7% of the population as a whole, and 19.3% of all overseas born. (ABS, 1997), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Today in South Australia there are programs broadcast in Croatian on 5EBI as well as other public broadcasting stations.

<sup>3</sup> Ljerka Drapač, Milan Karamarko and Vinko Romanik are the recipients of the Order of Australia Medal. Dragana Brkljača was awarded the Centenary of Federation medal.

<sup>4</sup> In Adelaide, however, the Yugoslav and Istrian Clubs and the Dinamo Soccer Club, for example, also numbered high percentages of Croats among their members.

<sup>5</sup> See National Archives of Australia (henceforth NAA), A6122/40/181, Yugoslav Immigrants' Association, Vols. 1 and 2.

<sup>6</sup> NAA, A6122XR1/310, Croatian Club Adelaide, Regional Director's Report, 5 September 1952.

<sup>7</sup> From a statistical point of view, for example, these figures are questionable given that the Croatian club itself was established by a handful of men in 1952 and there were no more than a few hundred members in the early years. Club membership peaked at around 1,200 in the early 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> It is known that the Yugoslav Embassy monitored the activities of Croatians in Australia and that, on occasion, the Australian government availed itself of information gathered by Yugoslav officials, sometimes through the tapping of Yugoslav Embassy phones. See David MacKnight, *Australia's Spies and their Secrets* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), pp. 256, 261.

<sup>9</sup> For example, after the raid on ASIO undertaken by the Whitlam government under the direction of the Attorney-General, Senator Lionel Murphy, in 1973, Commonwealth policemen conducted illegal searches in the homes of Croats in most states. For much of the period under review in this paper, Commonwealth and local police closely monitored Croatian activities in South Australia, attending community picnics and cabarets, for example, and periodically visiting the homes of community leaders.

<sup>10</sup> There is ample evidence, anecdotal and oral, testifying to this tension. For example, one of the author's interviewees described how he was physically prevented from removing a large framed portrait of Ante Pavelić from clubrooms when the ladder on which he was standing was shaken from beneath by another club member. Moreover, the extent to which the presence of such portraits was representative (or the product) of an informed political position or historical assessment is a subject calling for further research.

<sup>11</sup> NAA, A1838/272/73/1/3/6 Part 1, Vienna Memorandum, 18 June 1964.

<sup>12</sup> An Australian embassy was established in Belgrade in 1967.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bruce MacFarlane, *Yugoslavia: Politics, Economics and Society* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Donald Dunstan, "Social Democracy in the 1970s: The Struggle Against the Myths," The 1976 Chifley Memorial Lecture (Melbourne, 1976), pp. 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Industrial Democracy, South Australian Government Policy* (Government Printer South Australia, September 1979); *Employee Participation, South Australian Government Policy* (Government Printer South Australia, October 1979); Daryll Hull, *Yugoslavia: The Long Road to Self-Management* (Unit for Industrial Democracy Papers, Department of Labour and Industry, Adelaide, n.d.); K. K. Wang, *Worker Participation Matrix* (Unit for Industrial Democracy, Premier's Department South Australia, July 1974).

<sup>16</sup> *Proceedings of the International Conference on Industrial Democracy, Adelaide, 1978* (Unit for Industrial Democracy, Adelaide, 1978). See "Industrial Democracy in Yugoslavia" and "An Australian Experience in Yugoslavia," pp. 156-185 (pp. 175, 181-183).

<sup>17</sup> State Library of South Australia, Good Neighbour Council of South Australia, SRG 703/21, State Conference Papers, 9th State Conference Proceedings, 2 November 1963.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, SRG, 703/18/6, National Synopses, Croatia.

<sup>19</sup> On the occasion of Beovich's eighty-fourth birthday, *The Sunday Mail* described his father as 'an Austrian born in Dalmatia'. See Garth Rawlins, "Nearly 40 Years a Bishop," *The Sunday Mail*, 30 March 1980.

<sup>20</sup> Stepinac, dubbed a 'clerical fascist' by the Communist regime in Yugoslavia, was tried in Zagreb in 1946 for collaborating with the wartime Ustasha regime. Stepinac, who died in 1960, has been the subject of a number of studies in English, the most balanced of which is Stella Alexander's *The Triple Myth: A Life of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1987).