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# Priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Units of the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia

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Based on archival and published documents and relevant historiographical literature, this paper describes the main characteristics of the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) who held the functions of religious officers in the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ), the armed force of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ). The available sources point to the conclusion that SPC priests had a great influence in the NOVJ units, because they were religious officers in those units that were considered elite. Also, the SPC priest Vlada Zečević was a religious officer in the Supreme Headquarters of the NOVJ and had the role of supreme religious officer in the NOVJ.

**Keywords:** Communist Party of Yugoslavia, People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, Vlada Zečević, religious officers, Serbian Orthodox Church.

## Introduction

A large number of historiographic works have been written in Croatian and foreign scientific literature about the People's Liberation Movement (NOP), a revolutionary movement led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), and the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ) as the armed force of that movement. However, some topics related to the NOP are still largely unknown.

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One of them is the topic of priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in the NOVJ units. Yugoslav historiography had completely ignored this research subject. After the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe and the consequent disintegration of the Yugoslav state, this topic was mentioned in general terms in only a few historiographic works. However, even in these works, only the names of those persons are listed - without the political context of their actions or the influence they exerted during the war on the units of the NOVJ, that is, the NOP as a whole.

Taking that into account, the aim of this paper is to fill that historiographical gap and provide basic information about SPC priests in the NOVJ units, the main features of those units, and answer the question - what kind of influence these priests had on the NOP.

## **The political context of the joining of SPC priests to NOVJ units**

For the topic of SPC priests in NOVJ units, the most important term is “religious officer” (hrv. vjerski referent). This institution was introduced as a special institution of the military wing of the NOP by the decision of Josip Broz Tito dated June 23, 1942. From the text of the decision of the establishment of that institution, it is evident that the institution was originally exclusively military in nature.<sup>2</sup>

However, the available documents point to the conclusion that by the end of 1942, the jurisdiction of religious officers was extended, and they were also active in civil and not only military bodies of the NOP. Direct evidence for this is a document dated December 26, 1942, which was signed by Pop Vlada Zečević as head of the Religious Department within the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). In that document, two religious officers of the Muslim faith were mentioned, one of whom was the religious officer of the 3rd Sandžak Brigade, while the other was stated to be from Bosanski Petrovac, although the name of his unit was not mentioned.<sup>3</sup> This circumstance, as well as the fact that the political bodies of the NOP included

2 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], II/4, 403.-404.

3 Petranović and Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam: ideje i stvarnost 1914-1943 – Tematska zbirka dokumenata* [Yugoslav federalism: ideas and reality 1914-1943 – Thematic collection of documents], 739.

priests who did not have a military duty, is an argument for the conclusion that the institution of religious officer developed, and that over time it was not exclusively military in nature.

For example, the Catholic priest in Croatia who joined the NOP, Svetozar Rittig, did not hold a post in the army, but had exclusively political functions. The same was the case with the Orthodox priest Jovo Miodragović. He died on June 14, 1943, but not as a soldier, that is, a member of the NOVJ, but as a civilian. From the available records it is evident that he was a member of AVNOJ, as well as the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH) and the Regional People's Liberation Committee for Dalmatia,<sup>4</sup> while he was not a member of NOVJ. On the other hand, there have been recorded instances where a member of the AVNOJ simultaneously held the position of religious officer in the NOVJ. An example of this type is proprietary Jevstasije Karamatijević. In November 1943, he was simultaneously a councilor of the AVNOJ and the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Sandžak (ZAVNOS) and the religious officer of the 2nd Proletarian Division of the NOVJ.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the above data, the assertion of the Croatian historian Davor Marijan that the role of religious officers is "shrouded in a "veil of secrecy"" can be accepted as correct.<sup>6</sup> In general terms, the unknowns ("secrets") related to the institution of religious officers relate to two important topics. The first concerns the immediate function and scope of work of the religious officers, while the second refers to the total number of priests who held this function, as well as their national and religious affiliation.

From the available documents, one gets the impression that among those religious officers who worked in the military wing of the NOP, that is, in the units of the NOVJ, Catholic priests were least in number. The only known priest in that position was Metod Mikuž. He held the position of religious officer of the Main Headquarters of the People's Liberation Army and partisan units of

4 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], II/7, 458., note 7.; Plenča, *Kninska ratna vremena* [Knin war times], 355.

5 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], II/11, 436.

6 Marijan, *Borbe za Kupres 1942.: Pohod proleterskih brigada i borbe za Kupres u ljeto 1942. godine* [Battles for Kupres in 1942: Campaign of the proletarian brigades and battles for Kupres in the summer of 1942], 167.

Slovenia.<sup>7</sup> In Croatia, there was no recorded case of one of the Catholic priests being appointed to this position. One of the unsuccessful attempts for Catholic priests to accept this role was recorded on the island of Krk. This attempt was prevented by the bishop of Krk, Josip Srebrnić.<sup>8</sup> A similar situation as in the case of Catholic priests is noticeable in the case of Muslim religious officials. Available sources record two hodjas who were religious officers. They were hodja Sejdo Musić from the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade and hodja Meho Omerhodžić from Bosanski Petrovac.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the number of SPC priests who joined the NOVJ units and performed the function of religious officers as part of those units was significantly higher. The available sources point to the conclusion that there was a significant number of members of that religious structure, who occupied important positions in the hierarchy of the military wing of the NOP. Namely, the SPC priests in the NOVJ units performed the duties of religious officers in the positions of brigades, divisions and later corps. Also, SPC priest Pop Vlada Zečević was the religious officer in the Supreme Headquarters of the NOVJ, the supreme military body of the NOP's military wing.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that the SPC is the only religious community from the territory of the former Yugoslavia which, in the wartime conditions of 1941-1945, managed to exert a relevant influence on the political movement that took over power after the war.

Although some historians who dealt with the position of the SPC in Yugoslavia after the Second World War are of the opinion that the SPC saw the victory of the NOP and the consequent creation of federal Yugoslavia as a "loss of statehood, and therefore as a threat to the national identity of the Serbian people"<sup>10</sup>, this judgment can hardly be accepted as accurate. The most obvious argument for this is the fact that the authorities of federal Yugoslavia enabled the restoration of the organizational structure of the SPC in the entire area where the SPC operated until April 1941, that is, until the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Therefore, the question of the internal character of the Yugoslav state according to the criteria of a federal or unitary state was of a secondary na-

7 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 17, 445.

8 Krišto, *Sukob simbola: Politika, vjere i ideologije u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj* [Clash of Symbols: Politics, Religions and Ideologies in the Independent State of Croatia], 385.

9 Petranović and Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam* [Yugoslav federalism], 739.

10 Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji 1945.-1991.: Od zajedništva do razlaza* [Croatia in Yugoslavia 1945-1991: From unity to separation], 125.-126.

ture for the SPC. From the perspective of the SPC, the most important state-legal issue was the survival of the Yugoslav state, because the SPC was created as the state church of Yugoslavia. This happened on September 12, 1920, after the decision (decree) of the heir to the throne Aleksandar Karađorđević.<sup>11</sup>

In order to understand the relationship of SPC priests towards the NOP during the war, as well as towards federal Yugoslavia after the war, it is important to take into account that after the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the organization of the SPC in Macedonia was “incorporated” into the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, while in Kosovo “the Church was incorporated into the Albanian Orthodox Church”.<sup>12</sup> In the area that became part of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), the work of the SPC was suspended to a significant extent, and with the formation of the Croatian Orthodox Church (HPC) it was almost completely terminated. The aforementioned development of events led to extremely great dissatisfaction among the priests of the SPC. The SPC leadership protested against such a situation, “but without results”.<sup>13</sup> Taking this into account, for members of the SPC, the political order established by the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was not only an attack on their mother country, but also on their church organization. From the perspective of the SPC, the fight against such a political order could, even if it was led by communists (atheists), be interpreted as a struggle for the survival of the original SPC. Aware of this, Josip Broz Tito emphasized the “loyalty” and “patriotism” of SPC priests in contrast to the “impropriety” of Catholic priests in an interview with a French newspaper in early November 1945.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, it is obvious that the main reason why SPC priests participated in the NOVJ units to a much greater extent than Catholic priests or Muslim religious officials was the clearly expressed position of the NOP on Yugoslav statehood. That is, because the NOP had as its first and most important goal the restoration (liberation) of Yugoslavia, a certain number of SPC priests joined the armed forces of that movement.

11 Car, „Srpska pravoslavna crkva u Hrvatskoj: oduzimanje imovine i odnosi s državom od 1945. do 1967.“ [„The Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia: confiscation of property and relations with the state from 1945 to 1967“], 7.

12 Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija u Jugoslaviji 1941-1945.: Okupacija i kolaboracija* [War and revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945: Occupation and collaboration], 576.

13 *Ibid.*, 588.

14 Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji 1945.-1991.* [Croatia in Yugoslavia 1945-1991], 125.

## SPC priests on duty as religious officers in NOVJ units

The religious officers as a special institution of the military wing of the NOP began their work on June 23, 1942. In the decision on the establishment of that institution, it was stated that the brigade could have “more priests” in that position. However, in that case, only one priest could have the position of the religious officer of the brigade, while the other priests were supposed to have the function of the religious officers of the battalion. This decision would have been determined by the staff of the brigade. This authority of the brigade leadership regarding the deployment of religious officers is significant as an indication that the religious officers were directly responsible for their work to the members of that leadership, i.e. to the commander of the brigade and the political commissar and chief of the brigade’s staff. On the basis of this, it can be concluded that the religious officers were an integral part of the broader leadership of the brigade, that is, an extended part of its staff.<sup>15</sup>

The provision according to which the leadership of an individual brigade could decide for themselves who would be the brigade or battalion religious officer was particularly significant in the case if the same brigade had religious officers of different faiths. So far, only one such case is known. Two religious officers, one of whom was Orthodox and the other Muslim, worked as part of the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade. They were protopriest Jevstasije Karamatijević and hodja Sejdo Musić. According to the monograph of that brigade, at the time of its formation, the religious officer of the brigade was Karamatijević.<sup>16</sup>

From the available sources, it is clear that by the end of the following year, 1943, Karamatijević was promoted to the position of religious officer of the 2nd Proletarian Division of the NOVJ.<sup>17</sup> Although it is not known when this promotion took place, it is evident from the signatories of the Epistle of the congress of SPC priests from November 15, 1942, that Karamatijević was still the religious officer of the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade at that time.<sup>18</sup> Since the aforementioned Zečević’s report dated December 26, 1942 mentions hodja Musić as the religious officer of that unit, it is certain that Karamatijević was promoted to the position of religious officer of the 2nd Proletarian Division in

15 Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], II/4, 403.-404.

16 Vidović, *Treća proleterska sandžačka brigada* [Third Proletarian Sandžak Brigade], 378.

17 Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], II/11, 436.

18 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 220.

the period between the second half of November and the first half of December of 1942.

Accordingly, it is likely that Musić was appointed as the religious officer of the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade only after Karamatijević's promotion. It is important to emphasize this fact, because on its basis it can be concluded that in the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade, the influence of the SPC was significantly stronger than the Muslim influence.

The powers and duties of religious officers were regulated by the decision of June 23, 1942. In that decision, it was stated that the tasks of the religious officers were to "keep the records of the killed and deceased" members of the brigade, to popularize the NOP, to perform religious ceremonies and to collect "voluntary contributions from the people".<sup>19</sup>

Of the four listed duties of religious officers, the first duty is of particular importance - recording the killed and deceased members of the brigade. In order to specify the aforementioned task, Vlada Zečević wrote a special document entitled "Instructions on the organization of books of killed and deceased combatants" (hrv. Uputstvo o ustrojstvu knjiga poginulih i umrlih boraca). That document defined the appearance of the "book of the killed and deceased", wherein it is specified that "in addition to the basic information about the dead (name and surname, where they are from and what their occupation was, functions in the unit) the date and place of death, the place of burial and who performed the funeral and when should also be indicated".<sup>20</sup>

The fact that it was the religious officers who had the task of keeping records of this means that they had the most precise information about the members of the brigade. Taking this into account, it can be concluded that, in addition to their role during the war, the influence of religious officers came to the fore during the creation of monographs of individual units, because they had key information about the members of the unit they were in.

In relation to other members of the NOVJ, religious officers differed in the appearance of their uniforms. In the content of the decision on religious officers, it is defined that they should have a cross on the left hand of their uniform if they are religious officers for Christians, that is, a crescent moon if they are religious officers for Muslims. Below the religious symbol, there were supposed

<sup>19</sup> Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], II/4, 403.-404.

<sup>20</sup> Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 11, 278.-279., note 142.

to be two dashes if it was a brigade religious officer, or one dash if it was a battalion-level religious officer. Religious officers, like all other NOP members, were supposed to have a red five-pointed star on their caps.<sup>21</sup> The Serbian historian Veljko Đurić stated that, despite the text of the decision prescribing the appearance of their uniforms, religious officers did not wear a red five-pointed star on their caps, but the symbols of their religious organizations.<sup>22</sup> From the available photographs, it can be concluded that Đurić's claim is correct. The available photographs of Blažo Marković and Vlado Zečević are proof of this.<sup>23</sup> Both of them had an Orthodox cross on their caps instead of a red five-pointed star. This fact is particularly significant in the case of Zečević, who appears in that photograph with other members of the NOP leadership, including Josip Broz Tito. By this alone, it can be concluded that the original decision on the appearance of the caps of the religious officers had effectively been invalidated.

The fact that the religious officers, or at least some of them such as Blažo Marković or Vlado Zečević, did not adhere to the decision on the appearance of the caps of the religious officers, as well as the fact that they were allowed to do so, is a significant indicator of the influence that these religious officers, and thus indirectly the SPC, had in the units of the NOVJ.

With the formation of the first NOVJ units at the divisional and corps level at the end of 1942, the institution of religious officers was further developed. At that time the title of religious officers was introduced at the divisional level. Direct proof of this is the report that Zečević sent to the leadership of the 1st Bosnian People's Liberation Corps of the NOVJ on December 26, 1942. In that report, it was recorded that the religious officers of the 2nd Proletarian and 10th Herzegovinian Brigades, Rufim Žižić and Vidak Drakić, were promoted to the positions of religious officers of the 4th and 5th Krajina Divisions.<sup>24</sup> Due to insufficient sources, it is not known whether with the introduction of the title of religious officers at the divisional level, a decision was made to regulate the ap-

21 Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], II/4, 403.

22 Đurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve 1941-1945* [Golgotha of the Serbian Orthodox Church 1941-1945], 289.

23 The photograph of Marković was published in: Špadijer, *Vladimir Popović Španac 1914-1972: Biografska priča i sjećanja savremenika* [Vladimir Popović Španac 1914-1972: Biographical story and memories of contemporaries], 162. The photograph of Zečević was published in: Anić, *Povijest Osmog dalmatinskog korpusa* [History of the Eighth Dalmatian Corps], 23.; Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 11, 48.-49.; Nađ, *Raporti Vrhovnom komandantu* [Reports to the Supreme Commander], 30.

24 Petranović and Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam* [Yugoslav federalism], 740.



pearance of their uniforms, as was done with the original decision on religious officers from June 23, 1942.

The available documents do not enable a specific conclusion as to when the title of religious officers was introduced at the corps level. However, it is evident from the operational diary of the 17th Eastern Bosnian Division of the NOVJ that this title also existed. Namely, for the day of April 17, 1944, it was recorded in the diary of that division that the religious officer of the 3rd Shock Corps of the NOVJ, Orthodox priest Blažo Marković, performed a religious service in Kravica in eastern Bosnia.<sup>25</sup> It is not known whether any other NOVJ units at the corps level had a religious officer. In the biography of Vidak Drakić, it is stated that he was the religious officer of the 5th Krajina Corps of the NOVJ.<sup>26</sup> However, no documents were found that would directly confirm this, so one can only speculate about this information.

At approximately the same time as the function of divisional religious officers, documents mention a religious officer in the Supreme Headquarters. Although it remains unknown whether this title was defined by a written decision, it is evident from the text of the Epistle of the congress of SPC priests from November 15, 1942 that this title existed and that Zečević held that position.<sup>27</sup> Although a document defining Zečević's powers in that position has not been found, it is obvious that he was the superior of the religious officers in the NOVJ units, that is, the "supreme" religious officer. A document that provides an insight into the powers that Zečević had in that position is the case from Varcar Vakuf (Mrkonjić Grad), when he revoked the decision of the religious officer of the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade, Jevstasije Karamatijević, on the establishment of the committee of the brotherhood of Saint Sava.<sup>28</sup> It is certain that Zečević had the authority to do this, which means that his position as the religious officer in the Supreme Headquarters had been previously informally standardized and that the authority of that body over the religious officers in the NOVJ units had been defined.

25 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], IV/24, 554.

26 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 329.

27 *Ibid.*, 220.

28 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], II/6, 33.; Marijan, *Borbe za Kupres* [Battles for Kupres], 167., note 46.

The described case from Varcar Vakuf is important as an indicator that within the military wing of the NOP, with the necessary permission of Josip Broz Tito and a group of his closest associates, a clearly defined and hierarchically organized religious structure was established. At the head of that structure was an SPC priest, that is, Zečević. From this position, Zečević was superior not only to Orthodox priests in the function of religious officers, but also to Catholic and Muslim officials of that type.

In addition to religious officers in the NOVJ units, the structure which was headed by Zečević included religious officers in the political bodies of the NOP, that is, civilians, as well as students of theological faculties and various spiritual seminars. This can be inferred from the personal data of the signatories of the previously mentioned Epistle of the congress of SPC priests from November 15, 1942. On that list, the latter are listed by NOVJ brigades, and most of them, as many as four, were from the 3rd Sandžak Brigade.<sup>29</sup>

The religious structure within the NOP and Zečević's position within it were defined later, that is, only at the First session of the AVNOJ in Bihać on November 26 and 27, 1942, when the Executive Committee of the AVNOJ was constituted, in which a vice president in charge of religious questions was appointed. Zečević was appointed to that position.<sup>30</sup> The powers that Zečević received with this function are visible in his report dated December 26, 1942. From the text of that report, it is clear that all public manifestations of a religious nature in which religious officers participated had to be approved by Zečević beforehand. The specific case in question was the printing of the "Epistle of Serbian priests", i.e. the aforementioned document adopted at the congress of SPC priests on November 15, 1942, and the publication of a "written short greeting to Muslims", which was signed by two religious officers from the ranks of Muslims - hodja Sejdo Musić and hodja Meho Omerhodžić.<sup>31</sup>

Taking into account the experience of Karamatijević's actions in the Varcar Vakuf, the leadership of the KPJ, through the AVNOJ as its political body, decided to prevent religious officers from acting on their own initiative and thereby potentially harming the interests of the NOP. Consequently, it is obvious that the creation of the Religious Department within the Executive Committee of AVNOJ defined the supervision of the head of that department, that is, Zečević,

29 J. Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 220.

30 *Ibid.*, 276., note 114.

31 Petranović and Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam* [Yugoslav federalism], 739.

over the work of individual religious officers.

The formalization of Zečević's role in the position of a kind of "supreme" religious officer also reflected on the staff members of those NOVJ units in which these religious officers worked. Namely, the creation of a religious organization within the military wing of the NOP with a clear hierarchy necessarily led to a reduction in the authority of those staffs.

A clear example of this is the promotion of Vidak Drakić and Rufim Žižić from the position of religious officers of the 10th Herzegovinian and 2nd Proletarian Brigades to the function of religious officers in two divisions of the 1st Bosnian People's Liberation Corps of the NOVJ. Zečević left a written trace of that event in his previously quoted report dated December 26, 1942. From that document, it is clear that the promotion of the two mentioned religious officers was arranged between themselves, "with the agreement and approval" of Josip Broz Tito, by members of the command of that corps and Zečević.<sup>32</sup> In other words, it can be assumed that the members of that command turned to Zečević with the request that the two religious officers be transferred to them, for which he received Tito's permission. Although the question of consent of the members of staffs of the parent units of Drakić and Žižić was not defined in Zečević's report, it is very likely that they were not asked about their departure to other NOVJ units. Consequently, it is certain that with the promotion of Drakić and Žižić, their parent units were left without religious officers.

However, since this promotion took place during the period when divisions were formed in the organizational system of the NOVJ, it is very likely that the previous duties of the religious officers of those two brigades were taken over by the religious officers of the divisions to which those brigades belonged. In the case of the 2nd Proletarian Brigade, it was the 2nd Proletarian Division of the NOVJ, while in the case of the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade, it was the 3rd Montenegrin Division of the NOVJ. As previously stated, the religious officer of the 2nd Proletarian Division was very likely Jevstasije Karamatijević at the time, while it is not known who the religious officer was for the 3rd Montenegrin Division, or whether that unit even had a religious officer.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 740.

<sup>33</sup> In his memoirs, Jovo Kapičić stated that the religious officer of the 3rd Division was a certain Orthodox priest Kalezić. However, it is not clear from the available documents who he is. Nikčević, *Goli otoci Jova Kapičića* [The bare islands of Jova Kapičić], 74.

## Biographies of the leading SPC priests in the NOVJ units

The exact number of SPC priests who joined the NOP is still unknown. Therefore, the exact number of SPC priests who were members of the military wing of the NOP, i.e. the NOVJ units, is also not known. However, based on the available sources, it is possible to create a general conclusion.

From the available documents of the civil and military bodies of the NOP, it can be ascertained that in almost all NOVJ units that were considered elite, there were religious officers, and these religious officers were priests of the SPC. Those units were the 1st and 2nd Proletarian Brigades, the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade, the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade and the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade. Of the elite units of the NOVJ, it seems that only the 5th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade did not have a religious officer. However, since that unit operated together with the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade from the moment of its creation, it is likely that its religious officer also served as the religious officer of the 5th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade. The argument for this conclusion is the example of Blažo Marković. As the religious officer of the 1st Proletarian Brigade, he came into contact with the members of the local unit in the area of Kupres, that is, the 3rd Krajina NOP Detachment, and assumed the duties of the religious officer of that unit as well.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, it can be assumed that the religious officer of the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade worked in the same way in the 5th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade.

The available data, apart from being an indicator of the influence of SPC priests on the most important NOVJ units, are also significant as evidence that a certain number of SPC priests joined the NOP early on. This circumstance needs to be emphasized, because in this particular case it was clearly a matter of taking sides in the war and in a period when the victory of the KPJ was unlikely. In the context of the revolutionary war led by the KPJ under the auspices of the NOP, the term “early” referred to the period up to June 1942, that is, the first year of the war in which the KPJ actively participated.

June 1942 marked a turning point for the development of the NOP. In the middle of that month, the leadership of the KPJ made a decision to leave Montenegro and march west, that is, to the territory of the Independent State of Croatia

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<sup>34</sup> Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], IV/6, 254.

(NDH).<sup>35</sup> Six brigades headed west with the leadership of the KPJ. They were the 1st and 2nd Proletarian Brigades, the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade, the 4th and 5th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigades and the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade. It is evident from the names of the signatories of the Epistle of the congress of SPC priests from November 15, 1942, that five of those six brigades had religious officers. In the 1st Proletarian Brigade the religious officer was Blažo Marković, in the 2nd Proletarian Brigade Rufim Žižić, in the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade Jevstasije Karamatijević, in the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade Jagoš Simonović and in the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade Vidak Drakić.

From the biographies of the mentioned persons, it is evident that almost all religious officers were born in Montenegro. The only exception among them is Karamatijević. He was born in Nova Varoš, a place in Sandžak, a border region between Montenegro and Serbia. In his biography it is recorded that he was born in 1885 in Nova Varoš and that he was a participant in the Balkan wars and the First World War. He was the religious officer in the 3rd Sandžak Brigade since its foundation, and after that he was promoted to the position of religious officer of the 2nd Proletarian Division of the NOVJ. At the same time, he was a councilor of AVNOJ and ZAVNOS. By the end of the war, he had reached the rank of colonel (hrv. pukovnik). In several of his biographies published during the time of Yugoslavia, three different years of his death are given: 1948, 1949 and 1950. Taking that into account, as well as the fact that he did not receive the “Commemorative Medal of the Partisans of 1941” (hrv. Partizanska spomenica 1941.) although he allegedly joined the NOP in 1941, it is certain that after the war he came into conflict with the Yugoslav authorities.<sup>36</sup> An additional argument for this is the aforementioned decision of Vlada Zečević to prevent him from establishing the brotherhood of Saint Sava in Varcar Vakuf. Based on this, it can be assumed that he came into conflict with the authorities after the war for similar reasons.

The biographies of Vidak Drakić, Blažo Marković and Jagoš Simonović should be viewed together, because in publications from the period of Yugoslavia, it is stated that all three of them were religious officers of the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade.<sup>37</sup>

35 Marijan, *Borbe za Kupres* [Battles for Kupres], 17.-21.

36 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 336.; Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], II/4, 297., note 3.; Vidović, *Treća proleTERSka sandžačka brigada* [Third Proletarian Sandžak Brigade], 378.

37 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 329., 342., 355.

However, from the available documents, this can only be concluded for Simonović. Along with the text of the Epistle of the congress of SPC priests from November 15, 1942, the evidence for this is the letter that Josip Broz Tito sent to the leadership of the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade on August 4, 1942. In that letter, it was stated that “religious officer Simonović” should be “constantly with your unit”.<sup>38</sup> In Simonović’s biography, it is recorded that he was born in 1893 and that he was the protopriest in Kolašin until the April War in 1941. The available sources point to the conclusion that he spent the entire war as a religious officer in the 4th Proletarian Brigade. By the end of the war, he had reached the rank of colonel and he was a member of the Religious Commission of the post-war Yugoslav government.<sup>39</sup>

Blažo Marković was born in 1905 near Crmnica and became a member of the KPJ during the war. Although the monograph of the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade states that Marković was the religious officer of that unit, this information is very likely not correct. In addition to the circumstance that there is no confirmation of this in the available documents, an additional argument for this conclusion is the information from the monograph of the 1st Proletarian Brigade, according to which Marković joined that unit in May 1942, that is, in the period before the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade was formed.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, it is very likely that Marković was never a member of the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade. It is evident from the previously mentioned documents that Marković was promoted from the position of religious officer of the 1st Proletarian Brigade twice. The first time to the post of religious officer of the 1st Proletarian Division of the NOVJ, and then to the post of religious officer of the 3rd Shock Corps of the NOVJ. Marković came out of the war as a lieutenant colonel (hrv. potpukovnik) of the Yugoslav Army (JA) and as a bearer of the “Commemorative Medal of the Partisans of 1941”. He died in Belgrade on June 12, 1949.<sup>41</sup>

The third SPC priest who was linked to the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin)

38 Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], II/5, 217.

39 Broz Tito, *Šabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 355.

40 Janković, *Četvrta proleterska crnogorska brigada* [Fourth proletarian Montenegrin brigade], 13.; Miladinović, *Prva proleterska brigada* [First Proletarian Brigade], Book 4, 509.

41 Broz Tito, *Šabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 342.; Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], IV/6, 254.; Špadijer, *Vladimir Popović Španac*, 158.

Brigade is Vidak Drakić. He was born in 1908. According to the information from his biography, he stayed in his parent brigade for a relatively short time, because he was quickly transferred to the 5th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade, and then to the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade. From that brigade, he was promoted to the 5th Krajina Division of the NOVJ in December 1942, and after the formation of the 5th Krajina Corps of the NOVJ, he joined that unit. He was the religious officer in all the mentioned units. By the end of the war, Drakić had reached the rank of lieutenant colonel and he was a bearer of the “Commemorative Medal of the Partisans of 1941”. He also exerted great influence in a number of important Yugoslav institutions. According to information from his biography, he was a member of the Main Commission for the Colonization of Vojvodina, the president of the Supreme Disability Commission under the Yugoslav government and the secretary of the Central Shipbuilding Administration under the Yugoslav Ministry of Defense.<sup>42</sup> Due to the lack of available documents, it is difficult to conclude the accuracy of Drakić’s wartime biography. However, what can be considered accurate is the fact that he was the religious officer of the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade and then the 5th Krajina Division of the NOVJ.

According to biographical data from the Yugoslav period, Rufim Žižić was born in 1909 under the name Radoš Žižić. He finished the monastic school in the Ostrog Monastery and until the April War in 1941 he was the “elder” of the Bijela Monastery near Šavnik. After that, he joined a local unit under the leadership of the KPJ, the Durmitor Detachment.<sup>43</sup> In the period until June 1942, the region around Šavnik was a strong foothold of the NOP. This is evident not only from the wartime documents of the leading figures of the KPJ, but also from the records of political opponents of the NOP, such as Dragoljub Draža Mihailović.<sup>44</sup> After leaving Montenegro, Žižić was appointed as the religious officer of the 2nd Proletarian Brigade, a unit mainly comprised of fighters from Serbia, and then, in December 1942, he was promoted to religious officer of the 4th Krajina Division of the NOVJ. Rufim Žižić ended the war with the rank of major (hrv. bojniki).<sup>45</sup>

42 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 329.

43 *Ibid.*, 363.

44 Trgo, *Zbornik* [Collection], II/4, 61., 105.; Marjanović, *Dražo Mihailović između Britanaca i Nemaca* [Dražo Mihailović between the British and the Germans], 268.

45 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 363.

Apart from Montenegro, a larger number of SPC priests who had the function of religious officers in the NOVJ units was also recorded in Serbia. The most famous among them was Vlada Zečević. He was undoubtedly the most important religious officer in the NOVJ, that is, the supreme religious officer. As previously stated, his function was formalized by the establishment of the Religious Department within the Executive Committee of AVNOJ. From his biography published in postwar Yugoslavia, it is evident that he was born in 1903 and that he held important positions in the civil and military bodies of the NOP, as well as in Yugoslav institutions after the war. In addition to the function of supreme religious officer, probably the most important duty is the position of Minister of Internal Affairs in the first Yugoslav government.<sup>46</sup> In this position, Zečević was one of the protagonists of the colonization process after the war,<sup>47</sup> which means that he worked closely with Vidak Drakić in the area of Vojvodina. In a practical sense, this meant that Zečević was one of the members of the narrow circle of Yugoslav officials who forcibly evicted a part of the population, mainly the local German population, from their homes and settled wartime members of the NOVJ in those places.<sup>48</sup> However, a less known fact from Zečević's wartime biography is related to the fact that he formed his own Chetnik detachment in the summer of 1941, which he attached to the military wing of the NOP in the autumn of that year. This information has been recorded in various publications from the Yugoslav period,<sup>49</sup> but it is not overly emphasized in Zečević's biography. In this context, it is worth mentioning it, because Zečević was but one of the Chetnik leaders who went over to the side of the NOP during the war and who occupied important positions in the hierarchy of that movement. However, considering the position of the Minister of Internal Affairs during the establishment of the communist regime, Zečević was certainly the most important among them.

Alongside Zečević, there are records of other SPC priests from Serbia who had the title of religious officers in the NOVJ units. They were Meletije Horvat

46 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 29, 314.

47 Petranović, *Srbija u drugom svetskom ratu 1939-1945* [Serbia in the Second World War 1939-1945], 702.-703.

48 Geiger, *Josip Broz Tito i ratni zločini: Bleiburg – Folksdojčeri* [Josip Broz Tito and war crimes: Bleiburg – Volksdeutsche], 38.

49 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 7, 1982., 171.; Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 29, 204., note 24.; Dedijer, *Josip Broz Tito: Prilozi za biografiju* [Josip Broz Tito: Contributions to the biography], 305.



in the 46th Serbian Division of the NOVJ, Aleksandar Stanković in the 23rd Serbian Division of the NOVJ and Milovan Veselinović in the 24th Serbian Division of the NOVJ.<sup>50</sup> However, their motives for joining the NOP were very likely significantly different from the motives of the previously mentioned SPC priests, because they joined the NOVJ units at the end of 1944, that is, after the Soviet forces had occupied Serbia and established the KPJ regime there. In other words, they joined the NOVJ units in the period when the NOP in Serbia represented the authorities and not a persecuted rebel movement.<sup>51</sup> However, the role of those SPC priests is important primarily as an indicator that the leadership of the KPJ assessed that it was necessary for them to secure the support of the SPC in order to stabilize the regime in Serbia.

Except in Montenegro, in the period up to June 1942, SPC priests joined the NOP in large numbers in Dalmatia as well. According to the data of pre-war KPJ member and post-war influential Yugoslav writer Dušan Plenča, out of 20 SPC priests who were in the Kninska Krajina, as many as eleven of them cooperated with the bodies of the NOP. The more famous among them were the previously mentioned Jovo Miodragović, then Milivoj Jelača and Jovo Šolaja.<sup>52</sup> However, in contrast to Montenegro, there was no recorded case in the Kninska Krajina of SPC priests performing the duties of religious officers in NOVJ units. A possible reason for this is the fact that the majority of the inhabitants in Dalmatia were of Croatian nationality and of the Catholic faith, and the engagement of SPC priests as religious officers could have had an unfavorable political effect on the strengthening of the NOP in that area.

However, the absence of religious officers from the ranks of the SPC in the NOVJ units in Dalmatia does not mean that the SPC did not manage to exert influence on those units. In January 1944, that is, only three months after the formation of the 8th Dalmatian Corps of the NOVJ, the main military unit of the NOP in Dalmatia, the former political commissar of the 4th Krajina Division of the NOVJ, Boško Šiljegović, was appointed as the political commissar of that corps. Although it is stated in Šiljegović's biography that he was a member of the KPJ since 1940, and thus very likely an atheist, he was

50 Đurić, *Golgota Srpske pravoslavne crkve* [Golgotha of the Serbian Orthodox Church 1941-1945], 291.

51 Since the autumn of 1944, there were Soviet instructors in the NOVJ units. Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 29, 205., note 30.

52 Plenča, *Kninska ratna vremena* [Knin war times], 265., 355.

nevertheless closely connected with the SPC. The first and probably the most important piece of information for this conclusion is the fact that his father Blagoje Šiljegović was an Orthodox priest.<sup>53</sup> This fact had a significant impact on Šiljegović's future path. This can be concluded from the fact that Šiljegović was appointed as the political commissar of the 4th Krajina Division of the NOVJ, a unit in which the identity connection with the SPC was probably most clearly pronounced. The fact that proves this is Tito's arrival before the members of that unit on Orthodox Christmas on January 7, 1943 in the town of Jasenica (Srpska Jasenica).<sup>54</sup> This place had great symbolic importance for the NOP, and especially for all members of the SPC in that movement, because on November 15, 1942, the congress of SPC priests in the NOVJ units was held there.<sup>55</sup> After being promoted to political commissar of the 8th Dalmatian Corps of the NOVJ, Šiljegović remained in that position until the end of the war, and after the reorganization of that corps into the 4th Yugoslav Army, he was the political commissar of that unit.<sup>56</sup>

On the territory of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), only two priests of the SPC who joined the NOVJ units were recorded. They were Krstan Bijeljac and Novak Mastilović. In Bijeljac's biography, it is stated that he was a priest in Bjeljaj near Bosanski Petrovac until the outbreak of the war. He joined the NOP in 1941, and was the religious officer of the 5th Krajina Division of the NOVJ during 1942 and 1943. After that he only held political functions in the NOP. He was a councilor of the First and Second sessions of the State Anti-fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ZAVNO-BiH) and a member of the Regional People's Liberation Committee for the Bosnian Krajina.<sup>57</sup> In a biography of Mastilović published during the socialist period, it is stated that he was born in 1906 and that he was an Orthodox priest in Gacko until the April War of 1941. He joined the NOP in 1943 and he was a

53 In the biography, it is stated that Boško was Blagoje's youngest, ninth son. Lukić, „Boško Blagoja Šiljegović“, *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije* [People's heroes of Yugoslavia], Book 2, 252.

54 Karasijević, Četvrta krajiška NOU divizija [Fourth Krajina NOU Division], 55. In that speech, Tito emphasized the connection of Serbs in western Bosnia “with their brothers Serbs and Montenegrins”. The speech was published in: Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 148.-150.

55 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 218.; Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija* [War and revolution], 576.

56 At the end of the war, that corps was reorganized into the 4th Yugoslav Army, and Šiljegović was the political commissar of that army. Joksović, „Boško Šiljegović“, 499.

57 Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* [Collected works], Volume 13, 326.

councilor of AVNOJ and ZAVNOBiH. His duties in the army are not mentioned at all, although it is recorded that he was an “active participant of the National Liberation War (NOR) since 1943”, which would mean that he was a member of the NOVJ units. Mastilović’s participation in the war within the hierarchy of the military wing of the NOP is evident from the available documents of the NDH authorities. In the three available documents, one of which was published in the form of a transcript during the socialist period, it is clear that Mastilović was the commander of a small unit of the NOVJ that operated on a local level, that is, in the wider area around Gacko. The 10th Herzegovinian Brigade was located in that area at the time, which would mean that Mastilović’s unit was operationally subordinate to that brigade.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), through the People’s Liberation Movement (NOP) which it supervised, tried to attract the widest possible range of the population to its ranks. Among them were officials of the three most influential religious communities in the territory of the former Yugoslavia: the Islamic religious community, the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). Religious officials within the body of the NOP were called “religious officers”.

The institution of religious officers was introduced on June 23, 1942 as an exclusively military body, but over time it also became a civilian body. Within the military wing of the NOP, that is, in the units of the NOVJ, religious officers had several duties. In addition to performing religious duties and political propaganda, they were supposed to keep records of the killed and deceased members of the unit they were in. As a result, the religious officers (along with the members of the staffs of each unit) had the best insight into the state of the unit to which they belonged.

From the available sources, it is evident that the number of Catholic priests and Muslim religious officials in the NOVJ was very small. In contrast, the number of SPC priests was respectable. SPC priests in the NOVJ units occupied important positions. That is, they performed the duties of religious officers

58 HR-HDA-223, box 203, NO – II 3807/44.; HR-HDA-1502, box 20, t. 2487/43.; Trgo, *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [Collection of documents and data on the national liberation war of the Yugoslav peoples], IV/19, 530.

of brigades, divisions and corps of the NOVJ. Also, a priest of the SPC held the position of supreme religious officer, that is, religious officer of the Supreme Headquarters of the NOVJ. It was Pop Vlada Zečević. He was also the head of the Religious Department in the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), the main political body of the NOP.

The reason why SPC priests took part in the NOVJ units to a much greater extent than Catholic priests or Muslim religious officials is the congruence of the positions of the KPJ and the SPC on the question of the restoration (liberation) of the Yugoslav state. In other words, unlike the other two religious communities, the SPC was created as the Yugoslav state church and was organically linked to the existence of Yugoslavia.

An important feature of the SPC priests in the NOVJ units is the fact that almost all the units that had been considered elite in the NOVJ, had an SPC priest in the position of religious officer. They were the 1st and 2nd Proletarian Brigades, the 3rd Proletarian Sandžak Brigade, the 4th Proletarian (Montenegrin) Brigade and the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade. The divisions of the NOVJ that had SPC priests as religious officers were also elite units. They were the 1st and 2nd Proletarian Divisions and the 4th and 5th Krajina Divisions of the NOVJ. All SPC priests in the aforementioned units were natives of Montenegro, with the exception of protopriest Jevstasije Karamatijević. He was from Sandžak, a border region between Serbia and Montenegro. Due to the lack of SPC priests in the NOVJ units, the religious officers of the brigades were promoted to the religious officers of the four mentioned divisions.

After the Soviet occupation of Serbia in the autumn of 1944 and the consequent establishment of the communist regime in that area, NOVJ units were formed at the divisional level, some of which had SPC priests as religious officers. Those divisions were the 23rd, 24th and 46th Serbian Divisions of the NOVJ. In contrast to Serbia, in Croatia it was not recorded that there were religious officers in the NOVJ units. Despite this, one of the most important positions in that area was held by a KPJ official who was brought up in the spirit of the SPC by family heritage and later education. It was the political commissar of the 8th Dalmatian Corps of the NOVJ, Boško Šiljegović.

In the context of the clergy who worked in the NOVJ units, it is worth mentioning Krstan Bijeljac and Novak Mastilović. According to the information from historiographical works of the Yugoslav era, Bijeljac was for a short peri-

od of time the religious officer of the 5th Krajina Division of the NOVJ, while Novak Mastilović was the commander of a small unit of the NOVJ that operated in the vicinity of Gacko, that is, in eastern Herzegovina. The exact name of the function he held is not known from the available sources.

The influence of SPC priests in the NOVJ units was also manifested on a symbolic level. Namely, two of the most influential among them, Pop Blažo Marković and Pop Vlada Zečević, did not adhere to the provision according to which religious officers in the NOVJ units should have had the communist symbol (a red five-pointed star) on their caps. Instead, they had an Orthodox cross on their caps.

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## Svećenici Srpske pravoslavne crkve u postrojbama Narodno-oslobodilačke vojske Jugoslavije

### Sažetak

Na osnovi arhivskih i objavljenih dokumenata te relevantne historiografske literature u radu se opisuju glavne značajke svećenika Srpske pravoslavne crkve (SPC) koji su u Narodno-oslobodilačkoj vojsci Jugoslavije (NOVJ), oružanoj sili Komunističke partije Jugoslavije (KPJ), imali funkcije vjerskih referenata. Dostupni izvori upućuju na zaključak da su svećenici SPC ostvarili velik utjecaj u postrojbama NOVJ jer su bili vjerski referenti u onim postrojbama koje su smatrane elitnima. Također, svećenik SPC, pop Vlada Zečević, bio je vjerski referent u Vrhovnome štabu NOVJ, te je imao ulogu vrhovnoga vjerskoga referenta u NOVJ.

**Ključne riječi:** Srpska pravoslavna crkva, Narodno-oslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije, Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, vjerski referenti, pop Vlada Zečević.