

## CHURCH AND COMMUNIST REGIME IN SERBIA

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**ABSTRACT.** Christianity as a religion is not anti-political, but as in other segments of its existence, it overcomes politics and human organizations, for the Lord tells us that 'My Empire is not of this world' (Jn 18:36). Morals, which are so important for Christ's faith, invite people to accept authority and comply with civil obedience. Everything can be misused, or misunderstood, however, the general moral significance of the State is needed to limit evil and to maintain good for everyone when it comes to social relations between people.<sup>1</sup> The State, as a system of legal regulations that manages interpersonal relations in one community, exists in various forms, almost as many as mankind. Unfortunately, Christianity wasn't well understood from its very beginning in the country where it appeared – the Roman Empire, because of suspicion that it's anti-state and anarchist, even thought that is far from the truth. It took some time until the State realized the meaning of St. Paul's words: "Let everyone put himself under the authority of the higher powers, because there is no power which is not of God, and all powers are ordered by God" (Rom 13:1), these words imply that Christians can be good citizens only if a common language is found. However, at certain times even after gaining its freedom the Church has borne a wreath of martyrdom because of State persecution. History shows us that the systems that fought against the Church, actually fought against God, and the one who fights against God is always defeated in the end.

**Keywords:** Church, Yugoslavia, Communism, suffering

### Introduction

After the end of the First World War, a long-awaited wish of South Slavic nations to have their own state, was finally realized in 1918. In the Balkans, from former territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed. The state unity encouraged to find a solution for the dissolved Church, as was done by the renewal of the Patriarhate of Peć in 1920.

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<sup>1</sup> Ivica Zivkovic, *Christian ethics: The relationship of Christians towards the Government: State, Society and Human Rights* (Belgrade, 2011), 169.

In the 1920s, the world was recovering from the effects of the war by accelerated modernization and improvement of infrastructure. The constitutional monarchy led by the royal dynasty of Karađorđević enabled the Serbian Church unhindered development, more precisely it worked on restoring spiritual unity of the Serbian people and created conditions for the improvement of the Church life in the spirit of new needs. During the administration of the patriarch Dimitri (+1930), the administrative organization was improved by creating new dioceses and ecclesiastical organs. Orthodox Christian faculty was found in the University of Belgrade for the needs of education of new generations of the clergy. The work of patriarch Dimitri was continued by his successor, patriarch Varnava (+1939).

Among the prominent figures from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Serbian Church, is Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. The work of the newly established National Christian Community was helped by his advocacy in 1920, the well-known Prayer movement, in order to defend Orthodox Christian faith from various sects that came to the Serbian territory after the Great War. This movement, which worked until the beginning of the Second World War, largely determined the course of the work of Serbian Orthodox Church and people of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and we can still see today the consequences. Especially there was a link between nationalism and Saint Sava, from where the term 'Svetosavlje' comes from. Svetosav nationalism, in its negative form, caused much damage to the Serbian Church during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Church had to struggle with the division within itself, while also fighting for existence in the new state order. As an overture to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the Second World War, but also somewhat earlier, in the territory of Yugoslavia, communism appeared.

This work is dedicated to the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and one of the most humiliating systems of state governance, communism, which committed horrible crimes in an effort to exterminate the faith of the people and erase the Name of God. We will try to explain the historical circumstances that marked the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their consequences, when the short-lived, but demonic evil and bloody, reign of Nazism gave way to a godless communism that oppressed, humiliated and persecuted the Church of God for almost half a century.

## **I. Communism and its Historical Formation on the Territory of Yugoslavia**

Communism (lat. Communio – community) represents an ideology that advocates the establishment of a classless society that is based on joint ownership of the means of production. In its present form, communism emerged from the workers' movement of Europe from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was conditioned by

advanced capitalism that cruelly exploited workers in every possible way. The fathers of communism are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who advocated the idea of revolution as a form of freedom from the existing system and the introduction of radical social equality. The basic principles of their ideology are: the destruction of capitalism by armed forces and the establishment of the communist society and the dictatorship (rule) of the working class.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that communism, after the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, when the imperial Romanov family was executed, received its anti-monarchist spirit; the fact that the Church was closely linked to the monarchy because of their traditional cooperation, communism became an anti-clerical movement. Warfare against the monarchy meant war against the Church, and war against the Church was war against religion and God.

The Communist Party in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was created in 1919, as the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which was banned by the royal government after a couple of years, but continued to operate illegally, spreading its influence and gaining more and more supporters. In 1937 Josip Broz Tito became the head of the party; his goal was to fight against fascism, takeover power and establish a socialist republic. The monarchy collapsed during World War II, when the king fled, and Yugoslavia was occupied by Germany. The Allies decided to provide the support to Tito and the Communists, which was the final blow to the monarchy and the beginning of the political rise of communism in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which ceased to exist officially on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1945, with the declaration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

## II. Serbian Church and Communism

The Serbian Church was able to organize and strengthen itself, even though historical circumstances heralded a dark future for it in the first half of the twentieth century. Patriarch Varnava greatly improved the life of the Church, as it was in his time that the Serbian Church reached the number of 37 dioceses, adopted the Constitution of the Serbian Orthodox Church and started the construction and reconstruction of many churches, among others, the church of St. Sava on the Vračar in Belgrade (1935).<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this flourishing church life was short-lived. The monarchy was in crisis due to the strengthening separatism in some parts, especially among the Croatian population. The Roman Catholic Church was not satisfied with its position, in spite of its age-

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<sup>2</sup> Ranko Pejić, *History* (Serbian Sarajevo, 2003), 240.

<sup>3</sup> Radomir Popović, *Orthodoxy at the crossroads of centuries: Local Orthodox churches* (Belgrade, 1999), 132.

old aspirations to regain supremacy in the Balkans. Yugoslav politics which was year to year more strongly pursued by the royal government, not only failed to reconcile differences within the religiously and ethnically divided monarchy, but irritated even more those who were already dissatisfied.<sup>4</sup> The attempts of joining the Concordat with the Roman Catholic church collapsed because of the harsh reaction of the Serbian church, which was soon pushed into the background due to the outbreak of World War II, that brought the world enormous suffering and destruction, but also changes in the field of political configuration, because the world was faced with the expansion of communism.

### ***1. Serbian Church after the Second World War***

At the peak of the Concordat crisis in 1937, under strange circumstances, Patriarch Varnava died, and his place was taken by the former Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral, Gavriilo (Dožić). During the unfortunate war that divided Europe and the world, Patriarch Gavriilo took refuge in the monastery of Rakovica, then in the Žiča and finally to the monastery Ostrog. He was captured by the Nazis in Ostrog and deported to Belgrade, where they kept him in prison. The execution of the patriarch was not possible, even though the Germans wanted it, but they knew it would just irritate the enslaved people. In 1944, the Patriarch, together with Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp, where he stayed until the end of war. During the absence of the patriarch, who could not immediately return to Serbia – he would return only in 1946 – the deputy for Belgrade was Metropolitan of Skopje Josif Cvijović.<sup>5</sup>

The Metropolitan Josif was an energetic man who was aware of the difficult situation, so he took care of the Serbian church, and did everything that was possible to allow the work of the Holy Synod of Bishops,<sup>6</sup> taking over the presidency of the Synod as the oldest bishop at consecration. The Communist government had already begun even before the end of the war, to be unjust towards the Church and the clergy, so that the Metropolitan publicly addressed a protest letter to Josip Broz Tito, where we learn about the relationship between the Church and the communist authorities at the very beginning of his reign: “...With various sides to the Holy Synod are incoming complaints from ecclesiastical

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<sup>4</sup> Zoran M. Jovanovic, *Belgrade Archdiocese and its environment in space and time* (Belgrade, 2014), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Veselinovic, 269.

<sup>6</sup> Sava Vukovic (Bishop of Sumadija), *Serbian hierarchs* (Kragujevac-Belgrade-Podgorica, 1996), 262.

authorities. We cannot ignore the many cases where national authorities unfairly interfere in internal affairs of the Church.” Here a Metropolitan introduced only a couple of cases, where the government had interfered in church affairs and the Liturgy, attacked the priests, desecrated holy objects, forbade prayers and other ceremonies, and even physically attacked the clergy, in almost all dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church, not only in Serbia. Then the Metropolitan vehemently requested that the government enforce and respect the freedom of the Church and its organizations, to respect and protect its clergy, and to return church property seized by the state government during the war. He finished his letter with these words: “You may think of the Church what you will, but by legal status, which the Church is constitutionally guaranteed, everyone has to respect it.. As you can see from all that was written above there were a lot of cases in which the Serbian Orthodox church was the victim of the gravest violations, and therefore the Holy Synod, in the interest of the correct legal relationship between Church and State, asks the Presidency of the Yugoslav Government to stop with these actions, and that the regional state authorities order the necessary instructions, as it is stated above.”<sup>7</sup> This was in 1945. The state did not grant the Metropolitan’s request.

Even before the war the Communist government had a vision of creating a federal state based on six countries, with the prerequisite to create these six countries. The Communists wanted to create a Macedonian and Montenegrin state, which also involved the creation of independent church organizations, independent from Belgrade, to be as efficient as established pseudo-national consciousness. In 1944 the so-called Initiative committee for the organization of church life in Macedonia was founded, which was quite ignorant of the earlier church organization.<sup>8</sup> It was the beginning of the creation of the non-canonical Macedonian Orthodox Church, until now unrecognized. Metropolitan Josif and the Holy Synod did not agree with this, but the government was persistent. In the late 1946 Patriarch Gavrilo returned from abroad and immediately convened an urgent meeting of the Holy Synod. Unfortunately, the war was taking its toll and freedom was not met by Dabrobosnian Metropolitan Petar Zimonjić, Upperkarlovac Bishop Sava Trlajić, Banja Luka Bishop Platon and the Czech-Moravian Gorazd. The four bishops died as martyrs by the hands of the invaders. Patriarch Gavrilo was grieved as one evil replaced the other evil. The departure of Nazi troops did not bring the expected prosperity and freedom, but an even worse situation encouraged by the attitude of government authorities toward the Church and

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<sup>7</sup> Radomir Popovic, *Sources for church history – second edition: Letter from Metropolitan of Skopje to Josip Broz Tito* (Belgrade, 2006), 576.

<sup>8</sup> Slavko Dimevski, *History of the Macedonian Orthodox church* (Skopje, 1989), 34.

all of its concerns. The question of the Macedonian church remained unsolved, although the state pressure was rather increasing. The communist government of that time implemented extensive measures against the Serbian church, among other things, in addition to what has in the protest letter written by Metropolitan Josif, the government completely separated the Church from the state, took its land possessions of approximately 70,000 hectares and 1,180 buildings, which were worth about eight billion dinars.<sup>9</sup> Patriarch Gavriilo had already died under strange circumstances, suddenly in 1950, at age of 71, although he did not feel sick or enfeebled.

The successor of Patriarch Gavriilo was the Bishop of Zletovo-Strumica and administrator of the Ohrid and Bitola Diocese, Vikentije. It should be noted that the communist government had put pressure on the upper echelons of the Serbian church in order for Vikentije to be elected, which was evidenced by the presence of representatives of the Initiative Committee of the electoral council, by the will of the state. The communist government believed that by choosing him, it will achieve all its goals when it comes to the “Macedonian question”, but they were wrong. Patriarch Vikentije did not allow to violate the canonical tradition of the Church for the sake of national interests that were not just secular, but would also do harm to Serbian people. Pressure was exerted on all sides and after only two years the Patriarch received a state act, by which the Theological Faculty was excluded from the University, due to his refusal to consider the “Macedonian Question”.<sup>10</sup> The patriarch gave in and the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church accepted the request of the autonomy of the Church in Macedonia in 1955, based on the existence of the former ancient Ohrid Archbishopric. Unfortunately, the sincere desire of the Serbian Church for Macedonia to develop normal religious life was not identical with the communist wishes, because the communists wanted a “Macedonian nation”, hated the Church itself, and initiated the creation of the Macedonian church in order to achieve their own goals. The Patriarch visited Macedonia but he didn’t give his blessing for the establishment of the canonical Church in addition to the existing hierarchy of the Serbian Church. The Parliament of the Serbian church refused the nominations for bishops of Macedonia (since it is part of the certificate of autonomy, and included in the national hierarchy), holding that all candidates were unfit (they were all married priests), but the government warned that the issue of the Macedonian church must be solved, regardless of canonical and other obstacles. All this was followed by a shock to the Church and the nation. Patriarch Vikentije died under very mysterious

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<sup>9</sup> Popovic, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 133.

circumstances, shortly after the regular session of the Holy Assembly of Bishops, in which he and the bishops confirmed his decision not to recognize the so-called "Macedonian Orthodox Church". He died on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1958 in Belgrade.<sup>11</sup> In his place was elected the former Bishop of Zica, German.

## ***2. Church and Political Events in Yugoslavia during the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

After the Second World War, according to the Metropolitan Josif, the Serbian Church was thrown into poverty, because it was the first time in history that it lost its property and secure revenue for the maintenance of the central bodies and educational institutions.<sup>12</sup>

The new Yugoslavia, unlike the first, monarchist state, was filled by state-national or state-civil Yugoslavism, combined with ethno-pluralism, which recognized the equality of all nationalities. In 1953, when Stalin – a second Diocletian, one could say – the great communist leader of the USSR died, Josip Broz Tito came to power as President of Yugoslavia; he was nothing less "religious" than Stalin. Ten years later, in 1963, the name of Yugoslavia was changed to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), and its leader, the hero of heroes, was Tito. He was Yugoslavia, and Yugoslavia was him.<sup>13</sup>

Patriarch German was one of the most important Serbian shepherds of the Church, since he led the Church at the time of the most severe persecution, perhaps even worse than the Turkish times.<sup>14</sup> His election was accompanied by pressure from state authorities, since he was considered the most suitable candidate for future cooperation between the Church and State. At the time of the election of Patriarch German, almost everyone was talking about corrupt elections – that the last sexton knew that the Patriarch was elected against the will of archbishops, with good agitation and terror.<sup>15</sup> These stories, which are not completely untrue, are the reason why Patriarch German was called the "red patriarch" in later sources. The next year, in 1959, he was enthroned in Peć. That year, the Serbian Orthodox Church, by the signature of the Patriarch recognized the so-called pseudo-Macedonian church's creation and, consequently, the head of the Serbian church bore the title, unprecedented since the existence of the Patriarchate of "Serbian and Macedonian patriarch"; as an expression of its

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<sup>11</sup> Vukovic, 79.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>13</sup> Holm Zundhausen, *Serbian history from 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>th</sup> century*, translated from German by Tomislav Bekic (Belgrade, 2009), 381.

<sup>14</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *History of Serbian Orthodox Church III* (Belgrade, 1991), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Misina Veljko Djuric, German Djoric, *Patriarch in dedivinized age* (Belgrade, 2012), 54.

gratitude, the state awarded him the Order of the Yugoslav Flag of the First Order.<sup>16</sup> However, confirmation of the Macedonian quasi autonomy, failed to please the Macedonians. In the following months there were problems due to the insolence of the “chief” of the Macedonian Church, Metropolitan Dositej (+1981); he had been the vicar of patriarch Vikentije, after whose death the ethnic-church synod in Skopje elected him as the non-canonical “Archbishop of Ohrid and metropolitan of Skopje and Macedonia.” According to the folk proverbs, if you don’t want the easy way, we’ll go the hard way, the third national-church synod in Skopje in 1967, on the occasion of the two hundred years anniversary of the abolition of the Ohrid Archbishopric, declared the autocephalous status of the Macedonian church. The Serbian Church refused to accept this precedent and distanced itself from the Macedonian church, indicting the former Metropolitan Dositej and four bishops, which came with him into schism, in the canonical court. None of the Eastern Orthodox Churches recognized the autocephaly. The attitude of Patriarch German has not changed even after the elections of Dositej’s successor, Angelarije (+1987) and Gavriilo II (+1993), who, after their enthronement, sent requests to Belgrade to recognize the autocephaly, for which they received a negative answer.

Besides the “Macedonian question”, Patriarch German was the culprit in the Serbian church’s suffering in other ways, for example, many priests suffered persecution and torture by government authorities, and no one was allowed to even speak about the issue. On the relationship between communist authorities and Church, the Serbian Orthodox clergy speak about mostly tragic and bitter experiences after the 1945: they were forbidden to perform clerical actions, expelled, killed, arrested and convicted, especially in the area of Banja Luka eparchy.<sup>17</sup> Many priests were leaving Yugoslavia, which was a big problem to bishops and the patriarch.<sup>18</sup> The consequences of systematically pushing the Church to the margins of society evidently were difficult. Disruption of the traditional religious rituals in Orthodox churches was a daily occurrence. The ones that were observing religious and traditional customs, possessed icons and religious symbols in their homes, were usually sent to the judges! It is difficult even today to prepare a precise list of churches and parish buildings that were desecrated, icons and relics that were destroyed, given the fact that state authorities did not record many of these misdeeds, and also on the other hand the Church itself was sometimes forbidden to report crimes. In implementing its politics towards the Church, the state had many ecclesiastic goods proclaimed cultural and historical monuments, singling them out from the wing of the

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<sup>16</sup> Dragoljub Vurdelja, *Decapitated Serbian Church* (Trieste, 1964), 80.

<sup>17</sup> Dragan Scur, *Banja Luka Diocese during Bishop Vasilije Kostic, 1947-1961* (Banja Luka, 2009), 48.

<sup>18</sup> Djuric and Djoric, 160.

Church. And finally, the very youth of Church was devalued, since the theologians were not entitled to social security, and were invited to the military service before graduation. The situation was more than difficult, since the priests were mostly old, and there was nobody to replace them.

The turning point in the history of communism in Yugoslavia was the death of the former leader, the last major of World War II and symbolic figure of Socialist Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1980. The oligarchy of the country, in a false homogenous state, began a relentless struggle for power<sup>19</sup> and slowly started to leave communist traditions of the previous decades, which brought a positive change for rigid ideological attitude towards religion and the Church.

Cooperation of Patriarch German with communist authorities, despite outcry of individual bishops like the bishop of Raska-Prizren, Pavle (the latter successor Patriarch German), led to the fact that the Serbian diaspora in the United States separated from the mother Church in 1963, with the leadership of the US-Canadian Bishop Dionisije. This was certainly a part of plan of the communist government to sever ties between the Serbs in Serbia and those in the diaspora, and on the other hand Dionisije himself was an ambitious man, having previously asked the Holy Synod to grant him the title of metropolitan, three Vicars, and to add to his territory South America and South Africa. The Serbian church subsequently joined by dividing the American-Canadian Diocese, which served as a pretext for the schism. Besides this painful event in Serbian Church Parliament, with decay of communist regime bishops intended to renew the prayer movement of Bishop Nikolaj, to rehabilitate his personality and ideas, as well as the promotion of a tougher course for the country.<sup>20</sup>

The last Christmas epistle of Patriarch German was rocked by 1989. His Holiness was bedridden due to illness, and soon after, the Holy Assembly decided that the patriarch would retire in 1990. He died on August 27<sup>th</sup> 1991 and was buried in St. Mark's Church in Belgrade.<sup>21</sup> Even during his lifetime, Pavle, the Bishop of Raska and Prizren, was elected in 1990 for the new patriarch. The old Yugoslavia "died" in 1992 when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began, which marked the end of communism in Yugoslavia; the new state consisted of Serbia and Montenegro. The Serbian Church, led by the new Patriarch, opted for nationalism in those turbulent years; it at least managed to get through the "American question," when in 1992 it repaired the rift in the US, but the Macedonian issue was not resolved.

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<sup>19</sup> Zundhausen, 413.

<sup>20</sup> Djuric, 256.

<sup>21</sup> Vukovic, 135.

## Conclusion

For the Church the world still is the world whose face passes (1Cor 7:31), and this attitude applies to all forms and all institutions of the world. In Orthodox social ethics, the question of relations between Church and state is additionally burdened by the notion of state-building nations. As yet it is impossible to impose the faith, so it is impossible to abolish or prohibit its existence in the atmosphere of truth, love and freedom, far above any form of violence. Through this historical period, when the terror was atheistic communism, the Serbian church and religion in the nation were experienced as martyrs, but eventually took the victory wreath. The Serbian Church came out not as the defeated opponent of the system, but as transformed dynamical victory of good over evil. And in this sense speaks Apostle John: "... and this is the victory that wins the world – our faith" (1Jn 5:4). Mimicking the words of his brother in Christ, Apostle Paul continues, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Grief and anguish, persecution or hunger ... but in all this we win through Him who loves us ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life ... nor any other substance will not be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:35-39).

Even in the Old Testament it was written: "So the fool says in his heart: there is no God" (Ps 14:1), which clearly shows who is the one who hates God. The Serbian church had put up with terrible suffering during many decades of communism. "Heaven and earth will undergo, but my words shall not pass away" (Mk 13:31), they say that he has left us a legacy of our Saviour to remember them in the most difficult times. Persecution, torture, prohibition, punishment and most diverse abuses, are the results of communism in our countries. Starting from Patriarch Gavriilo, and then Vikentije, who were most likely executed due to their resistance to the government, the Church has experienced the largest interfering of politics in its affairs in the time of Patriarch German. His struggle that lasted for decades, has managed to preserve the church, the clergy and the faith to new generations. Although certain methods of Serbian clergy caused schisms, it may be the opinion only of the ignorant, because all the misdeeds that occurred within the Church were the result of government intrigue. Finally, we can conclude this work with the famous words of Lactantius:

"The Church until recently demolished rose again as the temple of God, which the unbelievers destroyed, builds with greater glory and grace of God. Now, after a turbulent whirlwind of dark storm, desired shine and pleasant air finally came. Those who rise up to the Lord, lie, those who destroyed the holy temple, were killed in an even greater demolition, those who cut the righteous dropped the souls under the strikes from the sky and under the deserved

torments. Because the Lord revealed their downfall, to thereby provide a large and lovely examples in which the descendants learn that God is one and the same judge who determined worthy of punishment and wicked persecutors."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lactantius, *Death of the pursuers* (Belgrade, 2014), 11.

