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YUGOSLAVIA AND BEYOND – THE SERB COMMUNITIES ON THE
SLOVENE-CROAT BORDER DURING THE 20TH CENTURY*Christian PROMITZER*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper traces the recent history of four Serbian Orthodox settlements in the Slovene region of Bela Krajina close to the border with Croatia. It includes an outline of how notables, journalists, politicians and ethnographers throughout the 20th century up to the end of Yugoslavia and beyond characterized the local population; thereby it concentrates on the influence of different forms of collective identity (Serb, Croat, Slovene, Yugoslav) on the inhabitants of the four villages. Consequently and due their peripheral location on the Slovene-Croat linguistic and national divide the local population had to deal with different offers and imputations.

Key words: Bela krajina, border, ethnicity, Serbs, Slovenia, Croatia, Yugoslavia

JUGOSLAVIA E AL DI LÀ DI ESSA – LE COMUNITÀ SERBE SUL CONFINE
SLOVENO-CROATO NEL XX SECOLO*SINTESI*

Il presente contributo traccia la storia recente di quattro villaggi serbo-ortodossi nella regione slovena di Bela Krajina, vicino al confine con la Croazia. Comprende una breve panoramica di come i notabili, i giornalisti, i politici e gli etnografi hanno caratterizzato la popolazione locale per tutto il XX secolo fino alla disintegrazione della Jugoslavia e oltre; pertanto, s'incentra sull'influenza che le varie forme di identità collettiva (serba, croata, slovena, jugoslava) hanno avuto sugli abitanti dei quattro villaggi. In conseguenza di questo e per via della loro posizione periferica sul confine linguistico e nazionale sloveno-croato, la popolazione locale ha dovuto affrontare diverse proposte e accuse.

Parole chiave: Bela Krajina, Jugoslavia, Croazia, Slovenia, frontiera, enticITÀ

INTRODUCTION

Since their declarations of independence on 25 June 1991 the mutual relations between Slovenia and Croatia have been burdened by a territorial and maritime border dispute, whose arbitration was recently stalled.

While the pertinent problems regarding the bay of Piran and the Slovenian outlet to the open seas have been introduced to a broader audience, the dispute on territorial border issues, in particular of the border section of Žumberk (or Žumberk in Slovene), is far less known. The latter stems partly from the fact that a considerable segment of the local population, which is Greek Catholic by confession, is neither Slovene nor Croat by origin; as descendants of Vlach or Uskok settlers, who had arrived from the former Ottoman territory in the 16th century and accepted the Habsburg offer of certain privileges, in exchange for military service against the Ottomans, they have a different ethnic background. Depending on the respective occasion, these same people show different and mutually exclusive national affiliations as Serbs, Slovenes and Croats.

The fluid ethnic identity of the Vlach population of Žumberk stands in stark contrast to that of their peers in Croatia, likewise Vlachs from the Ottoman Empire who retained their original Orthodox confession and consequently adopted a Serb national identity (cf. Kaser, 1997, 599–617). The latter is also the case with the small enclave of Marindol in the Slovene region of Bela krajina, around 30 kilometers away from Žumberk. Historically, Bela Krajina consists of three villages and is situated next to the border with Croatia on the left bank of the river Kolpa (Kupa in Croatian). The names of the three villages are Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči (resp. Milići and Paunovići in Serbian). A fourth village with an Orthodox population, Bojanci, is situated in the neighborhood of these three villages, but is isolated from them by the Veliko Bukovje forest. In 1869 all four villages counted 686 inhabitants; owing to emigration to America the population figure decreased to 503 in 1910, and 492 in 1931. After the Second World War it further declined to 398 in 1948 and 285 in 1991. In 2012, 237 persons lived in these villages. Until the end of the First World War Bojanci was the largest village in this region by number of inhabitants; thereafter this role was taken over by Marindol (Komac et al., 2014, 72–74).

Different from the Vlachs in Žumberk, who in the 17th and 18th century were compelled to adopt the Greek Catholic confession, the Vlachs of these four villages could keep their Orthodox faith – they had the parish church of Saint Peter and Paul in Miliči and its auxiliary church of Saint George in Bojanci. The population of the four villages consequently adopted a Serb national identity much in the same way as the Serbs with Vlachian roots in Croatia. Administratively, three of the four villages – Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči – belonged to the District of Žumberk within the framework of the Habsburg Military Frontier: up to the late 19th century they were required to guard the border with the Ottoman Empire and to serve as soldiers should war break out – in exchange for these duties they were free peasants on their soil, while the vast majority of the peasants of the Habsburg Empire were dependent on their feudal landlords. The inhabitants of the village of Bojanci did not share these privileges; it was not included in the system of the Military Border, but was attached to the Duchy of Carniola. It became a cadastral commu-

nity of its own, possibly owing to the Orthodox beliefs of its inhabitants, and was attached to the district of the manor of Freythurn (Probrežje) (Miklavčič, 1944–45, 8, 33, 38, 44, 59). Interestingly, when in 1844 each parish of Carniola was asked to send a dancer to emperor Ferdinand, who at the time visited Ljubljana, the Orthodox Bojanci could also send one envoy, whose dancing pleased the emperor most (Dular, 1955, 107). In 1848 Bojanci was attached to the municipality of the Catholic village of Adlešiči. Also the population of Adlešiči and several other villages of Bela Krajina were of Uskok origin. But, apart from Bojanci, all of the other villages had become Catholic already in the early modern period (Terseglav, 1996, 16–25). The wider neighborhood of these villages forms the region of Bela Krajina with two urban centers – Metlika and Črnomelj.

Throughout the last two centuries both Žumberk and Marindol have been the subject of border disputes between Croatia and Carniola – or Slovenia, respectively. It is the task of this paper to trace these disputes with respect to the imputations various factors from different sides developed when they spoke about the inhabitants of the two regions. Thereby ethnographers and politicians were the spokesmen. For the period up to the end of the First World War, the Slovene historian Marko Zajc has already extensively researched the arguments which were used in this dispute with respect to Žumberk and partly also for the enclave of Marindol, whereby he also treated the fluidity and ambiguity of national categories which were in play as well as the positions of Slovene authors like Janez Trdina, or Croatian adherents for the integration of these areas into Croatia proper like Nikola Badinovac (Zajc, 2006, 101, 106–107, 115–116, 129–131, 135–136, 205–207, 214, 321–354). Other Slovene and Croat scholars have also exhaustively dealt with the region of Žumberk (Hranilović, 1990; Zajc, 2007; Josipovič, 2007; Repolusk, 2007; Žmegač, 2007; Knežević Hočevar, 2007a; Rožman, 2007).

In my article I will rather concentrate on Bojanci and the enclave of Marindol. There exists a vast amount of Slovene, Serbian and other foreign literature concerning these villages (Dražumerič, Terseglav, 1987; Dražumerič, 1988; Ognanović, 1997; Vlahović, 1997; Knežević Hočevar, 2004; Knežević Hočevar, 2007b; Komac, 2014; Petrovič, 2006; Promitzer, 2002; Promitzer, 2007). Two of these publications deal with the cultural heritage of the Orthodox population in Bela Krajina. While one of them, by ample usage of historical facts and documents, attempts to show in how far the inhabitants can be treated as an ethnic minority by the Slovene legal norms (Komac, 2014), the other one examines various ways of dealing with the cultural heritage of these communities (Petrovič, 2014). The purpose of this paper, therefore has to be a different one: it seeks to trace the main developments and characteristics of the history of the four villages in the 20th century both by considering their role as being on the very boundary between Slovene and Croat territory and by assessing the influence of various forms of (Serbian, Croat, Slovene, Yugoslav, etc.) collective identity on the inhabitants of the four villages. The latter includes an outline of how contemporary ethnographers and ethnologists as well as notables, journalists and politicians throughout the 20th century characterized the inhabitants.

Before I will go into detail, one specific circumstance must be kept in mind, namely, the strong bonds of Orthodox faith that tied the inhabitants of Bojanci and of the enclave of Marindol to each other. It was not so much the role of the Orthodox priest from the

ranks of the Serbs in Croatia which led to the passing on of the traditional Orthodox faith of these four villages. Rather, this was attained by mono-confessional marriage, which excluded exogamy with Catholics, except in the rare case of religious change, so that the homogeneity of the local population was secured, at least up to the conclusion of the Second World War, when the Communist government introduced civil marriage (cf. Ivanović-Barišić, 2010, 103). Therefore not only ethnographic and linguistic commonalities, but also common patterns of procreation and kinship formed stable connections between the enclave of Marindol with the village of Bojanci, although they belonged to different social orders – one a provincial village far away from the reaches of government and the other, representative of militarized society on a local scale.

FROM “VLACHS” TO “SERBS” – THE SELF-ASCRPTIONS AND ASCRPTIONS FROM OUTSIDE UNTIL THE END OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Long before the abolishment of the Military Border, but also from this occasion on, the diets of Carniola and Croatia were engaged in a dispute about the future affiliation of Žumberk and the enclave of Marindol, whereby both sides could put forth various historical arguments for their respective claims. This happened in a situation, which is characterized by two different circumstances:

The first was about the constitutional dualism of the Habsburg monarchy from 1867 until 1918. The division between the Hungarian and Austrian parts of the monarchy rendered the existing internal border more important than before, since it also formed the border for different legislations on the level of two different political bodies which were only loosely tied to each other as a twin state. For the village of Bojanci, which was already incorporated into the municipality of Adlešiči, the administrative affiliation to Carniola and therewith to the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire remained the same. The three villages of the Marindol enclave, however, which had been part of the Military Frontier in 1881, after the dissolution of the latter were provisionally assigned to the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia and therewith to the Hungarian part of the dual state; they were included into the municipality of Netretić which had not been part of the Military Frontier and whose administrative center was on the right bank of the river Kolpa and therefore, due to the lack of a bridge, not easy to access. In spite of these changes Marindol in Slovene newspapers was even two decades later still designated as a village situated “in the Military Border in Croatia.”¹

The second circumstance concerns the rise of modern nations. Which national affiliation would the descendants of the Uskoks, who – apart from their priests – did not have an intellectual elite of their own, select? Would it be a Serbian or Croatian one? Or a Slovenian one, which was offered in Carniola? Or would they choose none of the offered concepts of national identity?

The most important person, regarding such issues, was Niko Županič (also written Zupanič or Županić) (1876–1961), an anthropologist who hailed from Griblje, a Catholic

1 Cf. Amerikanski Slovenec, 2.10.1903: Iz Adlešič pri Črnomlju, 3.

village in Bela Krajina about ten kilometers from Marindol. As an adherent of Yugoslavism, who had found it difficult to find an adequate position in the Habsburg Monarchy, Županić moved to Belgrade during the first decade of the 20th century. There he tried to rouse the interest of the Serbian intellectuals for the South Slavs in the Habsburg Monarchy, and for this reason he believed the Orthodox villages of Bojanci and the Marindol enclave to be an appropriate vehicle. First he had to show that the inhabitants of these villages had a Serbian origin, which he claimed to demonstrate by extensive anthropological measurements of the local population – both schoolchildren and adults. Also his interpretations of the ethnographic peculiarities he met there went in the same direction (Županić, 1909; Županić, 1910; Županić, 1912).

The second circumstance, which Niko Županić attempted to use to interest the Serbian public for the region of Bela Krajina and adjacent Žumberk, was their aptness, to serve as a pattern for a future Yugoslav community. Thus he contended that the heterogeneous character of the whole region – one could come across three confessions (Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox), two languages (Slovene, Serbo-Croat) and three different manifestations of nationalities (Croat, Slovene and Serb) – made it essentially “Yugoslav”. The single exception were the Bulgarians, who as the fourth in that period acknowledged South Slavic nation were not represented in the region. Županić consequently described Bela Krajina as a territory where Slovenes, Croats and Serbs lived together in peace and commonness without any problems. Exactly this region served as his example for the cohabitation of a possible Yugoslavia in the future. Under such circumstances, he believed, the issue of the contested Carniolian-Croatian border would be overcome, only when Yugoslav unification took place (Županić, 1912, 6, 16). This did not prevent him, however, from claiming that the enclave of Marindol should be moved to the Carniolian side of the border (Županić, 1909, 205).

Županić was a rigid pioneer of Yugoslav unification on a centralist base. But in one aspect he took a common stance with the federalist proponents of Yugoslav unification – because of the living example of Bela Krajina he denied, that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes would form a homogenous South Slavic ethnos, but rather three different ones. They could form a single nation, which was necessary to build a common Yugoslav state, but would differ from each other like the Prussians from the Bavarians, although both of them were Germans (Županić, 1912, 15–16).

Županić’s elaborate description of the inhabitants of the enclave of Marindol are noteworthy for yet another fact: it also tackles the issue of self-ascription of the people in concern as well as into that of their perception from outside: Thus he contends that the term “Vlach” was the term the Croat and Slovene neighbors of Bojanci, the enclave of Marindol and of Žumberk used to designate the inhabitants of these places. The people in concern, namely the older generation among them, also used this term as self-designation. In the same way they labeled their vernacular as “Vlach” language. As for the village of Bojanci and those of the enclave of Marindol, Županić observed, however, that the designation “Serb” came increasingly into use both by the people in concern as well as by their Slovene and Croat neighbors. This change of designations points to the activities of the Orthodox priests who tried to instruct the villagers that they belonged to the Serb nation

(*ibid.*, 9, 16–17). But, on the other hand, in the censuses of 1900 and 1910 at least the inhabitants of Bojanci declared that their ordinary language was Slovene and not – as one would expect – Serbo-Croatian (cf. Dražumerič, 1988, 310). This shows that the national affiliation of the inhabitants of this village at the time was rather fluid or considered to be used purposefully.

Županič also informs us that the Slovene “intelligence” of Bela Krajina – he is probably referring to Catholic priests, teachers and clerks – felt attracted by the “exotic world of Balkan Orient” and visited the Serbs of Bela Krajina on Orthodox holidays in order to see them dance the “Kolo” (round dance) (Županič, 1912, 9–10). Thus, in the Slovene mind which had found its firm place within Central Europe in terms of geography and by mental mapping, this region formed something like “the Balkans in Central Europe” (cf. Promitzer, 2007; Petrovič, 2006, 91–96). One of those who held to this assessment was Ivan Feliks Šašelj (1859–1944), the Catholic parish priest of the village Adlešiči; in his spare time Šašelj would work as a lay ethnographer. In his newspaper articles and in the local church chronicle which he authored he also discussed the orthodox populations of Bojanci and Marindol, although he once admitted that during the three decades, he had been the priest of the parish of Adlešiči, he had only visited the village of Bojanci three times.² He mentioned individuals from the Orthodox population of both Bojanci and Marindol several times, however, who would participate in the collection of money for the Catholic parish church of Adlešiči, which had St. Nicholas – also a prominent saint in the Orthodox church – as its patron. These donations mainly came from persons who had left their birthplace in order to work in the USA (Pittsburgh, Kansas).³ Šašelj was also aware of the ethnographic value of the Orthodox tradition and bought the small bell which hang in “the only Orthodox church in Carniola”, namely in Bojanci. He had heard from the schoolmistress of the village that the bell had been allegedly founded in “Old Serbia” 380 years ago and had been brought by the first settlers to the village. Whatever the truth, Šašelj sent the bell to the episcopal museum in Ljubljana in order to save it from being lost (Šašelj, 1914; Šašelj, 1929, 84).

However, with respect to politics Šašelj took a firm position. Being a deputy in the municipal council of Adlešiči himself, he undertook to ensure that that the inhabitants of his parish would vote for Catholic candidates, when elections took place. But in 1901 he had worriedly noticed that a part of the Orthodox voters from Bojanci, who were definitely not Catholic, voted for the ultimately defeated liberal Candidate for the state diet.⁴

It appears that the Orthodox population of Bojanci was influenced by a teacher from the neighboring village of Vinica, Franjo Lovšin (1863–1931) and consequently supported by the Slovene liberals in general (Dražumerič, 1988, 306). The latter also mattered

2 Slovenec 22.6.1914: Iz Adlešič, 2.

3 Cf. Archiepiscopal Archive of Ljubljana, Zapuščine, Župnija Adlešiči, fasc. 1, Zvezek I, Župnijska kronika od leta 1887–1904, 23 and 34 (for the year 1889), 95 (for 1893), 165 (for 1901), Župnijska kornika, Zvezek II, od julija 1904 – konca 1907, 43–44 (for 1905); Amerikanski Slovenec, 13.9.1901: Iz Adlešič pri Črnomlju, dne 22.Avg. 1901, 2; Amerikanski Slovenec, 22.11.1901: Iz Adlešič pri Črnomlju., 2.

4 Archiepiscopal Archive of Ljubljana, Zapuščine, Župnija Adlešiči, fasc. 1, Zvezek I, Župnijska kronika od leta 1887–1904, 161–162.

on the second occasion, when Šašelj raised a complaint against the Orthodox inhabitants of Bela Krajina. The reason for this was the inauguration of the railway line from Novo Mesto via Metlika to Karlovac in late May, 1914. In Carniola this line was called “the railway of Bela Krajina,” and the opening ceremony was a big event for the local population and the regional notables. While “the Vlachs from Bojanci” were invited to appear in their national costume,⁵ an invitation was not sent to the Orthodox priest of Marindol, although all Catholic priests of the region were bid to come. Because of this insult the whole Orthodox population boycotted the event. Their boycott of the celebration was supported by the liberal daily “Slovenski Narod”, where one could also read that it was the fault of the Clericals that the Slovene schoolmistress in Bojanci did not teach the pupils the Cyrillic alphabet.⁶

Šašelj replied in an article, which was published in the Clerical daily “Slovenec”, that the Orthodox priest of Marindol had not been invited, because Marindol was in Croatia and not in Carniola. He admitted that the church of Bojanci was subordinate to the Orthodox parish of Marindol, but that the priest of Marindol up to now had never introduced himself to the authorities of Carniola. He blamed the liberals for having instigated the whole affair because of the forthcoming local elections. Šašelj declared that the local population had to be glad that they had any lessons at all; he pointed to the law which foresaw that instruction in Carniola could only take place in the Slovene or German languages, and expressed the opinion that there were no teachers capable of Serbo-Croat language.⁷

In “Slovenski narod” one could read in turn that the final affiliation of Marindol was still pending and that the villagers of Bojanci would never let themselves be misused for a Clerical performance or for voting for the Slovene People’s Party which was the political representation of the Clerical wing of the Slovene political spectrum. One could rather understand from Šašelj’s words – the article further reads – that the Clericals would love nothing better than to take them away their language and their faith; only thereafter conceding that they are Yugoslavs.⁸

In a final reply Šašelj indicated that Marindol at least formally belonged to Croatia. He further claimed that among the adults of Bojanci only one of them was able to read and write, because a school in this village had been established only recently.⁹

Two weeks before the beginning of the First World War another remarkable event took place in Bojanci. At that time the Carinthian teacher and travel writer Franc Mišič (1881–1969) and the judge and composer Oskar Dev (1868–1932) on their tour through Bela Krajina also visited the village of Bojanci and accidentally happened upon a wedding. Immediately they were received with hospitality and became part of the ceremony: “When we escorted the bride from her home to the house of the groom in a long procession, the composer and Austrian judge O. Dev on the forefront of the parade on a long

5 Dan. Neodvisen političen dnevnik, 18.5.1914: Belokranjska železnica, 2.

6 Slovenski narod, 27.5.1914: Preziranje pravoslavnega življa pri otvoritvi belokranjske železnice, 3.

7 Slovenec, 4.6.1914, Še nekaj o otvoritvi belokranjske železnice, 4.

8 Slovenski narod, 6.6.1914: Še nekaj o otvoritvi belokranjske železnice, 5.

9 Slovenec, 22.6.1914: Iz Adlešič, 2.

pole carried – the Serbian flag. A fortnight before the war broke out with Serbia.”¹⁰

During the First World War, Bela Krajina became a typical hinterland which had to pay its death toll at the front lines, while the remaining population suffered from requisition and the shortage of various commodities of everyday life, so that some of the more needy ones committed thefts among the more wealthy.¹¹ Shortly before the war the forest of Veliko Bukovje had been bought by the timber merchant Benedik in Zagreb who during the war contracted with the Austrian military, which constructed a small railway into the forest. Near Bojanci, Italian and Russian prisoners of war who had to work as lumberjacks were housed in shanties.¹²

Niko Županič, who in the meantime had become a member of the Yugoslav Committee, which lobbied for the Yugoslav cause among emigrants and among the members of the Entente, in his pamphlets once more again used the region of Bela Krajina as role model for a Yugoslav state to come (Županič, 1916).

THE SERBS OF BELA KRAJINA IN YUGOSLAV CONTEXT

After the first World War, with the demise of the Habsburg dual state and the foundation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes the issue of Žumberk and Marindol was again on the agenda. Immediately before the proclamation of the short-lived State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs which would soon merge with the Kingdom of Serbia, the lawyer Fran Ogrin (1880–1958) asked for the incorporation of Žumberk and Marindol into Carniola.¹³ But these two areas nevertheless remained in Croatia, from which – as contemporaries noted – the enclave of Marindol was separated by the Kolpa river, so that this area was part of Croatia only in political terms, while territorially it was supposed to belong to Carniola or Bela Krajina, respectively.¹⁴

When prince Aleksandar Karađorđević, then still regent of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes visited Ljubljana in late June, 1920, a joint delegation from Bojanci and Marindol appeared among the ceremonial parade in their national costume and praised the prince’s father, King Peter, who had accomplished Yugoslav unification.¹⁵

During the 1920s one can observe two different developments in the region: the population of Bojanci vis-à-vis the authorities confirmed their collective will to be treated as Serbs, which was partly rewarded by improvements in the fields of education and infrastructure; and secondly, the inhabitants of the Marindol enclave declared their will to be separated from Croatia and included into the territory of Slovenia, since it gravitated towards Bela Krajina geographically. As for the first development, the inhabitants of Bojanci asked the Ministry of Education in Belgrade for a teacher who would conduct

10 Jutro, 23.12.1928: Slavje slovenske narodne pesmi, 4.

11 Dolenjske novice, 7.2.1918: Od Kolpe, 24.

12 Dolenjske novice, 28.3.1918: Iz Adlešič, 51; cf. Glas naroda, 15.1.1924: Iz Belokrajine, 2.

13 Slovenec, 26.10.1918: Ustava in uprava v Jugoslovanski državi, 1–2.

14 Jugoslavija, 23.12.1919: Marindol, 3; Jugoslavija, 26.2.1921: Žumberk in Marindol, 2.

15 Jugoslavija, 27.6.1920: Regentov prihod v Ljubljano, 1; Slovenski narod, 27.6.1920: Prestolonaslednik regent Aleksander v Ljubljani, 1–2.

the instruction in Serbian language. Since this wish was allegedly fulfilled, the Radical Party, which had its strongholds in Serbia proper, not without good reason cherished hopes to gain ground in Slovenia.¹⁶ The teacher, who was engaged in the school from Bojanci, Slobodan Živojinović, a strong Serbian activist, became a driving force for various public and political activities in the village. He expanded the schoolhouse and was the founder and leader of the local branch of the anti-Clericalist youth sport movement, Sokol. Therein he was supported by the merchant Stevo Vrlinić, who acted as the “eldest brother” in the local branch of Sokol. Together they succeeded that virtually every adolescent and grownup male inhabitant of the village became a member and had to organize performances of gymnastic exercises and plays in particular on Đurđevdan, the day of Saint George on 6 May; these performances soon became famous and attracted visitors from other settlements in the region of Bela Krajina.¹⁷

A day before Christmas Eve, 1923, Živojinović and Vrlinić were engaged in a nocturnal gunfight with lumberjacks from Veliko Bukovje who after the war had replaced the POWs. Two reasons led to this conflict; first, the fact that the Croatian owner of the forest around Bojanci, had abolished the privileges the villagers had had with respect to wood and timber, the second resulted from harassment the young women suffered from the lumberjacks who often laid in wait for them at night, so that the male inhabitants armed guards. The gunfight cost the life of a young Croat, who had come from Gorski Kotar. Only thereafter was the village included in the patrols of the local police.¹⁸

According to the Catholic press the incident had a religious background, since it took place between “Orthodox peasants” and “unarmed Catholic workers”. The court had found the villagers not guilty, since they had defended public moral; but it was presumed that Niko Županič, who in that period was minister without portfolio in Belgrade, had had a finger in the pie.¹⁹

Županič had been also engaged in the foundation of a Slovene branch of the Radical Party, but would prove rather unsuccessful therein; the Radicals could not achieve a single deputy among the Slovene voters, as the result of the parliamentary elections in May, 1924 showed. In the municipality of Adlešiči, however, the Radicals could rely upon voters from Bojanci in the impending municipal elections of late June. The latter were also the reason, why the previous year’s incident in December and its aftermath had been exaggerated as inter-confessional struggle. Actually, thanks to the voters from Bojanci, the Radicals, who had their base in that village, won two seats out of nine in the local council of Adlešiči. This was as much as the Clericals could gain in the whole municipality, while the liberal Economy Party (Gospodarska stranka) with five deputies gained the majority. Among them were also two deputies from Bojanci, so that four out of nine deputies were

16 Avtonomist, 3.10.1921: Srbska šola v Bojancih, 3.

17 Jutro, 9.3.1922: Vsi vaščani v Bojancih Sokoli, 2; Jutro, 7.7.1922: Sokolsko društvo v Bojancih, 2; Jutro, 28.2.1924: Sokolsko društvo v Bojancih pri Črnomlju, 6; Slovenec, 13.5.1924: Bojanci pri Adlešičih, 3; Domoljub, 18.6.1924: Adlešiči na Belokranjskem, 355; Jutro, 2.4.1926: Bojanci pri Vinici, 7; Jutro, 4.5.1928: Jurjevanje na Bojancih, 3.

18 Glas naroda, 15.1.1924: Iz Belokrajine, 2.

19 Domoljub, 18.6.1924: Adlešiči na Belokranjskem, 355.

of Orthodox confession, as the Catholic daily “Slovenec” worriedly observed. Two of them would become members of the municipal government.²⁰ It appears that Adlešiči was one of the few municipalities of Slovenia, if not the only one, where the Radical party had won deputies of their own.

The local Slovene liberals became entangled in further struggles with the Clericals and the Catholic priest from Adlešiči who threatened to excommunicate those who would read the liberal “Kmetijski list,” whereupon one could read in this newspaper: “That’s nothing to us, since Marindol is not far away.”²¹ This sentence should be read as the jocular declaration that in such a case one could resort to converting to the Orthodox church. The Catholic press, however, took this declaration serious and warned against such anti-Catholic behavior (Novi Domoljub, 25.3.1925, 83).

How strict confessional boundaries were, one could observe that the first inter-religious marriage between an Orthodox (Serb) groom from Bojanci and a Catholic (Slovene) bride from the neighboring village of Tribuče had to take place in the Croatian town of Karlovac. The event even became the topic of a report in the liberal daily “Jutro” which lauded it as a symbol of a new era that was characterized by national unification in the sense of Yugoslavism and emancipation from Rome.²²

Since the early 1920s there were several attempts to get the necessary money to construct a road from the village of Tribuče to Bojanci which was otherwise only accessible by cart. In 1924 Stevo Vrlinić as the fugleman of the “Serb oasis” together with a delegation negotiated funding for road-construction among Radical government circles in Belgrade, but the actual start of construction works took another three years, because the authorities in Ljubljana, who were under the influence of the Slovene People’s Party, did not treat this affair as a priority.²³

In 1929, Slobodan Živojinović left Bojanci (Učiteljski tovariš, 17.10.1929, 3). In the same year the issue of borders came to the fore again as a consequence of the King Aleksandar’s coup of the 6th of January. Since the foundation of the state one could hear Croatian voices which called for the inclusion of the region of Bela Krajina into Croatian territory. In the same period, inhabitants of Marindol, in turn, had become more and more dissatisfied with their affiliation with Croatia because of its separation from Croatia proper by the river of Kolpa, which was crossed only by two bridges at Vinica (15 km away) and at Metlika (20 km away). Therefore, in 1922, they asked the government in Ljubljana to be included into its territory.²⁴ This request went unanswered, and in October, 1929, the opposite happened: the whole of Bela Krajina was incorporated into Sava Banovina.

On the local level, however, many things remained the same. Unfortunately, the inter-confessional conflict went on: the Slovene liberal press reported that on Đurđevdan, 1930, the usual celebration was attended by the Catholic priest from the parish of Adlešiči.

20 Jutro, 1.7.1924: Adlešiči, 2; Slovenec, 2.7.1924: Adlešiči, 2; Glas naroda, 4.8.1924: Iz Belokrajine, 2.

21 Kmetijski list, 11.3.1925: Iz Adlešičev na Belokranjskem, 2.

22 Jutro, 18.10.1923: Znamenje časa, 7.

23 Kmetijski list, 14.7.1921: V dobrobit ljudstva, 2; Jutro, 15.2.1927: Zopet nova mistifikacija na ,krščanski podlagi, 2.

24 Jutro, 7.1.1922: Bela krajina, 3.

But instead of providing an example of religious tolerance and Yugoslav unity in the presence of the Orthodox priest from Marindol, he raised his protest against the fact that people would dance, because for him every dance was morally offensive. Since none of the dancers would comply, the Catholic priest began striking some of them with his cane. Fortunately, this incident did not grow into a conflict of greater dimensions.²⁵

Just over a year later, the schoolhouse of Adlešiči was the venue of the celebration of Niko Županič's 30th anniversary of being active in public, whereby he was made an honorary resident of Adlešiči. The keynote was given by Stevo Vrliniĉ in his capacity as a member of the municipal government (Vrliniĉ, 1931).²⁶ One month later, in August 1931, Bela Krajina was returned to Slovenia or rather Drava Banovina, while the enclave of Marindol remained – as before – in Sava Banovina.

Stevo Vrliniĉ meanwhile became active in the organization of the regional branch of the "Yugoslav Radical Peasants Democracy" which gathered the former liberal and centralist parties in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and for the time being was the only legal political party in the framework of the king's dictatorship after the 6th of January 1929.²⁷ Delegates from Bojanci were also active in the re-launch of this organization under the name "Yugoslav National Party" in summer, 1933.²⁸

Beginning with the school year of 1932/33, the school of Bojanci again had a Serbian teacher, Danica Vranešević from Uĉice, who had previously been schoolmistress in the village of Dobrovnik in Prekmurje. Unfortunately, she was already replaced by a schoolmistress with a Slovene name in 1934.²⁹ That same year, Bojanci became an independent Orthodox parish (Šifrer, 1971a).

The Sokol movement blossomed again in the mid-1930s.³⁰ The inhabitants of Bojanci demonstrated their devotion to the Yugoslav idea and to King Aleksandar (who was assassinated in October 1934) by collecting money among themselves and their relatives who had emigrated to North America for a memorial plate for the king, which was inaugurated less than a year after his death on 11 September 1935, on the day which was dedicated to the Beheading of St. John the Baptist.³¹

In the late 1930s the Slovene press rarely reported about the situation in the Orthodox villages of Bela Krajina. There is only one article which mentions giving an outline of the history of Bojanci and claims that its inhabitants would consider themselves Slovenes.³² This was either wishful thinking of the author or a self-serving declaration of the villagers.

25 Jutro, 13.5.1930: Pravoslavno jurjevanje Bojancev, 5.

26 Jugoslovan, 28.7.1931: Bela krajina je proslavila jubilej dela dr. Županiĉa, 3.

27 Domovina, 17.3.1932: Ustanavljanje sreskih in krajevnih organizacij JRKD, 2.

28 Domovina, 24.8.1933: Lepo zborovanje JNS v Ćnomlju, 9.

29 Uĉiteljski tovariš, 17.12.1931: JUU sresko društvo v Dolnji Lendavi, 3; Jutro, 25.8.1932: Premestitev uĉiteljstva, 2; Slovenski narod, 16.2.1934: Sokoli v srbski vasi med Slovenci, 3; Uĉiteljski tovariš, 22.11.1934: Osebne zadeve, 3.

30 Slovenski narod, 16.2.1934: Sokoli v srbski vasi med Slovenci, 3; Jutro, 4.5.1938: Staroznano jurjevanje na Bojancih, 3.

31 Jutro, 22.9.1935: Narodna manifestacija v Bojancih, 3.

32 Jutro, 26.8.1940: Bojanci in Preloka, 4.

PARTISAN VILLAGES

After the German attack on Yugoslavia. Bojanci – like the rest of Bela Krajina – became part of the “Provincia di Lubiana” which was under Italian occupation. By ordinance of the High Commissioner Emilio Grazioli from 2 July 1941 the cadastral community of Marindol which comprised the places Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči and had been part of the municipality of Netretić in Croatia was incorporated into the municipality of Adlešiči and therefore also incorporated into the “Provincia di Lubiana.”³³ With this, the inhabitants of the enclave of Marindol were spared a fate similar to that which awaited the Serbs in Croatia proper who had to suffer the terror and the crimes of the regime of Ante Pavelić and his Ustaše. It appears that the Orthodox priest of Marindol and Bojanci, however, was caught in the maelstrom of war and prosecution, because in spring, 1942, his post became vacant,³⁴ so that the two villages until the end of war would be devoid of pastoral care.

In a situation of increasing food shortage some peasants from Marindol started to occupy themselves with the smuggling of flour; two of them were sentenced to punitive fines.³⁵ But it became worse. The inhabitants of the two villages became increasingly exposed to the hardships of requisitions and armed struggles between the Slovene Liberation Front, which several young people from Bojanci joined, and the Italian and later on German occupiers. Already in the first half of 1942 a Partisan group came from Croatia to Marindol, where they shot a Croatian policeman whom they had brought along.³⁶ In the summer of that year a mobile group of the Italian division “Isonzo” was active around Bojanci in order to “cleanse” the area from partisans (Zbornik NOV, 1956, VI.3, 580). By the end of September the shock brigade “Ivan Cankar” occupied Bojanci, but were forced back by units of the 11th Italian Army Corps (Zbornik NOV, 1958, VI.4, 139, 457, 467, 478). The village nevertheless had organized a local council of the Liberation Front, and the Second Slovene Shock Brigade “Ljubo Šercer” in April 1943 temporarily resided in the Village. In early July 1943, Italian troops and units of the Slovene Anti-Communist Volunteer Militia engaged the First Slovene Shock Brigade “Tone Tomšič” in Bojanci. The partisans on their arrival found a village which was altogether favorably disposed towards them, and this time the victory was on their side and therewith the village was saved, as captive Italians revealed that they had had the order to hunt local members of the Liberation front and thereby set fire to some houses (Strle, 1986, 806–811).

After the Italian capitulation, the inhabitants of Bojanci and Marindol lived for more than a year in peace and were guarded by the troops of the Liberation Front. Bojanci hosted the courier outpost TV 9 and a partisan hospital. The district council Vinica-Stari Trg of the Liberation Front in summer 1944 could report that among its 25 local councils that of Bojanci was among the best; the inhabitants of the village had produced almost four thousand kilograms of charcoal. Here and in Miliči, the Liberation Front established two

33 Jutro, 8.7.1941: Sprememba območja nekaterih občin in okrajev, 2.

34 Slovenski narod, 8.6.1942: Voditev matičnih knjig srbsko-pravoslavni župnjih v Bojancih in Marindolu, 3.

35 Slovenski narod, 28.8.1942: Kaznovani ker so kršili predpise o živilih, 2.

36 Domoljub, 9.6.1943: V treh belokranjskih farah so komunisti pomorili 46 ljudi, 3.

new schools (Slovenke v narodnoosvobodilnem boju, 1970, II.1, 579-581; Dražumerič, 1988, 311).

By the end of August, 1944, the enemy undertook an advance from Croatian territory across the Kolpa and occupied Bojanci, but immediately retreated upon contact with partisan units of the “Bela krajina Detachment” (Zbornik NOR, 1969, VI.15, 774–775; Zbornik NOR, 1969, VI.16, 373). Thereafter Bojanci and Marindol were not seriously threatened any more.

After the war both places were designated as “Partisan Villages,” due to the fact that they had given support to and housed partisans, had been exposed to attacks by the enemy and had been rather early part of the liberated Slovene territory. As a result, the inhabitants of Bojanci, who were totally impoverished because of requisitions during the war, enjoyed certain benefits and donations.³⁷ Already this circumstance insinuated that the inhabitants of the village who had been amidst the liberation struggle were accessible for the values of the promised Socialist society and prepared to break with certain elements of their past. A journalist from the Slovene daily “Ljudska pravica” wrote a fine piece about how this break with tradition in an ideal and symbolic way could have happened: She points out that in the first months after the war the villagers had been without a priest, but they were finally notified that on Sunday, 11 November 1945, just on the day of the parliamentary elections, an Orthodox priest would come and conduct a service. They refused to have the priest in their village just when they were on their way to the polling spot in neighboring Tribuče, where they wanted to be the first to vote. The priest nevertheless arrived on the morning of the election day, just when they were on their way to vote “for Tito, for the Republic.” So they became wary about his true intentions and whooping and singing on their festively decorated carriages they left him behind in the village, where he had to officiate in front of four decrepit aged women (Pavlin, 1945).

By discipline and zeal of its inhabitants – not by infrastructure, however – Bojanci became a Socialist model village: The local council of the Liberation Front succeeded to mobilize about 95 to 98 percent of the registered voters for its monthly gatherings and for voluntary community service.³⁸ The female teacher organized a group of lay actors among the pupils, and also the Union of Pioneers staged performances.³⁹ On 22 July 1951 – exactly ten years after the Liberation Front had announced the uprising against the occupiers – in Bojanci a memorial plate for the Brigade “Tone Tomšič” was inaugurated.⁴⁰ Thus the Slovene partisans had replaced the Serbo-Yugoslav king, as the Yugoslav-Slovene Liberation Front and the Union of Pioneers had substituted the Sokol movement. The increasing candor towards the Slovene society also had consequences in school curriculum: in 1954 the new teacher declared that he would instruct in Slovene only, and the parents had to comply (Dražumerič, 1988, 312).

37 Ljudska pravica, 18.10.1945: Belokranjci ženam iz Šiške, 3.

38 Ljudska pravica, 4.3.1950: Bela krajina se pripravlja na volitve, 1; Dolenjski list, 11.4.1952: Iz življenja naših frontnih organizacij, 4.

39 Dolenjski list, 23.1.1952: Bojanci pri Črnomlju, 7.

40 Dolenjski list, 10.7.1951: Tisoči bodo sodelovali v dolenski partizanski štafeti, 1.

The villages of Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči in contrast were still more marginalized than Bojanci. The reason for this was maybe their renewed incorporation into Croatia which lasted until 1952, when they were returned to Slovenia upon the explicit wish of the inhabitants, expressed by way of a referendum (Šifrer, 1971b; Petrović, 2006, 106–108). Soon thereafter they were included into the Slovene preparations of the 11th anniversary of 22 July 1941.⁴¹ The opening of a wooden bridge over the Kolpa close to the village of Žuniči three years later would make communication with the Croatia easier, but it did not change the situation any more (Šifrer, 1971c).

With regards to development, Marindol lagged behind Bojanci: the official Antifascist Womens' Organization of Adlešiči noted that educational work among the women of Marindol and Miliči was still necessary,⁴² which implies that the gender relations in these two Serbian villages were more unfavorable for the women than in Bojanci. The Central Hygienic Agency of Slovenia and other health authorities more than once criticized the lack of hygiene in Marindol, whereby the poor state of toilets and cesspools and the lack of potable water were mentioned. In this village practically all children suffered from rickets.⁴³ According to a doctoral examination of the 29 pupils present in the village in October 1955 62 percent had poor nutrition, 59 percent unhealthy teeth and 51 percent suffered from struma, which were in every instance, the highest figures among the places around the town of Črnomelj.⁴⁴ The average annual income per capita (19,000 Dinar) of the Serbian villages of Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči was assessed as being half of that of Adlešiči (38,000 Dinar). An indicator of the poverty of these places was the still dominant sheep husbandry. Also the land registry of this place which just one year before had been attached to Slovenia, was not in good order, because nobody felt concerned for these poor places.⁴⁵ The chaos, which the Slovene authorities wanted to abandon for good, had also to do with the fact that the institute of *zadruga*, i.e. the in the Western Balkans once usual cohabitation of adult brothers with their families in complex households, was still vivid in these villages, so that ownership of land and inheritances, which formed the base for taxation, were not entered into the registry.⁴⁶

Also the conditions in the school of Marindol were considered miserable; the authorities regarded the instruction in Serbo-Croatian as problematic and as one of the reasons why the inhabitants of Marindol would fall short of the general development of Bela Krajina, because their young generation would only rarely advance Slovene high schools or vocational schools. Different than the inhabitants of Bojanci, who had already switched

41 Dolenjski list, 25.7.1952: Od Adlešičev do Gornjih Laz, 4.

42 Dolenjski list, 20.3.1953: Praznik borbenih žena so dostojno proslavili po vsej Dolenski, 2.

43 Dolenjski list, 30.7.1954: Zdravstvena ekipa v Adlešičih, 6; Dolenjski list, 18.3.1955: Po Kmetijskem tednu še velika zdravstvena akcija v Beli krajini, 1; Dolenjski list, 8.4.1855: Ob zaključku zdravstvenega tedna, 2.

44 Dolenjski list, 10.1.1957: Vtis o šolskih zdravniških pregledih otrok v občini Črnomelj: slaba prehranjenost, zobovje, golšavost ..., 3.

45 Dolenjski list, 2.8.1956: Belokranjska kmečka gospodinja 3, 2.

46 Dolenjski list, 27.9.1956: Kaj je novega v Adlešičih in okolici, 5; Dolenjski list, 4.6.1958: Iz Marindola in Dragovanje Vasi, 5.

over to Slovene instruction, the inhabitants of Marindol would insist in Serbian instruction, however; the authorities, on the other hand, did not want to injure their national rights.⁴⁷

But in some aspects both Bojanci and Marindol made progress: Marindol was attached to the electric grid in 1955.⁴⁸ With regard to water shortage, both the schools of Marindol and Bojanci in 1957 were included into a UNESCO-program for healthy water supply.⁴⁹ On 6 July 1958, at the celebration of the anniversary of the defense of Bojanci by the “Tone Tomšič” brigade in 1943, the school building which during the war had housed the partisan hospital and had now been refurbished in an exemplary way, was officially dedicated to the public (Vrlinič, 1958). With the help of the inhabitants, the promised construction of a connecting road from Vinica and the electrification of Bojanci the following year were duly completed for the celebration of the 1st of May 1959.⁵⁰ But due to emigration, the number of inhabitants was shrinking, so that the school of Marindol, which had been founded in 1878, had to be closed in 1961. This was also a result of the tragic death of the teacher, who had come from Paunoviči. Thereafter nobody wanted to come to Marindol to teach, so that the pupils, after the parents had given up their resistance, started to attend the Slovene school in Adlešiči. In 1963 the school of Bojanci likewise had to close after 97 years of existence, and the pupils had to attend the school in Vinica. Therewith in the four villages the process of integration into Slovene society, but also that of linguistic assimilation came into effect (Šifrer, 1971a; Šifrer 1971b; Dražumerič, 1988, 311–312).

From 1966 to 1968 the Bosnian ethnologist Milenko Filipović (1902–1969) visited Marindol and the other three orthodox villages of Bela Krajina three times, each time for a few days. Shortly before his death, he finished an exhaustive study on them, where his special concern was the search for their original homeland of the inhabitants, which he believed to have found in Eastern Herzegovina. As for their definite identity as Serbs – different than in the era before the First World War when Niko Županič had conducted anthropological research in these villages – there was no discussion nor even any doubt for Filipović. But he also saw dangers for the ethnic survival of these communities: these were the increasing replacement of folk costume by modern western dress, the relinquishment of complex households, the relaxation of religious beliefs that had been a buttress of ethnic division, the introduction of civil marriage which weakened the traditional principle of exogamy, so that inter-confessional marriages which became a common phenomenon led to the influx of Slovenian daughters-in-law and to the exodus of Serbian daughters to Slovene husbands. The processes of modernization and industrialization led to emigration to other towns and urban agglomerations in Slovenia and Croatia, so that the average age in villages rose, while others became commuting spare-time-farmers or

47 Dolenjski list, 26.6.1958: Šolstvo v črnomaljski občini, 4.

48 Dolenjski list, 18.2.1955: V občini Adlešiči napredujemo z elektrifikacijo, 4.

49 Dolenjski list, 25.4.1957: 50 šol bo dobilo zdravo vodo, 7; Dolenjski list, 4.9.1958: Marindolska šola je dobila vodnjak, 5.

50 Slovenski Jadran, 1.5.1959: Za praznik dela – v partizansko vas Bojanci!, 5; Dolenjski list, 7.5.1959: Pristrčno slavje v Bojancih, 4.

even gave up their traditional agricultural profession and became workers or employees. Many old customs were not handed down to the next generation – they were even considered part of yesteryear and a sign of backwardness, while the younger ones adopted customs from the neighboring Slovene villages. What was left, was the celebration of the family's patron ("Krsna Slava") and the annual public village festivals on Đurđevdan in Bojanci and on Petrovdan in Miliči (12 July) with liturgy in the church (Filipović, 1970, 199, 210–211, 215, 221–222, 225–226, 228). At least the collective awareness of the villagers about their origin was raised by the affixing of a memorial plate on the entrance of the Orthodox church which reminded those who read it that the first settlers in Bojanci had been Vrlinić, Radojčić and Kordić (*ibid.*, 151).

Later-on Slovene colleagues criticized Filipović's claims that some of the ethnographic features he had observed among the Serbs of Bela Krajina were Herzegovinian by pointing at the Slovene neighborhood that had also influenced the culture of the Orthodox villages (Dražumerič, Terseglav, 1987, 210–213).

THE SERBS OF BELA KRAJINA AND THE END OF YUGOSLAVIA

During the 1980's, as the process of Socialist modernization throughout the country had already come into crisis, the Slovene ethnologists Marinka Dražumerič and Marko Terseglav became interested in the Serbs of Bela Krajina. Both of them discussed the collective identity of this group. Members of the group defined themselves as Orthodox or evaded to reply to the question about their ethnic identity, although in the census of 1981 – apart from the few Slovene wives – all had declared themselves Serbs. The younger generations, however, did not possess such linguistic competence in the Serbo-Croat language as their forefathers. Despite the general process of secularization, the affiliation to the Orthodox church remained a decisive ethnic marker. The inhabitants of the four villages as well as former inhabitants who had emigrated furthermore showed a mutual bond with respect to work and financial assistance (Dražumerič, Terseglav, 211–214; Various authors, 1988, 330). Both authors also noted that different from Bojanci the village of Marindol was more conservative; here endogamy was stronger and if exogamy was practiced it related to Serbian women from Croatia and not so much to Slovene wives. Consequently, linguistic competence in Serbo-Croatian and the ties to the Orthodox church were stronger in this settlement (Dražumerič/Terseglav, 1987, 240). But all of the informants agreed about the impending demise of the local Serbian folk culture due to linguistic assimilation, secularization and exogamy (Dražumerič, 1988, 314–316).

In 1988, in the same year, when Dražumerič and Terseglav published their papers and when in Serbia, Vojvodina and Montenegro mass demonstration, orchestrated by Slobodan Milošević took place, a letter, written by an anonymous "Committee for the Protection of the Serbs in Bojanci and Marindol," arrived at the Yugoslav parliament in Belgrade. It blamed the leadership of the Slovene Communists for forbidding the inhabitants of Bojanci and Marindol use of the Serbian language. Journalists from Belgrade newspapers travelled to Bela Krajina and asked about the state of the Serbs in the four villages. The latter convened a gathering and made an inquiry about the authorship of the

ominous letter, but none of the attendants supported the letter, not to mention confessed to having written it. A spokesperson of the villagers declared vis-à-vis the Slovene press, that somebody from outside wanted to force them into the role of an advocate for the rights of the Serbs in Slovenia, since someone from the ranks of the Serbs from Bela Krajina who had lived there for several hundred years was more useful for such a function than someone who has moved to Nova Gorica some decades ago. As for the Serbian villages, they were indeed neglected with respect to regional development; thus, the roads to Bojanci were not sealed and the settlement was not connected with the public water supply; but the reason for these drawbacks was not the fact that they were Serbian, because also the neighboring Slovene villages suffered from similar disadvantages (Čontala, 1989; Ivačić, 1989; cf. Knežević Hočevar, 2004, 120–121; Petrović, 2006, 49–50, 99).

In the campaign for the first multiparty elections which were held in April, 1990, with regard to the four villages, the Serbian ethnicity of their inhabitants did not play any role. The only topic which was addressed by the frontrunner of the League of Communists-Party of Democratic Reform was the promise to bituminize the street in question (Dokl, Dimitrič, 1990).

But already in May it was rumored that the Novo Mesto branch of the newly founded non-parliamentary Serbian Democratic Party planed to hold a celebration on the occasion of the battle of Kosovo Polje in Bojanci on June 28th. Whoever had passed around this rumor, the inhabitants of the village took it as a provocation and signed a protestation, wherein they asked the authorities to prohibit any celebrations which were not organized by the villagers themselves (Dimitrič, 1990a).

Between the demise of Yugoslavia, which was already within sight and the covert issue of whether the borders of the individual republics should be the borders of the new independent states, or if the borders should be drawn according to ethnic settlement zones, conflict was already brewing. One must state that the Slovene public and Slovene politicians in this situation behaved very cautiously and level-headed. Thus, ahead of the 1990-referendum on Slovenian independence Milan Kučan, then President of the Presidency of Slovenia, came to Bojanci and talked with its inhabitants. He said: “You are good citizens of Slovenia and you are good Serbs. One cannot accept the view that someone who is living here is a good Serb, and therefore cannot be a good citizen of Slovenia. One and the other is possible. If it were otherwise, this would be a bad certificate for the Republic of Slovenia.” (Kraso, 1990). And indeed, at the referendum on 23 December 90 percent of the voters of Bojanci were in favor of the independence of Slovenia (Dimitrič, 1990b). Consequently, different than in Croatia, the Serbian villages of Bela Krajina did not play any role in the theaters of war, in which the second Yugoslavia broke apart.

If there was no tragedy like in Croatia, farce took its share: On 25 November 1993 the Slovene tabloid “Slovenske Novice” brought the headline: “Bela Krajina is a Serbian Krajina” and showed a map of the “Serbian Autonomous Territory of Bela Krajina” which had been recently recognized by a “Serbian Cultural Centre” in Ljubljana. An alleged declaration of this institution outlined the borders of the autonomous territory and congratulated its newly elected government in the “Serbian” town of Metlika and its mayor (Slovenske novice, 25.11.1993, 1, 3). The document, which was signed by “Slobo

Milošević,” was apparently a hoax, since there was neither a Serbian autonomous territory of Bela Krajina, nor a Serbian Cultural Centre in Ljubljana, let alone the alleged Serbian character of Metlika. But in the region of Bela Krajina the joke was taken as serious assault on the cohabitation of the different ethnic groups. These were not only the inhabitants of the four Orthodox villages, but also the Greek Catholics from Žumberk and itinerant workers of Serbian origin in the towns of Metlika and Črnomelj. The repercussions of this affair cannot be elaborated here (cf. Knežević Hočevar, 2004, 120, 122–123). A Slovene journalist from Bela krajina wrote angrily about the empty promises of the Slovene authorities to help the peripheral regions at the southern border. But if Bela Krajina were only in the headlines because of inventions like the “Serbian Autonomous Region”, then there would be left nothing else to say than “thanks” for such a kind of awareness (Bezdek-Jakše, 1994).

Compared to these arguments, it remained a mere footnote that in Croatia in the wake of the establishing of the border conflicts with Slovenia one could hear even marginal voices who claimed the Serbian villages of the former enclave of Marindol for their state, since they maintained that it was essentially “Croat” by its nature (Majstorović 1997).

CONCLUSION

In the case of the Serbs of Bela Krajina, I have sought to provide some insights into the existence of a group living at the borders of two neighboring states – Slovenia and Croatia – which did not belong to the two eponymous nations, but belonged to a third one – the Serbs to whose nation state – Serbia – this group only had very loose ties. With the independence of these two states in 1991 and their international recognition in 1992 their common border at the river of Kolpa became an international one and since 2004 an external frontier of the EU. As Duška Knežević Hočevar found out by fieldwork, nobody who lived in the four Orthodox villages, was happy with the new demarcation: the limitations of small border traffic aggravated not only economic contacts, but also the relations with the Serbian communities in Croatia (Knežević Hočevar, 2004, 130). Only with the accession of Croatia to the EU in 2013 some restrictions were loosened.

One could therefore assume that until 1991, when Slovenia and Croatia became independent and fixed their administrative borders as international boundaries, the ethnicity of the group in concern did not play a major role. But rather the opposite is the case. During the decades before the First World War the national affiliation of the inhabitants of the four villages as Serbs came on the agenda; within the framework of the ideology of a centralist, but also mutual Yugoslavism it reached its apex in the interwar period. During the Second World War the incorporation of the villages into the Slovene partisan movement and the appertaining politics of memory during Socialism further emphasized the ties to Slovenia and the Slovene population, while processes of modernization and structural change as well as exogamy and secularization led to the gradual loss of traditional ethnographic, linguistic and religious features that underpinned a sense of Serbian national identity. This process also continued after Slovenian independence, whereby the village of Bojanci was ahead of the three villages of the former Marindol enclave, which, maybe

due to their former affiliation to the Military Border and Croatia, were more conservative and lagged behind. From a different angle, one could also say that the inhabitants of Bojanci applied different identity strategies and were more rooted in the political life of the region than those living in the other villages and who were – and are – even more removed from decision-making levels (cf. Petrović, 2006, 31–32).

Throughout the 20th century we can also observe strategic uses of discourses that either support cohabitation or underscore ethnic difference: Thus, in the early 20th century we are faced with the endeavor of Niko Županič, who praised the multiethnic setting of Bela Krajina as a paragon for a common Yugoslav state, within which the Serbian villages form an essential element. At the same time, one can also recognize a concept which is not against cohabitation as such, but asks for a clear submission of the orthodox population under a Catholic and Slovenian norm, as can be demonstrated by the example of Ivan Šašelj. Finally, one can observe attempts where the local multiethnic setting is dismissed for the cause of reinforcing Serb-dom. A first representative of this approach was Milenko Filipović, although there was still a long way to go to reach the positions of the Serbian nationalists a quarter of a century later who would misuse the existence of the four villages for their own aim. Shortly thereafter, in the first half of the 1990s, Slovenian nationalist journalists and politicians applied a similar approach – but now for the contrary purpose of stigmatizing the Serb population. Thus the “[t]he Serbs of Bela Krajina [...] did their best to avoid public exposure in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in part by hiding everything that made them appear different from the majority population” (Petrović, 2014, 93); otherwise their only other strategy towards the outer world remains to be “inevitably and constantly engaged in positioning and repositioning vis-à-vis the different gazes of all the subjects involved [...]” (Petrović, 2014, 98).

By way of contrast to reification and stigmatization, one has finally to underscore the effort of Milan Kučan, who tried to evoke a sense of multiethnic cohabitation, which superficially reminds of the approach of Niko Županič. I say superficially, because their respective aims were totally different: Županič spoke for a common polity of the South Slavs, which was still a vision by then, while the position of Milan Kučan was already beyond Yugoslavia.

JUGOSLAVIJA IN ONKRAJ – SRBSKA SKUPNOST
NA SLOVENSKO-HRVAŠKI MEJI SKOZI 20. STOLETJA*Christian PROMITZER*

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POVZETEK

Članek obravnava ključne značilnosti novejšje zgodovine štirih srbskopравoslavnihi vasi v Beli krajini na meji s Hrvaško. S pomočjo arhivskih virov, dnevnega časopisja in ocene sodobnih narodopisnih del povzema razmišljanje lokalnih pomembnejšev, novinarjev, politikov ter etnografov o prebivalcih teh vasi za celo obdobje 20. stoletja, vključno z obdobjem po koncu Jugoslavije. S tem se osredotoča na vsakokratni vpliv različnih oblik skupnih (srbskih, hrvaških, slovenskih ali jugoslovanskih) identitet na prebivalstvo štirih vasi. Le-to se je zato in zaradi obrobne lege ob slovensko-hrvaški jezikovni in narodni meji moralo spopadati z različnimi ponudbami in pripisovanji.

Že pred prvo svetovno vojno je nacionalna pripadnost prebivalcev štirih vasi postala tema javnih diskurzov. Za medvojni čas, ki jo je označeval kot integralno jugoslovanstvo, lahko govorimo o politični povezanosti vaščanov z režimom in kraljem. Vključitev vasi v slovensko partizanstvo med drugo svetovno vojno in politika spominjanja v času socializma sta, po drugi strani, poudarjali njihovo povezanost s slovenskim prebivalstvom. Hkrati so postopki modernizacije in gospodarskega prestrukturiranja kot tudi eksogamija in sekularizacija prispevali k postopnemu izgubljanju etnografske, jezikovne in verske homogenosti ter s tem tudi lastne srbske nacionalne identitete. Med procesom razpadanja Jugoslavije so se vaščani skušali izogibati izpostavljanju v javnosti. Obenem so potrdili svojo zvestobo Sloveniji in zavračali vsako srbsko skrbništvo od zunaj.

Ključne besede: Bela krajina, meja, narodnost, Srbi, Slovenija, Hrvaška, Jugoslavija

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