

From Mothers' Day to "Grandma" Frost. Popularisation of New Year Celebrations as an Ideological Tool. Example of Čačak Region (Serbia) 1945-1950

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Abstract: This microhistorical case-study of the role of the Antifascist Front of Women of Yugoslavia in popularising New Year celebrations in the Serbian municipality of Čačak aims to examine the internalisation of the communist discourse through ritual practices serving to infiltrate the private life of the local community and to expand the Party's support basis. In the first post-war years, the new authorities not only tolerated, but tacitly approved and aided celebrations of Christian holidays. Yet this policy changed radically in 1948, when local mass organisations were instructed to replace winter holidays with New Year festivities, based on the Soviet model. These events bore an observably ideologised character, since New Year's Day was not only supposed to mark the calendar year's end, but also to symbolise the new beginning as a ubiquitous simulacrum for a new socialist society. The primary agents of this novel collective identity practice were women, champions of the socialist emancipation project, whereas the main channel for dissemination were children, which embedded this measure within the farsighted project of tempering a "new man."

Keywords: New Year, Yugoslavia, holidays, celebrations, Christmas, Grandfather Frost, Čačak, Antifascist Front of Women

The liberation of Yugoslavia in 1944/45 by the Tito-led partisan army was coupled with a socialist revolution and reconfiguration of the state, paving ground for a far-reaching transformation of the very structure of its political, social and cultural foundation. The consolidation of the new regime, aspiring

to mobilise all social forces into its apparatus of ideological diffusion, required a new system of collective identity markers and “realms of memory.”¹ In the Yugoslav case, this was an especially aching issue due to the country’s multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character. Therefore, the axiom for the new authorities was to curb the influence of particularistic sentiments along national and religious seams, which had brought interwar Yugoslavia to collapse, by promoting the concept of “brotherhood and unity.” An indispensable part of this early socialist “invention of traditions”² was a reconceptualisation of the official commemoration canon, state holidays and officially supported festive practices. This meant that holiday policies and the germane measures had to reflect the new reality of the Communist Party ruling and reorganising the whole society.

The topic of holiday policies in socialist Yugoslavia, as well as the issue of state-sponsored rituals in general, has not received satisfactory attention from researchers in post-Yugoslav countries. What little has been published on the topic mostly refers to explicitly political rituals (such as the Day of the Republic and Youth Day) and their visual features,³ whereas the evolution and utilisation of “calendric” holidays was mostly left to non-historians, unless studied as a side-phenomenon of broader research agendas such as religious history or memory studies.⁴ Admirable pioneer work has been done by anthropologists Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin and Lidija Sklevicky,⁵ although their emphasis was as much on the ethnological aspect of celebrating New Year as on the Catholic traditions specific to Croatia. Therefore, works on holiday practices in Serbia and their multivalent importance for creating and changing the quotidian social reality (particularly paying attention to provincial regions, outside of power-holding Belgrade) has mostly been lacking.

In this article, I am going to analyse the ambivalent attitude of Yugoslav authorities towards traditional Orthodox holidays in the first years after the liberation, as well as their efforts to popularise the habit of celebrating New Year’s Day from 1948 as a tacit mode of subduing religiously imbued traditions and making a symbolical discontinuity with the pre-revolutionary patterns of collective social activity. I will examine the holiday policies through the microhistorical study of villages gravitating towards the town of Čačak, representing a typical central Serbian municipality of the time. More specifically, I will focus on the role of the Antifascist Front of Women in this process,⁶

¹ Nora 1996.

² Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

³ Grigorov 2008; Luthar and Pušnik 2010.

⁴ For example Radić 2002; Mitrović 2006; Karge 2010.

⁵ Rihtman-Auguštin 1988 and 2000; Sklevicky 1988.

⁶ Antifascist Front of Women (*Antifašistički front žena*, hereafter: AFW) was an umbrella organisation of Yugoslav women, championing the process of female emancipation and the reconfiguration of gender relations. It was founded already during the Second World War, at

since from the very outset, the Yugoslav authorities endowed this organisation with the task of organising main activities around the winter holidays, putting their conceptualisation in the service of the new ruling ideology. Placing women's perspective at the centre of scrutiny helps illuminate a wider context for this detail of everyday life in early socialist Yugoslavia. Women, as one of the prime targets of the grand socialist emancipation project, were an important and self-explanatory medium through which the new ideological tenets (in this case, novel ritual practices) could be disseminated to wider masses and to the up-and-coming generations, which were supposed to be raised in the spirit of new values.

The main points of my analysis will be: the role of holidays as a symbolical medium of constructing a reconceptualised national collective; the reinvention of already existing cultural practices; and the multivalent agency of women as a social group at the centre of this ritualisation of cultural change. The New Year festivities will be analysed as a cultural framework undergoing the process of "keying,"⁷ resulting from the profound socio-political transformation, but also as a modern ritual practice of impregnating collectively experienced social contents with *liminoid*⁸ elements, transcending both the temporal border between the past/present and present/future and the border between private and public. The micro-historical perspective will emphasise the individualised and personalised experience, as well as the social mechanisms and networking patterns emerging "from below" and at the periphery, often hidden in state-level narratives concentrated on the power-holding centre. The fact that Čačak was an almost exclusively mono-ethnic, Orthodox region, in which New Year had had very little footing prior to the Second World War, as well as the place where women's communist organisations were particularly active in this period, makes this case-study paradigmatic of the relationship between the Communist Party and Serbian traditionalism and its reflection on the social position of women as an underprivileged collective. This article aims to fill the existing gap in scholarship on rituals and holidays in Yugoslavia, as well as to entwine the issues of ritualisation of ideology, politicisation of everyday life and the intrusion of the Party into the private sphere and gender relations.

the 1942 First Landwide Conference of Women in Bosanski Petrovac. After the liberation, it represented one of the prime motors of fulfilling the socio-political aims of United Peoples' Liberating Front. Its structure consisted of Congress, Central Committee, Presidency, Executive Committee and Supervisory Committee, with the network of local branches matching the changing administrative structure of the Yugoslav state. At its fourth congress in 1953, AFW was dissolved, whereas the new Alliance of Women's Societies (*Savez ženskih društava*) was founded (See Gudac Dodić 2006).

⁷ "Keying" refers to the sociological signification of the process in which "activities, events, and biographies that are already meaningful from the standpoint of some primary framework transpose in terms of another framework" (Goffman 1974, 43-44).

⁸ The term "liminoid" refers to (mostly modern) experiences which possess certain characteristics of *liminality*, but do not lead to a resolution of a personal or social crisis (See Turner 1974).

The main research source were the official documents of AFW branches of Čačak region's municipalities Ljubić and Trnava, including the correspondence between the Main Committee in Belgrade with municipal branches and the reports of local branches and schools to respective authorities pertaining to New Year celebrations. These valuable documents (all kept at the Regional Historical Archives of Čačak) provide a detailed insight into the internal mechanisms of holiday practices from the perspective of a specific social group, if only during a very short time-span. I also used the local weekly *Slobodni glas* [Free Voice], renamed *Čačanski glas* [Voice of Čačak] from 1950, which proved especially helpful with the period prior to 1948, when AFW had not yet been involved in the organisation of New Year festivities.

In the first part, I will portray how the pre-revolutionary folk holidays were synthetically adapted to the new socio-political reality of 1945, and focus on the example of the women's organisation embracing the Orthodox rites connected to Christmas in order to diffuse its influence and network, especially among children. However, the article will emphasise the sharp break with such eclecticism enacted in late 1948 by the central authorities, when New Year became an ideologically charged symbol of new commemorative activities and changing patterns of collective belonging, serving the purpose of creating a new socialist man, rid of old (essentially non-socialist) communitarian restraints, religious holidays included.

1. Amalgam of Old and New. Materice as a Socialist Holiday (1945-1948)

In Serbian pre-socialist folk tradition, Christmas had an absolute priority among winter holidays, together with other customs and traditions connected to that time of the year, including Christmas Lent (*božićni post*), Children's Day (*Detinjci*), Mothers' Day (*Materice*), Fathers' Day (*Oci*)⁹ and Yule-log Day (*Badnji dan*). New Year's Eve was a rather negligible holiday in this festival canon, without bigger public or private celebrations or refined communal customs. It is interesting to note, however, that although the fir tree (*jelka*) is nowadays usually connected to the Catholic influence on Serbian culture or to the power of Western-centric globalisation,¹⁰ the first Christmas fir in this part of Serbia (in the town of Kraljevo, more precisely) was introduced by

⁹ *Detinci*, *Materice* and *Oci* represent old Serbian family holidays auguring the coming of Christmas. *Detinjci* would always be on the third Sunday prior to Christmas day. Parents would tie their children around ankles, and the tied ones would have to "untie" themselves (*drešenje, odvezivanje*) by giving out presents to the tying party. The following Sunday, on *Materice*, mother would be tied and had to "untie" herself with presents. The last Sunday before Christmas, it would be fathers' turn to untie. See: Nedeljković 1990: 68, 150, 176.

¹⁰ In Serbian Orthodox tradition, instead of fir as a Christmas tree, a young oak log (*badnjak*) is used. However, it is not adorned with decorations, but burnt on home hearth on Christmas Eve.

Russian tsarist emigrants, who had a numerous and very active community in this town.¹¹ As for Čačak, the first fir appeared in 1928, thanks to a kindergarten nurse named Katarina Lijeskić from the Croatian province of Slavonija.¹² Russian émigré cavalry officers living in Čačak enhanced this novelty by organising charity "Christmas fir tree parties" on the third day of Christmas (9th January) from 1935.¹³ During the 1920s, after the 1919 reform of the official state (but not the church) calendar, the "civic" New Year was introduced as a new fashion among the bourgeois circles, yet this new holiday was hardly present in the traditionalist rural social habitus.¹⁴

After the liberation from the Nazi occupation and the formation of new revolutionary institutions under the hegemony of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the new authorities did not make a radical and abrupt break with festive traditions of the bygone era. Although the "civic New Year" (by Gregorian calendar) was celebrated in 1945 as a symbolic advent of liberation sweeping the country, the celebration of the Julian New Year was not only tolerated, but logistically supported as well. Tito took part in Orthodox Christmas rituals that winter, whereas St Sava (celebrated on 27th January),¹⁵ one of the most venerated Serbian medieval saints, was paradigmatically praised as a precursor of South Slavic emancipation from the foreign yoke. His cult was also paradoxically "rehabilitated" by the new authorities from its "perverted abuse" during the fascist occupation. Moreover, for the first time, the celebration of St Sava was occasioned on the premises of the National Parliament in 1945.¹⁶ Therefore, during this interim period, despite the nominal derogation of religious feelings and organisations by communist ideologues, religious life mostly preserved its continuity, not only in the private sphere, but also in the field of officially supported public ceremonies.¹⁷

As for the Čačak region, while the war of liberation was still raging, Yuletide was officially celebrated in the nearby village of Trnava on the 6th of January, 1945, with the participation of the highest authority officials. Priest Aca Savić, member of the communist movement, ceremonially blessed the

¹¹ Timotijević 2009: 86.

¹² N.R., "Simbol početka novog života" (Symbol of the beginning of a new life), *Čačanski glas*, 26th December 2008, 7.

¹³ Međuopštinski istorijski arhiv Čačak (Regional Historical Archives of Čačak, hereafter: MIAČ), Fond Pomoćna ženska sekcija FIDAK, k-1, *Molba Uprave kubanskog kazačkog hutora pomoćnoj sekciji FIDAK*, 26.12.1934.

¹⁴ Nevoljica 1993: 268-269.

¹⁵ St Sava (1174/5-1236, lay name Rastko Nemanjić) was the youngest son of Serbian duke Stefan Nemanja (ruled 1166-1196). He took a monk oath at the Mt Athos and devoted his life to strengthening the Orthodox culture in Serbia, subsequently establishing an autocephalous Serbian church organisation and becoming its first archbishop in 1219.

¹⁶ Mitrović 2006: 106-108.

¹⁷ About the Communist Party's stance towards religious communities in Yugoslavia in this period, see: Radić 2002: 126-136, 163-184.

badnjak log, which was greeted with “gorgeous” festivities at the town’s main square. Apart from Savić, program participants who also held speeches on this occasion were the local army commander Captain Dušan Carević, official representatives of the People’s Liberation Committees of Čačak (Radul Rabrenović) and Trnava (Babović), as well as another priest involved in the new political configuration, the president of the County Committee, Sava Protić. After the official speeches, folk festivities ensued.¹⁸ During that winter, St Sava Day celebration was officially endorsed as well. The festive bread was cut and shared in the joint celebration of all high schools in Čačak. In the evening, as many as three parties were held, in the Main High School, hotel *Kren* and the Railway School.¹⁹

In connection to the involvement of the new authorities in public celebrations, special importance was given to actions of the Antifascist Front of Women, more specifically, their charity activities for orphaned children. The most comprehensive and promoted actions of this type were the ones organised for *Materice*, thus reconceptualising old Christmas-related traditions.²⁰ The initiatives undertaken by the AFW County Committee would be materialised by local municipal committees. Some of their representatives would bring presents directly to orphanages, whereas others did it through the County Committee. These presents consisted mainly of sweaters, gloves, scarves, caps and other clothing pieces handmade by AFW members, but also included purchased items, such as shoes, study materials, as well as pocket money.²¹ Seven women from Ljubić visited an orphanage on *Materice* day in 1945, where they were traditionally “untied.”²² Besides collecting various types of contributions, charity parties were also organised, as the example of one such event held in 1946 in Gornji Milanovac tells.²³

A peculiar syncretism of Orthodox traditions and the new socialist ideology can be seen in the report on the visit of the Čačak AFW branch to a local kindergarten in January 1946. Not only did the children “spontaneously” cheer Tito’s name, but during the handing out of presents, one (apparently jealous) boy stubbornly insisted that he also gets a sweatshirt with an embroidered

¹⁸ “Svečano donošenje badnjaka u Čačak” [Festive Yule-log in Čačak], *Slobodni glas*, 18th January 1945, 7.

¹⁹ “Proslava Sv. Save u Čačku” [St Sava celebration in Čačak], *Slobodni glas*, 31st January 1945, 4.

²⁰ “Ženama okruga čačanskog” [To the Čačak county women], *Slobodni glas*, 28th December 1945, 2.

²¹ Stojanka V. Trumbulović, “Rad AFŽ u Raškoj” [AFW activities in Raška], *Slobodni glas*, 30th January 1946, 6; “Rad AFŽ u Ivanjici” [AFW activities in Ivanjica], *Slobodni glas*, 30th January 1946, 6.

²² O. Zečević, “Rezultati akcije za Materice” [*Materice* activities results], *Slobodni glas*, 4th January 1946, 4.

²³ Zora Lazić, “Prikupljanje pomoći da dečje domove u srezu takovskom” [Fundraising for children homes in Takovo municipality], *Slobodni glas*, 14th January 1946, 4.

five-pointed star "because he loved it."²⁴ Next winter, women from Čačak remembered children from Bosnia and Herzegovina, to whom they sent presents for *Materice*.²⁵ That same season, children from Čačak and Kraljevo area got Christmas presents from "brotherly" fellow-socialist Czechoslovaks, while the AFW activity network was expanded onto the local branches of boarding schools, Red Cross, apprentice unions etc.²⁶ Although each AFW member was instructed to knit one sweater as a Christmas present, many surpassed this "work norm," with one 70-year old member having knitted as many as seven.²⁷ Besides providing Christmas presents, the AFW, together with the United Alliance of the Antifascist Youth, undertook the project of sending orphans from Čačak to the Black Sea coast and Banat farms. The adults were also catered to through organising "instant" nursing and teaching courses.²⁸

Such amalgam of socialist rhetoric, propagated through the old framework of religiously conceptualised communitarian festive practices, ceased to be ideologically opportune and relevant already several years after the liberation, when the official festive policy completely abandoned the remnants of religiously motivated celebrations and turned to holidays which symbolised a discontinuity with the *ancient regime*. One such "acceptable" holiday was found in the New Year's Eve celebrations. Already in early 1947, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Serbia recommended that Party members avoid celebrating religious holidays.²⁹ Public church processions were forbidden by the 1947 state act, whereas Christmas was eventually demoted from the status of state holiday in 1948.³⁰ Although Christmas celebrations in private and church domains were never explicitly forbidden, the officially approved discourse very often put the expression of religious feelings and veneration of church holidays to public mockery and disapproval.³¹ The dissemination of the new holiday pervaded the local society rather quickly. Already for the New Year's Eve in December 1948, the People's Front organised

²⁴ Jelić, "Proslava Materica u obdaništu u Čačku" [*Materice* celebration in Čačak kindergarten], *Slobodni glas*, 14th January 1946, 4.

²⁵ "Žene okruga čačanskog poslale su poklon deci Bosne" [Women of the Čačak county gave presents to Bosnian children], *Slobodni glas*, 29th December 1946, 4.

²⁶ "Žene Kraljeva obišle su na Materice sa poklonima dečje domove" [Women of Kraljevo gave presents to children homes], *Slobodni glas*, 5th January 1947, 6.

²⁷ S. Vujičić, "Žene Čačka isplele su 210 džempera i dale kao dar za Materice dečjim domovima u okrugu" [Women of Čačak knitted 210 sweaters as a gift to the County's children homes], *Slobodni glas*, 5th January 1947, 6.

²⁸ "Akcija za zbrinjavanje dece u našem kraju" [Children nurturing action in our area], *Slobodni glas*, 18th January 1945, 8.

²⁹ Radić 2002: 351.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

³¹ See a sarcastic text frowning upon the still-lingering habit of some shop-owners to close their facilities on the Christmas day: N., "Sedmi januar 1949" [7th January 1949], *Slobodni glas*, 14th January 1949, 4.

lotteries in each of the 13 local affiliations on Čačak territory, including a big central celebration,³² whereas on the 1st of January, big cultural events took place in the City Theatre and the Trade Union Hall, with song and dance parties following in three restaurants.³³

However, these events, held by and for adult citizens, mostly of a jocular character and relying on the rather weak legacy New Year celebrations had in this region during the former regime, failed to sufficiently utilise the implicit ideological potency of the turn of the year's symbolism. A more discursively refined and ideologically charged content for this holiday was sought, with women becoming its prime medium of diffusion and children being the most convenient target group for the internalisation of the new rite and its semiotic complexity.

2. "A New Step on Our Road to Socialism." New Year Celebrations 1948-1950

On the 10th of December 1948, the Head Committee of the AFW of Serbia issued instructions to all local branches, concerning the changes in the organisation and ideological perception of New Year celebrations. The communiqué said:

Dear comradeses,

New Year should become our great holiday in the future. On that day, which represents a new step on our road to socialism, the previous year's results and achievements of the socialist construction are reviewed and working directions for the next year are being decided upon. For the last two years, New Year celebrations were mostly held under the wing of the pioneer organisation, thus encompassing only the school-age children. However, it [New Year's Day] should play a decisive role in curtailing the celebration of religious holidays Christmas, St. Nicholas, *Materice* etc, so that, by grouping our children, it remains unforgettable for them and replaces all other winter holidays for them. The torchbearer of celebrations will yet again be the youth. However, in order to encompass as many children as possible, it is necessary that other organisations help the [People's] Youth, especially AFW and the [Alliance of] Trade Unions.³⁴

It was also instructed that a special celebration committee be formed in every municipality and village/town, consisting of AFW, People's Youth and Alliance of Trade Unions members. Main celebrations ought to be held in local schools, but other types of festivities were to be organised in towns. Special

³² "Raspored lokala za doček Nove godine po osnovnim organizacijama u Čačku" [Basic organisations' New Year celebration schedule in Čačak], *Slobodni glas*, 31st December 1948, 1.

³³ "Sreski front Ljubičko-trnavskog sreza organizuje na Dan nove godine priredbe i zabave" [Ljubić-Trnava Municipal Front organizes New Year celebrations and entertainment], *Slobodni glas*, 31st December 1948, 1.

³⁴ MIAČ, Fond Antifašističkog fronta žena (AFW collection, hereafter: Fond AFŽ), kutija 3, *Pismo glavnog odbora AFŽ Srbije Sreskom odboru*, 10.12.1948.

attention was devoted to preparing presents for all children, just like it used to be done for *Materice*, with the difference that now also the pre-school age children were included in the program. There were other notable innovations, most importantly a much more developed scripting of festivities, now including an elaborate program and performance repertoire, as well as introducing a new character responsible for handing out the presents – Grandpa Frost (*Deda Mraz*).³⁵ That this whole new concept of commemorating winter holidays and organising adequate festivities was supposed to be a deliberate carbon-copy of the Soviet model can be seen from the mere fact that, together with the instructions quoted above, the central AFW organ sent out an inspired report on the way New Year was celebrated in the Soviet Union. Although this report could have brought some of the novelties (such as *Deda Mraz*)³⁶ closer to Serbian women, the very description of lush and widespread preparations for celebration in big cities was apparently without any practical use for Čačak women, save for enticing their admiration for the delicacy and pseudo-glamour with which this holiday was imbued in the Soviet metropolises.³⁷

Within days, the municipal AFW committee sent out instructions to all local branches, practically reiterating the Head Committee's message, yet also giving more specified and "hands-on" hints as to the practicalities of organising such festivities in local circumstances. The main motors of the aforementioned organisational committees were to be women (AFW was the only organisation co-opting two members to these bodies), as well as local teachers, since in most places, schools were the most (if not the only) suitable venues for hosting the New Year festivities. Since one of the main activities of local AFW branches in this period was to expand the network of school canteens (especially in villages), it was recommended that, should some local branch currently be working towards establishing a new canteen, it ought to be opened exactly on this day. Apart from its symbolical and propagandist importance, this was also a convenient means to improve the celebrations' quality, since canteens could be used to prepare a festive meal for all guests and participants. Moreover, the external appearance of the new character, *Deda Mraz*, was outlined:

He will be created by someone from women or youth. He/She will dress in white, put a big white paper cap with a five-pointed star and make a white beard, and then pack all presents into a big sack from which they will be handed out to children. Please take care that this does not have a mocking note to it, but contains a serious character.³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Translated as Grandfather Frost, virtually built upon the Russian fictional character *Ded Moroz*, which was largely shaped by the Alexander Ostrovsky's fairytale *Snegurochka* (Snow Maiden), first published in 1873.

³⁷ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Proslava Nove godine u SSSR*.

³⁸ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Pismo Sreskog odbora AFŽ Čačak Mesnom odboru AFŽ Vrnčani*, 21.12.1948.

There were only several days left to finish the preparations for the new celebration. Due to the local character of event, the formation of the joint committees of women, youth and trade union activists (the latter, only in Čačak) was quickly achieved, albeit in a rather informal manner. A fortunate convenience was the fact that the presents initially prepared for *Materice* could simply be “redirected” towards the New Year events. There was also a door-to-door agitation activity on behalf of AFW representatives seeking to invite all available children in their neighbourhood, as well as their parents, to visit the shows.³⁹ This pertained especially to the children of pre-school age and those who did not attend school for various reasons, since they could not obtain information about the forthcoming celebrations from local teachers. Apart from decorating schools, local women also took an active part in beautifying their community as well, as shown by women from Bresnica, who decorated every public building in their village with state symbols, thus additionally emphasising the patriotic feature of the new festive policy.⁴⁰ These activities were put into the context of the omnipresent socialist “competition,” which permeated literally every sphere of social and productive activity in early socialism. Accordingly, personal involvement and dedication to the organisation of New Year events (but also the lack thereof) were carefully scrutinised by local AFW secretaries, who noted and assessed the most diligent individuals in their reports to the municipal committee, explicitly naming female comrades or the local affiliations that proved themselves extraordinarily conscientious or creative in their work on this matter.

While in Čačak, the urban centre of the area, it was becoming more common in these years to have evening parties and celebrations on the night of 31st December, the school performances planned out by AFW took place mostly on 1st January. An exception was the school in Katrga, where an additional parent-oriented event was held on the 31st in the evening.⁴¹ Despite the very short notice with which the local women were notified of the forthcoming celebration, the program in most schools encompassed rather diverse aspects. The celebration would commence with children’s performances, consisting of plays, songs and recitations. The crux of the repertoire consisted primarily of patriotic texts and plays, dealing with the tropes of the People’s Liberation War and socialist revolution, as well as with the issues of social justice and workers’ and peasants’ unity (sometimes even Soviet poems and texts were used, which is curious to note, considering that the break between the Yugoslav and Soviet authorities was at its full rage in this period). This accent on

³⁹ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Petnici Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

⁴⁰ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Bresnici Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 3.1.1949.

⁴¹ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Katrgi Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

political and social themes as the main motif of celebrations was in a stark contrast with the traditions which the New Year festivities were supposed to replace, namely the plethora of Christmas customs deriving from Orthodox religiosity and folk peasant culture, which laid emphasis on the reification of the narrowly defined kinship collectives, rather than on participating in large public events commemorating the social identity of the working class.

Teachers attempted to involve as many pupils in these events as possible. Thus, at the event in the relatively small school in the village of Slatina, twelve children made individual recitations, followed by four choir songs, while in Slatinska Banja there were twenty recitations and three choir songs. The disproportionate massiveness of the program can be seen from the fact that the estimated attendance for both events combined was 50 AFW, 60 Communist Youth and 30 People's Front members.⁴² The school in Donja Trepča not only included all pupils in the performance, but also all available children of pre-school age in the village.⁴³ Plays were based on literary works (i.e. *Put u Svjetlovo* in Katrga). There were also more humorous program components, such as sketches where the Old and the New Year were personified,⁴⁴ a "fairy-tale about lost time"⁴⁵ (although even such "naïve" themes, depending on the context, could be interpreted as a multi-layered message about the upcoming new age), or folk dance performances. Yet the "official" part of the repertoire, at least from the available sources, seems to have been mostly reserved for a "more serious" program, whereas the closing part of the celebration would go into a more entertainment-oriented direction, usually with an invited accordion player who would play joyful songs for children and other guests.⁴⁶

The pupils' performance would be followed by a commemorative speech, most often by the school headmaster or the local People's Front official. These speeches, with their synthetic character (drawing a line to the previous year's work results and lining out the norms and expectations for the next) portray very vividly the ideo-symbolical essence which the new holiday was ripe with, at least in the vision of Yugoslav authorities. However, although the summarisation of achieved results was an inseparable part of these commemorations, they

⁴² MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Slatini Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949

⁴³ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Donjoj Trepči Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

⁴⁴ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Slatini Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

⁴⁵ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Osnovne škole u Mrčajevcima Sreskom narodnom odboru Čačak*, 3.1.1949.

⁴⁶ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Goričanima Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 3.1.1949; MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Osnovne škole u Rakovi Sreskom narodnom odboru Čačak*, 3.1.1949; MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Osnovne škole u Miličevcima Sreskom narodnom odboru Čačak*, 3.1.1949; MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Sreskog odbora AFŽ u Čačku Glavnom odboru AFŽ*, 19.1.1949.

were arguably more future-oriented. The rhetoric present in these speeches focused on the parallels between celebrating the beginning of a new calendric year and the ubiquitous social mirth linked with the grand vision of creating a new socialist society. In this way, the discourse present in these celebrations (basically marking local schools' plans for the following year) puts them into a wider socio-political context of building and solidifying the new system, thus exemplifying the Communist Party's insistence on "mobilising all social forces" (children included) into its all-encompassing utopian social experiment.

Probably the most anticipated and beloved part of these events, at least for children participants, was the handing out of presents. Gifts were mostly of the same nature as the ones given out for *Materice* in the previous years: pieces of (mostly winter) clothing, study items, fruit and cakes. Yet a significant novelty was that now, these presents were not given by visible and clearly identifiable individuals (charitable local women), but by *Deda Mraz*. In hindsight, it is curious to note that in most cases (since the women's organisation was the main organiser), it was a female who would disguise herself with a white beard and costume (with an unavoidable five-pointed star) and pose as the instantly popularised *Deda Mraz* (in some reports this character's name was accordingly "feminised" into *Deda Mraza*, whereas in the village of Baluga, he was referred to as *Čika Mraz*, "Uncle Frost").⁴⁷ Only in few cases was this role given to male activists of the People's Youth.⁴⁸ Needless to say, in this new conceptualisation of present-sharing, the "untying" custom, closely reminiscing of and inextricably entwined with peasant folk culture and Christmas traditions, was markedly absent. The unavoidable part of school performances was also a public lunch for participants and guests. From the sources, one can see that significant financial and material means were invested in these feasts. In Bresnica, a meal was served for as many as 229 children (due to spatial confinement, it was served in five shifts).⁴⁹ In some villages, this occasion was used for public opening of a school library⁵⁰ or events themselves served as a public fundraising for the school cafeteria.⁵¹

The Head Committee of AFW apparently sent their instructions about the newly prioritised holiday too late, since the local affiliations encountered significant problems in providing necessary resources (provisions, money, logistics) in time for the celebration. Thus, it happened that AFW members could

⁴⁷ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Osnovne škole u Goričanima Sreskom narodnom odboru Čačak, 3.1.1949*; MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Brđanima, 3.1.1949*.

⁴⁸ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Proslava Nove godine u selu Prijedoru*; MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Gornjoj Ježevici Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak, 2.1.1949*.

⁴⁹ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Bresnici Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak, 3.1.1949*.

⁵⁰ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Proslava Nove godine u selu Prijedoru*.

⁵¹ In Mrčajevci, 3000 dinars were collected that evening (MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Osnovne škole u Mrčajevcima Sreskom narodnom odboru Čačak, 3.1.1949*).

not collect enough money to buy all necessities and presents, or that by the time they were able to go to town and buy the required goods (basically in the last minute) shops and stationeries were closed for holidays.⁵² In Gornja Ježevica, women found time to collect the necessary wool, but could not knit socks for children in a timely manner, leaving it for "one of these days."⁵³ In some villages, such as Gornja Trepča, only the school-age children were invited to the event (for this mistake AFW secretary blamed the local pioneer organisation).⁵⁴ Similar exclusion of non-pupils occurred in Trbušani.⁵⁵ Thus, some local organisers missed the point of the newly established holiday, supposed to engage the entire youth and children population (their parents notwithstanding) into the ideologised commemoration rite.

These shortcomings were noted in the instructions of the Head Committee of AFW of Serbia for the following year's celebrations. Although this report referred to the general situation for entire Serbia, many problems surfacing in Čačak region were also mentioned there, especially the fact that

[T]he experience of last year's festivities has shown that the preparations for New Year's day had not commenced on time, that the celebration did not include all children and that New Year was mostly commemorated in towns, but very sparsely in villages. Moreover, another mishap of last year's celebrations was that there was an insufficient coordination of the activities of all organisations, which were mostly left to youth or AFW.⁵⁶

That central AFW had the intention to avoid this sort of inconveniences for the arrival of 1950 can be seen from the mere fact that instructions were sent to regional committees already on the 21st of November. This time, they were much more detailed and concrete, being adapted to local circumstances, not to the idealised Soviet pattern (although another reason for omitting any reference to the Soviet model could very well be that, since the Yugoslav-Soviet relations had significantly deteriorated in the meantime, it had become absolutely inappropriate to conceive New Year as a cultural practice explicitly imitating that of the Soviets):

This year, the celebration needs to be given a much wider character; it ought to reach our every man, every child. Together with the People's Youth and

⁵² MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Brđanima*, 3.1.1949.

⁵³ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Gornjoj Ježevici Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

⁵⁴ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Gornjoj Trepči Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

⁵⁵ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Trbušanima Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1949.

⁵⁶ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Pismo Glavnog odbora AFŽ Srbije Sreskom i Gradskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 21.11.1949.

other mass organisations (Trade Unions, Veterans' Alliance) festivities should be organised in each village, school, factory, institution, commune and, if possible, in every home.

In regional centres, a focal celebration for best pioneers of towns and villages and for the children of fallen soldiers should be held, as well as celebrations in local organisations with an appropriate artistic program, for which the best cultural workers should be engaged (to write the script for a fairy-tale, to decorate the stage and venue etc). Apart from these celebrations, folk festivities should be organised on squares, in parks and other handy places. People's celebrations should be organised in as many spots as possible. They should not contain artistic repertoire; nice decoration and provided music should suffice.

In towns, one should organise events similar to those held in regional centres – decorate Christmas trees, prepare artistic programs and attempt to include stories from the heroic struggle of our peoples and the construction of our country, where the persona of comrade Tito and other heroes of our liberation struggle and heroes of socialist work shall be specifically emphasised. For this, an officer of the Yugoslav Army, as well as distinguished shock-workers should be contacted.

In all places which have their own army garrison, celebrations need be held in the respective Army Halls or in the garrison halls for the best pioneers and fallen warriors' children.

(...) AFW organisation should undertake the widest possible propaganda to celebrate New Year at home as well, so that mothers make small festivities for their children and present them with gifts.⁵⁷

The novelty here was the expansion of the institutional mechanism for preparing official celebrations, most notably the involvement of the Veteran's Alliance, officers and army venues. This testified to the advanced politicisation of this holiday, as well as to the effort to put it into the militarised context of the self-perpetuating legacy of the People's Liberation Struggle (a concurrent military threat of Soviet invasion notwithstanding). Another interesting point was that AFW was now deliberately encouraging local affiliations not to confine their New Year popularisation endeavours merely to the sphere of public celebrations and officialised commemorative practices, but to start internalising this new holiday in the private domain as well, namely in their own (and subsequently in each and every) home.

On the local level, the organisation went much smoother than the year before. Joint committees of the aforementioned mass organisations were formed in every village, whereas umbrella committees were formed on the level of municipalities, with two AFW activists represented together with relevant trade, communal, educational and welfare-health authorities. AFW representatives' duty was to provide materials for presents and festive meals⁵⁸ (in

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Pismo Sreskog odbora AFŽ Čačak Glavnom odboru AFŽ Srbije*, 16.12.1949.

the subsequent communiqué to all local affiliations, they were instructed to handle the decorating, as well),⁵⁹ while the Veterans' Association was supposed to buy presents for the children of fallen soldiers only. Apart from school performances, there was to be a central event in the hall of the company *Hidrogradnja*, to be jointly set up by AFW and the respective trade union. From each school in the municipality, two best pioneers would be invited to this central celebration.⁶⁰

The AFW municipal committee expressed a deep satisfaction with the way its members understood this year's celebration. Already eight days before the events, there were lively preparations underway, in clear contrast with the previous year's last-minute haste. Even the fact that 217 kg of candies, promised by the Municipal Committee, were eventually not delivered, could not spoil the positive atmosphere in the collectives.⁶¹ The official part of the program now lasted slightly longer (in case of school in Donja Atenica for four hours)⁶² and involved more refined and better prepared elements, such as the dramatic performance of excerpts from literary pieces by Branko Ćopić, as well as dramatisations of the fairy-tales *Cinderella* and *Abu Khazam's Slippers*, specifically written for this occasion. In almost every village, dozens of women took part not only in preparation efforts (such as decoration), but also in collecting provisions (cakes, chicken meat, bread) and money contributions for necessities which ought to be bought. In some schools, parents themselves brought hot meals from home, thus showcasing their active participation in celebrations. It is interesting to note that in some villages the gift-giving character was not *Deda Mraz*, but the white-clad Snowman (*Sneško Belić*). In Gornja Trepča, he even had his apprentices, who informed every child about his good and bad deeds during the previous year, and instructed them how to be a better pioneer in the forthcoming year.⁶³

The municipal celebration encompassed 50 of the best pioneers selected from village schools for the event held in a specially decorated hall, where "our leaders' pictures" were hung above the fir Christmas tree. After guests were presented with packages containing school utensils and fruit, the leader of the municipal pioneer organisation held a speech on the topic of life as a child in new Yugoslavia and the importance of New Year as a moment of internal assessment and configuration of plans for the future. After this part of the event,

⁵⁹ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Pismo Sreskog odbora AFŽ Čačak Sreskom odboru*, 17.12.1949.

⁶⁰ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Pismo Sreskog odbora AFŽ Čačak Glavnom odboru AFŽ Srbije*, 16.12.1949.

⁶¹ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Sreskog odbora AFŽ Čačak Oblasnom odboru AFŽ Titovo Užice*, 18.1.1950.

⁶² MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Mesnog odbora AFŽ u Donjoj Atenici Sreskom odboru AFŽ Čačak*, 2.1.1950.

⁶³ MIAČ, Fond AFŽ, k-3, *Izveštaj Sreskog odbora AFŽ Čačak Oblasnom odboru AFŽ Titovo Užice*, 18.1.1950.

there was to be a joint program for village pioneers together with those from the town of Čačak. However, the latter came without any supervision from their teachers and caused a terrible lack of discipline and order, which eventually spoiled the joy of the whole day for the guests from the countryside.⁶⁴

In the following years, the socialist mass organisations insisted on extensively promoting New Year celebrations and the pertaining traditions among the population, as yet another confirmation of a sharp and ubiquitous discontinuity with the pre-socialist heritage (which kept lingering in the private domain nevertheless). Concurrently, the New Year imagery, such as decorated fir Christmas trees and Santa Claus, became “keyed” in the official discourse as symbols of an alleged antipode to the demonised embodiments of Christianity and Serbian traditionalism, with which Christmas and Yuletide customs were particularly impregnated. Thus, 280 fir trees were sold in December 1957 alone, while the next New Year’s season saw the increase in this demand to 470, with a simultaneous 40 percent increase in the sales of Christmas tree decorations.⁶⁵ The most blatant proof of success of this festive evolution can be seen in the field of everyday jargon, where the expression “Christmas holidays” (describing the full set of winter holidays) came to be replaced with the phrase “New Year holidays.”

3. Conclusions: New Holiday For a New (Wo)Man. 1st January as a Portent of a New Age

In the first several years of their rule, Yugoslav communists displayed a surprisingly mild attitude towards the remnants of religiosity and traditional rites in public sphere, given their strong ideological grounding on Marxism and the ideas of “state atheism.” Reasons for this ideological lenience were manifold. First, their position in power was still not firm enough, and was contested by both internal and external factors, making an open confrontation with religious organisations and believers undesirable. Second, even the most rigid ideologues could not underestimate the contribution of part of the clergy to the People’s Liberation Struggle. Moreover, the fact that many prominent communists derived from a rural and strongly patriarchal socio-cultural background should not be underestimated when explaining their initial reluctance to make a sharp discontinuity with “outdated” socio-cultural practices. Third, the priority in the first post-war years was the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country, requiring mobilisation of all available social forces as long as they were not strong enough to question the very foundations of the new regime. Therefore, a *détente* of the sorts ensued, reflecting itself, among

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Timotijević 2009: 156-157.

other spheres, in everyday life and collective festive ceremonies. Thus, it was not a mere paradox that folk rites connected with religious holidays were still freely practiced and publicly promoted. Some holidays were put in a new context and given a brand new meaning. This was best exemplified by the activities of the Antifascist Front of Women, in connection to *Materice* celebrations from 1945 until 1948. It can be said that the "old wine" of a religious family holiday signifying emotional bond between mother and children was poured into "new bottles" and reiterated as a symbol of female emancipation and social activism, aimed at building a new society and imbuing the up-and-coming generations with the new vision of future.

However, a wave of ideological rigidity swept all countries under the Soviet sphere of influence in 1948, aiming to eradicate remnants of the pluralist façade still lingering after the end of the Second World War. In the Yugoslav case, this was the period when the forced industrialisation, political purges and often violent collectivisation in the countryside were at its highest. The demotion of religious holidays from the status of state holidays, as well as pushing religious freedoms to the margins of social life, left an identity vacuum which had to be filled with new contents, susceptible to tempering the "new" socialist man. Popularisation of New Year festivities (supposed not only to mark the calendar year's end, but also to symbolise the new beginning as a ubiquitous simulacrum for the new socialist society) should be put into this context, as just one of the measures supposed to fill this identity void, together with other novelties such as youth labour actions, communist mass celebrations (i.e. Youth Day), the system of socialist competitions, shock-work etc. The lucid fact that the first "forced" New Year celebration in Čačak was modelled after the Soviet pattern at the same time when Yugoslavia entered a far-reaching conflict with USSR can be understood as much as an irony of history as the contingency of an unfortunate timing. Already from 1949, the absence of mentioning the Soviet role-model speaks volumes about the depth of this diplomatic rupture.

This article shows it was not a coincidence that women, as one of the social groups which benefited the most from the socialist emancipation efforts, were chosen to be the main agents for diffusing the new ritual practices. Their active role in engaging other segments of the population in celebrations served to make the public presence of the female mass organisation more visible and tangible. Moreover, since women's social position was traditionally associated with private sphere of family home, the "new" socialist women, "extracted" from such patriarchal seclusion, also represented a liminal medium through which the external influence of the official ideology could be "injected" into the more elusive and resistant domain of individual families. Therefore, AFW's main endeavour in this respect was to inscribe the *tabula rasa* of new generations with the "appropriate" cognitive content, consecutively expanding the field of social activity of women in general. Simultaneously, parents were (at

least indirectly and subliminally) exposed to the socialist discourse. These were gradual steps for the Party to eventually blur the boundary between the public and private spheres. The 1949 instructions to expand the celebrations from schools to the privacy of home testify to that intention.

Small-scaled studies like the one presented here can offer an illuminating glimpse into social mechanisms underlying everyday practices and often hidden layers of meaning attached to personal and collective agency. It also reveals the implicit channels through which the socialist authorities attempted to empower Yugoslav women who, on the other hand, willingly embraced their newfound public activism and in return helped disseminating the new revolutionary meta-narrative. The political role of festivities as a discursive practice diffusing ideological contents (already touched upon in existing literature) obscured a farther-reaching undercover social role of restructuring social order and forging a new system of interpersonal networks and allegiances. On a larger level, women and men alike (with their offspring), both behind the stage as organisers and in front of it as spectators, entered an affective relationship with the ideology as a discourse, in which mental maps navigating individuals' non-linguistic relationship to the world and its hierarchy were redefined.⁶⁶ Concurrently, the analysis of local New Year celebrations shows the concealed strands and rather tortuous paths of historical continuity, as reflected merely in a gradual (re)ritualisation of ideology, often impeding the rupture effect of the revolutionary *Nullpunkt* on the process of forging a new identity discourse and curtailing power of religious affiliations. Turning the calendar page was charged not only with the dissolution of the previous year's mistakes and under-achievements, but with the potential to symbolise the dissolution of old social norms and the chance to collectively create new ones.

However, what remains to be seen is other groups' perception of modern rituals containing traits of liminality (especially that of youth and children as primary target groups), as well as the rituals' evolution during a longer time-span, in order to disentangle the influence of various social phenomena and historical processes on the practical application of the rituals' ideological credo. Future research should also focus more on the internal links between New Year as a ritual that transcended temporality of socialism, and other Yugoslav political rituals (as well as their versions in other socialist countries), especially the ones aimed at transcending and reconstructing Yugoslav space as a set of *loci* of history through corporeal movement (i.e. Youth Baton, pioneer marches).

Perhaps the inexorable wave of the Western-centred globalisation, which did not avoid a single corner of the globe in the second half of the 20th century, would have contributed to the popularisation of New Year celebration and pertaining symbols in countries like Yugoslavia anyway. Yet, as this microhistorical study has shown, internalisation of the holiday among the populations

⁶⁶ Grossberg 1993, 80.

of socialist countries bore a distinct political importance and a teleologically conceptualised connotation, idiosyncratic to that ideological system. All the more peculiar was the construction of the New Year's "traditionality" in light of the already existing and mutually competing collective identity markers, as seen from the officially supported syncretism of tradition-oriented Orthodox rites and the future-oriented communist rhetoric. It is all but ironic that, even though the grand socialist project had catastrophically failed in the meantime (in Yugoslavia particularly harshly) and that religion had made an omnipresent comeback to public sphere, New Year persists as a widely accepted collective ritual practice, although within a rather different narrative, namely that of the Western-oriented capitalist globalisation process under the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.

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