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“No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!”

Social Integration, Mobilization and Cooperation in Yugoslav Youth Brigades. The Example of Čačak Region Brigades (1946–1952)

In this article I analyze the organizational mechanism of youth labor projects and the place of ideology and agitation-propaganda in the everyday lives of young laborers. I adopt a local micro-historical perspective in my analysis of the organization, documented activities and everyday functioning of youth brigades from the Čačak region of Serbia that participated in the earliest labor projects in Yugoslavia (1946–1952). The documentation on the brigades reveals omnipresent Party surveillance of brigadiers (with the ultimate aim of selecting the most “appropriate” elements for Party membership), but it also offers a glimpse into the ambivalent attitudes of youths (ranging from passive resistance to conformist participation and cooperation). The daily routine of brigade life helps further reflection on emancipatory and modernizing effects that transformed local society and proved notably more far-reaching and long-lasting than the superficial effects of agitprop efforts.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, labor actions, Čačak, youth, agitprop, shock workers

Voluntary youth labor actions organized by Yugoslav socialist authorities stemmed from the twofold set of influences, global and local. The most important external role model on which the Yugoslav projects were based was the Soviet *Stakhanovite* movement, together with the system of “shock-work,” public works and competitions, common to all socialist countries and the interwar corporatist societies.¹ The local roots were sought in the pre-modern tradition of communal labor during harvests (*moba*) and the antifascist resistance in the Užice region (Serbia) and Sanička dolina (Bosnia), where locals helped the partisan army by harvesting crops within the range of German artillery in 1941/42.² Upon liberation, a wave of initiatives aimed at providing winter fuel and clearing the war debris was instigated by the United Alliance of Antifascist

1 See Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR 1935–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2 Predrag M. Anastasijević, *Voluntary Labour Actions of the Yugoslav Youth* (New Delhi: Tanjug, 1952), 6; Srećko Mihailović and Grujica Spasović, *Tito, radne akcije. Stvaraoci neodoljivog poleta* (Belgrade: Istraživačko-izdavački centar Saveza socijalističke omladine Srbije, 1979), 11–13.

Youth of Yugoslavia³ during the winter 1944/45.⁴ The network of similar local initiatives quickly spread among youths in liberated parts of Yugoslavia. This was just a prelude to grand infrastructural projects for which the voluntary youth labor was used as an asset of reconstruction and industrialization processes.

The first federally supported project was the “Youth Railway” Brčko–Banovići, which connected the fertile wheat fields of Vojvodina and Slavonia with coal mines in central Bosnia. From May until November 1946, over 62,000 members of the People’s Youth of Yugoslavia, with very little in the way of proper machinery, completed the railway 22 days before the deadline. The following year saw an even greater endeavor, the construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway, which was built by over 210,000 Yugoslav and 5,000 foreign youths.⁵ However, the most ambitious projects on the federal level were the construction of the Zagreb–Belgrade stretch of the Brotherhood and Unity Highway and the building of the city of New Belgrade.⁶ Together with numerous labor projects on the federal and local level, over one-million Yugoslav youths participated in the country’s reconstruction and fulfillment of the First Five Year Plan,⁷ with an astounding rate of 80 percent of eligible youngsters applying to work as part of the labor brigades.⁸

Already in 1950, some Yugoslav politicians and economists criticized this system for its alleged financial inefficiency, as well as for its potentially anti-industrial over-emphasis on manual labor. Consequently, there was a halt in federally backed projects beginning in 1952 and lasting until 1958, when the initiatives were reinvigorated with the construction of a new stretch of the Brotherhood and Unity Highway. The financial burden and the organizational complexity of federal actions were always weighed against their benefits for the Yugoslav regime. Although the maintenance of youth camps and the organization of brigadiers’ extra-labor activities cost far more than the hiring and lodging of qualified workers, Tito never underestimated the value of such endeavors for

3 This mass organization was renamed the People’s Youth (*Narodna omladina*) in May 1946.

4 *Beograd – Grad akcijaša* (Belgrade: Gradska konferencija Saveza socijalističke omladine Beograda, 1985), 18.

5 Mihailović and Srećković, *Stvaraoci neodoljivog poleta*, 23–27, 29–31, 114.

6 Slobodan Selinić, “Omladina gradi Jugoslaviju (Savezne omladinske radne akcije u Jugoslaviji 1946–1963),” *Arhin, Časopis Arbina Srbije i Crne Gore* 1–2 (2005): 88–89.

7 Slobodan Selinić, “Počeci Novog Beograda – prva faza izgradnje Novog Beograda 1947–1950,” *Tokovi istorije* 4 (2007): 75.

8 Srećko Mihailović, *Omladinske radne akcije. Rezultati socioloških istraživanja* (Belgrade: Istraživačko-izdavački centar Saveza socijalističke omladine Srbije, 1985), 9–10.

the ideological indoctrination of young Yugoslavs, whose loyalty was won by offering them professional, social and intellectual resources otherwise unavailable in their native environment. He believed that these expensive and demanding activities had to be provided to the brigades, should a sufficient recruitment rate be achieved, because “if youngsters are given only shovels and cramps, no one will go.” A strikingly militarized atmosphere in the camps was not a coincidence for Tito, since “people forged through work can hold on through every struggle, be it in work or in war.” Labor projects were an intrinsic part of the socialist project of creating a new man, a place “where the new people are forged, with a new understanding of work.”⁹

In this article, I analyze the “first wave” of youth labor projects as one of the tools of power in the creation of a sense of belonging to a cohesive multinational community of Yugoslavs during the immediate postwar period. Voluntary youth work was not only a convenient means to secure free labor for ambitious infrastructural projects, but also a “social adhesive,” aimed at bringing together youths from the most distant parts of the country in order to disseminate the ideological tenet of “brotherhood and unity” between various representatives of the Yugoslav nationalities. The primary role of members of the younger generations in this process was that of a far-sighted, “tempered” (but in the long run also “tempering”) political and social consolidator of the new system, which ultimately was supposed to solidify the newly re-conceptualized social relations and power structures, simultaneously internalizing the omnipresent revolutionary ideological narrative. Youth projects also served to enable the authorities to select a reliable future party cadre, ultimately expanding the Communist Party’s support basis. On the other hand, brigadiers used the projects as opportunities to gain otherwise unavailable material, social and educational resources and improve their chances for upward social mobility. The very act of volunteering for socialist reconstruction projects (although the truly voluntary nature of brigadiers’ recruitment in this period was always in question) entailed the youths’ implicit cooperation with the regime, the ideological “pills” of which were (willingly) swallowed, along with far more significant and longer-lasting benefits of emancipation and education.

I will examine the role of these projects by embedding a local micro-perspective of brigades sent from the region of Čačak (Serbia) during the reconstruction and First Five Year Plan actions (1946–1952) within the broader

9 Mihailović and Spasović, *Stvaraoći neodoljivog poleta*, 21–31.

postwar historical context in Yugoslavia, as well as within the already existing body of scholarly work. The article's shifting analytical focus, swinging between the official "top-down" and the local experience helps shed new light on the ambivalent relationship between the power-holding center and the potency of the agency of individual subjects in the circumstances of an overarching socio-political transformation. Thus, I explore the non-dichotomous character of the interaction between the "regulating" state and the "regulated" society, which was highly ambivalent and often a contingent process. The brigades under discussion came from the central Serbian municipalities (*srez*) of Ljubić-Trnava, Dragačevo and Rudnik, as well as from the towns of Kraljevo and Čačak. The following federal actions were included in the analysis: the Brčko–Banovići railway (1946), the Šamac–Sarajevo railway (1947), the construction of New Belgrade (1948–1950), the Brotherhood and Unity Highway (1948–1950), the Doboj–Banja Luka railway (1951) and the Konjic–Jablanica railway (1952). I analyze various features of organizational mechanisms and everyday modes of social integration, including recruitment process, motivational concepts of "shock status," the screening of brigadiers for prospective Party membership, the involving of brigadiers in an array of physical, educational and cultural activities with a strong modernizing pretext, and the creation of trans-ethnic and trans-national social networks through contacts with peers from other republics and countries.

Until the first decade of this century, historical works dealing with Yugoslav youth labor projects were surprisingly sparse, probably because of the general post-socialist disinterest in the history of labor movements, a topic too closely entwined with the perceived communist utilization of science. Special monographs dedicated to individual actions, albeit devoid of much analytical value, remain an important source of information on the organizational setup of brigades, as well as sources of statistical data. They were usually published to honor anniversaries of certain projects, as well as to promote the ideologies on which these projects were based.¹⁰ Sociologists Rudi Supek and Srećko Mihailović did significant research concerning youth's perceptions and motivational factors. However, their research mostly referred to the later phase of labor projects

10 Anastasijević, *Voluntary Labour Actions; Beograd – Grad akcijaša*; Mihailović and Spasović, *Stvaraoši neodoljivog poleta*; *Radne akcije Narodne omladine Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Centralni komitet Narodne omladine Hrvatske, 1949); *Udarnici prve smene graditelja omladinske pruge* (Belgrade: Novo pokolenje, 1946). In this respect, a recently published monograph containing basic information on all labor actions in socialist Yugoslavia should be mentioned for its anthological comprehensiveness, despite its analytical dearth: Slobodan V. Ristanović, *To su naših ruku dela. Herojska i slavna epopeja omladinskih radnih akcija 1941–1990* (Belgrade: Kosmos, 2014).

and is of little relevance to the period discussed here.¹¹ Very important recent contributions to the historiography on labor actions, both because of the wealth of data they include and because of their analytical value, are found in Slobodan Selinić's articles and Saša Vejzagić's MA thesis.¹² The importance of this secondary literature notwithstanding, however, the main sources for this article were youth labor brigades' records kept at the Regional Historical Archives of Čačak, as well as the personal collection of lawyer Velimir Cvetić, a communist activist from Čačak and the commander of a 1946 brigade. I also used the relevant press coverage from the heavily ideologized local weekly *Slobodni glas*, which was published by the local Popular Front branch.

Organizational and Recruitment Mechanisms

Brigades from Čačak region, apart from their municipal designation (i.e. *ljubičko-trnavska*), were usually named after distinguished local communists or war heroes. Thus, the first brigades sent in 1946 were named after Ratko Mitrović and Bata Janković. On the other hand, high school brigades from the town of Čačak got their name in honor of Rade Azanjac, a 20-year-old political commissar shot in late 1941. Brigades were serially numbered, promoting the idea of a continuous and seemingly constant outflow of youth workforce to dispersed construction sites across the country. This way, the new regime tried to enforce its own traditions, drawn from the historical legacy of the persecution of communists in the interwar period and their subsequent fight against the occupiers and quislings, thereby passing these traditions on to generations that had been too young to have had personal experience of these events.¹³

The “Ratko Mitrović” and “Bata Janković” brigades, which are best documented in the available sources, attracted predominantly (although not exclusively) agricultural youth from villages around Čačak, most of whom had already completed their education and thus were not tied to the school year

11 Mihailović, *Omladinske radne akcije*; Rudi Supek, *Omladina na putu do bratstva. Psihosociologija radne akcije* (Belgrade: Mladost, 1963).

12 Slobodan Selinić, “Život na omladinskim radnim akcijama u Jugoslaviji 1946–1963,” *Arhiv, Časopis Arhiva Srbije i Crne Gore* 1–2 (2007): 119–37; Slobodan Selinić, “Omladina gradi Jugoslaviju”; Saša Vejzagić, “The Importance of Youth Labor Actions in Socialist Yugoslavia: A Case Study of the Motorway ‘Brotherhood and Unity,’” (MA thesis, Central European University, 2013).

13 “Ratko Mitrović” brigades even had a slogan: “We bear his [Ratko Mitrović's] name, the whole brigade is proud of him!” (“Ratka Mitrovića mi nosimo ime, cela brigada ponosi se njime!”), *Slobodni glas*, August 3, 1946, 2.

schedule. They usually left for campsites in spring and late autumn, when the agricultural season allowed. The “Rade Azanjac” brigades mostly consisted of teenagers with urban and non-agricultural backgrounds who studied and lived in Čačak. They would be dispatched in July and August, when schools were not in session.¹⁴ It was not uncommon, especially in 1946/47, for the returning brigades to be greeted with lush public celebrations and agitprop slogans in the town center.



Figure 1. Citizens of Čačak await the return of the local brigade from Bosnia, November 1946
(Source: Regional Historical Archives of Čačak)

Youngsters from the neighboring town of Kraljevo were also part of Čačak brigades until 1949, when they started to form their own brigades.¹⁵ As far as the practical meaning of the term “youth” is concerned, the documents show that most brigadiers were between 16 and 25 years of age, although there were some exceptional cases of brigade members being in their late 20s and even early 40s.¹⁶

14 D.Z., “Treća ORB ‘Ratko Mitrović’ otišla na izgradnju Omladinske pruge,” *Slobodni glas*, September 7, 1946, 6.

15 Dušan V. Janičijević, *Dobrovoljni rad omladine Kraljeva* (Kraljevo: JP PTT Srbija, 1999), 61.

16 In brigades from other parts of Yugoslavia there were documented cases of brigadiers who were younger than fifteen (even twelve years old), probably due to the desperate insistence of the local organization on fulfilling the prescribed quotas (Selinić, “Omladina gradi Jugoslaviju,” 91; Selinić, “Počeci Novog Beograda,” 93).

Mobilizing youth for labor actions was a complex task for mass organizations since it had to be (or at least seem to have been) performed strictly on a non-coercive basis. Yet, the Party's youth organization, the Union of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*, hereafter: SKOJ),¹⁷ and other organizers set ambitious plans with territorial recruitment quotas. These quotas depended on various specificities of the respective areas (for example, in regions with numerous ethnic minorities, organizers were not expected to draw in big numbers because the loyalties of the local populations were sometimes in question).¹⁸ Due to the centralized nature of establishing quotas, local SKOJ branches were often in a tricky situation. On the one hand, they needed to attract the required number of brigadiers, but on the other hand, it was an imperative that these youths apply voluntarily. There were many (albeit not numerous) cases of coercive collective recruitment, especially in regions notorious for their anti-Party stance.¹⁹ Moreover, certain categories of prisoners were also taken to construction sites as a part of their sentences, and some youths, such as 36 men from Kraljevo, fulfilled their military service obligations by participating in the construction of the Šabac–Zvornik railway.²⁰

Although blatant force was not permitted (at least nominally), it can be assumed that multifaceted informal means of persuasion were used to increase the number of brigadiers. In the countryside, agitprop units developed extensive propaganda aimed at presenting labor actions as a catalyst for social mobility and a life-enriching experience, which would in no way handicap the families of the youths during periods of seasonal work (they were promised help with house chores while children would be away).²¹ Schoolchildren were recruited through a web of students who were either SKOJ members or had already

17 In 1948, SKOJ and the People's Youth merged into one youth supra-organization, keeping the latter's name.

18 Selinić, “Omladina gradi Jugoslaviju,” 91–92, 95.

19 Vežzagić, “Motorway ‘Brotherhood and Unity,’” 53–55. Selinić emphasizes the almost military nature of the recruitment process (not the least because in the sources themselves recruitment is often referred to as “mobilization”) (Selinić, “Počeci Novog Beograda,” 81).

20 Jančićjević, *Rad omladine Kraljeva*, 95.

21 In the villages of Atenica, Katrga and Rošci, the local commanders' forceful method of agitation was stigmatized as “unpolitical” and “hostile,” but it was also pointed out that “we still need a sufficient number of youths” (“Budući zadaci osnovnih organizacija ljubičko-trnavskog sreza po pitanju formiranja frontovskih radnih brigada,” *Slobodni glas*, June 10, 1949, 2). However, a quote from the local newspaper vividly depicts the indirect and informal methods of pressure that were employed to entice youths: “There should be no youngster who would not apply for the Youth Railway construction!” (B. Kostić, “Do 16. aprila treba izvršiti izbor omladinaca,” *Slobodni glas*, April 12, 1946, 6).

participated in such projects, as well as teachers who organized special lectures on the importance of the initiatives. Students who were doing poorly in their studies were attracted by prospects of special assistance in preparing for their make-up exams while the projects were underway.²²

At first, collective agitation was the most widespread recruitment method, entailing group lectures and promotion. However, the Party realized that this approach did not bear satisfactory results, so SKOJ members were urged to undertake more personalized, individual agitation, designing specific means of persuasion and motivational factors for each potential brigadier. This was especially important for schoolchildren, who often failed to apply because of their parents' reluctance (to the great dismay of local commissars).²³ Still, the Čačak branch of SKOJ had no major problems fulfilling their quotas. The first brigade sent to the Youth Railway in 1946 (initially supposed to gather 200 brigadiers) had 275 members selected from a pool of 350 applicants, including one who had been rejected but who then had to be accepted after he refused to get off the train to Brčko.²⁴ Brigades were divided into troops (*čete*), usually hosting around 50 brigadiers each. The surprisingly high number of 1,331 brigadiers in 1946 increased SKOJ's ambitions, and the planned 1947 quota was raised to 3,000 youths. This target proved easy to reach as well, since in early March the quota for Čačak was surpassed by 40 applicants.²⁵ Village brigades usually had more members than the high school ones (counting up to 400 youths) due to their demographic prevalence.

Although the enthusiastic reports by SKOJ officials have to be taken with a grain of salt, it is obvious that it was a matter of prestige for local leaders not merely to fulfill their quotas, but also to have as great a percentage as possible of the youths of their settlements apply. According to these reports, in some villages, such as Mršinci, every eligible youngster applied for local or federal actions, and in

22 Vežagić, "Motorway 'Brotherhood and Unity,'" 51. In Čačak, the possibility of being accepted to labor projects was used as a motivational factor for bad students to improve their school marks (D. Grbić, "U našem odeljenju prijavilo se 29 učenika," *Slobodni glas*, March 15, 1947, 2).

23 S.A., "Školska omladina Čačka učestvovala na izgradnji auto-puta Bratstvo-Jedinstvo," *Slobodni glas*, May 9, 1948, 4. Every attempt on the part of parents to prevent their children from participating in labor actions (or mass organizations in general) was strongly condemned (I. Pešić, "O pogrešnom odnosu roditelja prema svojoj deci i omladinskim organizacijama," *Slobodni glas*, October 1, 1948, 3).

24 B. Kostić, "Do 16. aprila treba izvršiti izbor omladinaca za sastav radne brigade koja će uzeti učešća na u radovima na izgradnji omladinske pruge," *Slobodni glas*, April 12, 1946, 6; P.Đ., "275 omladinaca našeg okruga gradi omladinsku prugu," *Slobodni glas*, May 8, 1946, 6.

25 Milisav Đurić, "Izgradnja nove omladinske pruge Šamac–Sarajevo najveći zadatak omladine u 1947. godini," *Slobodni glas*, January 16, 1947, 2; "Omladina okruga čačanskog sprema se za omladinsku prugu Šamac–Sarajevo," *Slobodni glas*, March 8, 1947, 3.

Opaljenica the application rate was 96 percent.²⁶ Despite the possibility of these numbers being inflated, internal brigade records show no hints of understaffing problems. Moreover, the fact that many 15-year-old applicants had to be rejected from drafts clearly shows that the youth of the Čačak region saw labor projects as a unique opportunity to improve their social, political and material standing under the new system (as well as to widen their career prospects), despite all probable forms of formal and informal pressure to volunteer. Despite the Party’s nominal dissatisfaction with agitation results, the prescribed quotas were always surpassed, significant differences between the republics notwithstanding.²⁷ Yet, the success of the recruitment efforts should be credited not only to the enthusiasm or pragmatism of the youth, but also to SKOJ branches intentionally setting low quotas for fear of failing to meet them. The organizers were always pleased to accept more brigadiers than originally sought, although this simultaneously burdened them with additional board and lodging costs (which could have contributed to the temporary halt in the organization of federal projects from 1952 until 1958).

Becoming a Shock-Worker

Immediately after the revolution, the Yugoslav authorities introduced the system of competitions and shock-worker awards (*udarništvo*) to develop a culture of adulation of work, as well as to promote agency channels through which the working class could prove their devotion to the new order and be motivated to contribute to its solidification. This system, although it took its name from the Russian term for strike work (*udarniki*), was a virtual copy of the *Stakhanovite* movement developed in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1930s.²⁸ Just as the Soviet precursor was named after the most prolific miner, Alexei Stakhanov, the Yugoslav version came to be best known by the name of the Bosnian Roma miner Alija Sirotanović, who allegedly broke the coal mining world record in 1949. Since the *udarništvo* movement and system of competitions was introduced

26 “Na smotri u Čačku uzelo je učešća preko 4000 omladinaca iz sreza i grada,” *Slobodni glas*, April 2, 1948, 3; M.D. Rajčević, “Omladina moravičkog sreza u ovoj godini već je dala oko 7000 radnih dana na raznim lokalnim radovima,” *Slobodni glas*, April 2, 1948, 3.

27 For instance, the 1949 quota was surpassed by 27 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina and only by 3.7 percent in Slovenia (Vežagić, “Motorway ‘Brotherhood and Unity,’” 52–53).

28 The term *udarniki* was widely used in the Soviet Union to designate shock brigades and workers prior to the institutionalization of the Stakhanovite system in 1935. Since the culture of productivity was introduced in Yugoslavia only after World War II, different systems of shock-work were not distinguished in Serbo-Croatian, but were jointly grouped under the label *udarništvo*.

in all production activities in the country, it was also an inseparable feature of youth actions. Work tasks in camps were usually set according to “decimal plans” (*dekadni planovi*, lasting 10 days), at the end of which the most industrious brigade (*udarna brigada*), as well as individual workers (*udarnici*), would be proclaimed.

In order to become a so-called shock-worker, one had to surpass the work norm by 20 percent continuously. If case there were no specified norm, one had to surpass the common work result of the brigade by 30 percent. Brigadiers could also gain the status of shock-worker by applying measures through which 10 percent of the raw materials, fuel or work hours could be saved, or by introducing innovative techniques and methods that improved overall efficiency. The shock-worker status lasted for three months. During that time, in addition to enjoying prestige and respect, the individuals who had been given the award also got convenient material benefits, including better meals, shopping coupons, discounts for various goods, etc.²⁹ These benefits explain the often fierce competition among brigadiers at a worksite, as well as the obsessions of commanders with their brigade attaining the shock status. Although allegedly even Tito expressed concern that this insistence on surpassing norms would harm the health of the youths,³⁰ the brigade documents show that competition and the striving for more were the order of the day in literally every brigade. Typical is the quote of one brigadier at the Youth Railway: “Look, I have 34 blisters. I have never had them before. Tell the others not to be afraid of blisters. No one here is afraid of blisters or work!”³¹ Although the percentage of shock-workers varied according to the respective brigade’s work efficiency, available shock-workers’ lists show that seven to twelve percent of the Čačak brigades were declared shock-workers at some point.³²

Still, the workers had to participate in the competition in a comradely spirit, lest the rivalries lead to internal hostilities or intrigues among brigadiers. Overemphasizing one’s own work contributions and effort was strongly looked down upon, if not outright condemned by commanders. Such was the case of a

29 Međupostinski istorijski arhiv u Čačku (hereafter: MIAČ), fond Omladinske radne brigade (hereafter: ORB), kutija 2, fascikla 3, *Udarnička legitimacija Nikolić Nikole iz Donje Trepče, December 5, 1948*.

30 Mihailović and Spasović, *Stvaraoci neodoljivog poleta*, 34. One of the reasons for such excessive toiling was also the authorities’ pragmatic insistence during the period of reconstruction that the work effect of unpaid workers should be five times greater than that of paid workers, see Momčilo Mitrović, *Izgnubljene iluzije. Prilozi za društvenu istoriju Srbije 1944–1952* (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 1997), 19.

31 B.M., “Orlova Stena, radni logor čačanske brigade,” *Slobodni glas*, August 30, 1946, 3.

32 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-4, *Opšta arhiva 1. čačanske srednjoškolske ORB “Rade Azanjac,” Ruma, July–August 1948*. This is a somewhat lower percentage compared to the overall average for the whole New Belgrade project, during which every seventh brigadier became a shock-worker (Selinić, “Počeci Novog Beograda,” 86).

24-year-old brigadier who (apparently trying to make up for being put in a high-school brigade at such a late age) “had an tendency to show off blisters on his hands and dirt on his suit, overall one sick ambition for a shock-worker’s badge.”³³ On another note, 20-year-old Pantelija Glišović, despite having surpassed norms by 70 percent, was criticized in personal evaluations for “not being an agitator.”³⁴ The order of Main Headquarters of youth brigades on the construction of the Konjic–Jablanica railway in 1952 indicates that the overt enthusiasm (or the unconcealed ambition of their commanders) of some brigades to gain shock-worker status could eventually prove detrimental to the overall work dynamic. The youths were forbidden to work longer than the usual seven hours without the Headquarters’ prior approval, due to bad effect this would have on the overall performance.³⁵ This case represents an interesting official condemnation of an exaggerated work ethic, quite unlike the usual public shaming of lazy brigadiers or those who invested less in their work than they were supposedly capable of.

Selecting the New Cadre

Brigade commanders, by unwritten rule Party members, wrote personal evaluations for each brigadier in order to support or hinder his or her nomination for SKOJ membership. These evaluations had a template-like character, with an established pattern for data input: year/place of birth, nationality, social background, family standing during the war, (non)participation in the Liberation Struggle. Furthermore, the categories for personal impressions consisted of: attitude towards authority, physical effort at work, treatment of state property, conduct with other brigadiers, activity in classes, proneness to (self)criticism and notes on private life. Evaluations concluded with the commander’s opinion on whether the respective comrade was eligible to become a SKOJ member.³⁶

33 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-4, *Karakteristike brigadira 1. čačanske srednjoškolske brigade “Rade Azanjac” (1948).*

34 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-3, *Kratke biografije predložjenih.*

35 MIAČ, ORB, k-1, f-4, *Odluka o zabrani prekovremenog rada, July 23, 1952.*

36 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-1, *Karakteristike brigadira*, f-2, *Prozivnik 2. ljubičko-trnavske brigade*; k-3, f-2, *Knjiga karakteristika brigadira 2. ljubičko-trnavske brigade (1948)*; f-3, *Karakteristike brigadira 1. srednjoškolske ORB Rade Azanjac (1948)*; MIAČ, Lični fond Velimira Cvetića (hereafter: VC), *Karakteristike par članova*. Particularly interesting is the fact that brigade commanders put a high value on the contribution of brigadiers (or the lack thereof) to overall socialization within the barracks. Thus, the strongest remarks in some evaluations would be: “in crowds, he was closed off and introverted,” “he is many comrades’ favorite character,” “not serious in conversations with other brigadiers,” “he was always moody when among others,” “she was popular for her jolliness and her decent, comradely life and behavior”. MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-1, *Karakteristike brigadira 11. srpske brigade, Železnik (1947).*

These documents represent a particularly valuable source, helping historians reconstruct different demographic structures of labor volunteers and testifying to the Party's ever-watchful eye. In compiling their evaluations, commanders paid due attention to the conduct of members of the brigadiers' families during the war, as well as to their current standing towards the Communist Party and "the state of today." One of the more revealing cases was that of a 17-year-old Mileta Čvrkić, nephew of the interwar minister of posts Vojko Čvrkić (known to have supported a rival *četnik* movement³⁷ during the war). Although Mileta's characteristics were judged in a positive light, "special wariness" had to be paid to his education, because he "was surrounded by people with a negative attitude, who could tarnish his righteous development."³⁸ In several other evaluations, the family's attachment to *četnik* movement, which was equated with having "rebel bandits" for relatives or clinging to "reactionary attitudes," was mentioned as a potentially disruptive factor in the rearing of a youth. There was even a case of a former policeman who was fired and expelled from the Party after having beaten up one "reactionary" woman. This policeman went to the Brčko–Banovići action to atone for and recover from his past mistakes.³⁹ However, there were relatively few cases of brigadiers being explicitly considered unreliable on the basis of their family's political affiliations. A probable reason was that individuals coming from extremely hostile families would not volunteer for labor projects anyway and even if they did, their applications most probably would not have been accepted. Still, members of more "benignly hostile" families were accepted to brigades. This can be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the Party to "inject" itself into these families through their offspring or, conversely, as an attempt on the part of the "problematic" families to "whitewash" their past by encouraging participation in the new regime's legitimization.

Available internal documentation of brigade party cells suggest that the cases of resistance and conflict within the brigades most often had a markedly non-political character. The usual incidents occurring at the worksites were mostly

37 *Četnici* is the colloquial term for the monarchist Yugoslav Army in the Homeland (*Jugoslovenska vojska u otadžbini*) that undertook a rebellion against German occupation as early as May 1941, fighting together with partisans until their ideological split in November 1941. They were focused on sparing ethnic Serbs from open confrontations with Nazis, as well as preventing communists from inciting a socialist revolution. Consequently, many *četnik* units entered into tacit collaboration with the Nazi regime, and some commanders ordered severe reprisals against Muslim civilians in Bosnia and Sandžak.

38 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-4, *Karakteristike članova 1. srednjoškolske brigade "Rade Azanjac" (1948)*.

39 To make this case even more bizarre, his brigade commander suspected him of having belonged to *četnici* during the war (MIAČ, VC, *Pismo sreskog komiteta SKOJ Okružnom komitetu u Gornjem Milanovcu, April 29, 1946*).

connected to bad maintenance of tools and the scarcity of machines, as well as violations of conduct, such as walking barefoot or wearing dirty uniforms,⁴⁰ or simply sitting idly and failing to comply with the commander’s orders. At campsites, complaints mostly referred to bad hygiene habits, not making one’s bed, and being late for or avoiding morning gymnastics. Female brigadiers were frequently criticized for using their menstrual cycles as an excuse to stay in the camp for an entire day. One girl was reprimanded for taking leave on the pretext of visiting her ill father at home, but actually in order to celebrate Easter.⁴¹ In the course of the Brčko–Banovići project, a bizarre ideologically grounded “hygienic measure” caused a scandal among the brigade party leaders. A female brigadier, apparently from a better-off family, was the only one in her troop to own a toothbrush. The troop leader “expropriated” the toothbrush from its owner and declared it “common property” to be used by all brigadiers, in line with the collectivist spirit. This order was met with the superiors’ condemnation, both for breaching hygienic norms and for misrepresenting the “socialist lifestyle.” Yet there was no recorded disciplinary proceeding against the overtly diligent commander, nor is there evidence that this “expropriation” was corrected.⁴² However, it showed the extent to which the commanders’ lack of education, coupled with a relentless obedience to authority, could often lead to comical interpretations of the official party doctrines.

On the interpersonal level, conflicts usually derived from teenager pranks (such as smearing toothpaste on a comrade in his or her sleep at night), alcohol consumption (despite a strict ban, brigadiers frequently used their leaves to go to nearby villages and get drunk), or “inappropriate” interaction between male and female comrades. One of the commanders’ frequent concerns was

40 The insufficient number of work uniforms, as well as of basic clothing (trousers, shirts and underwear), caused many problems during the 1946 project, but it seems that in later projects these procurements were much better planned, becoming yet another asset with which to attract poor youths to actions. Several brigadiers were strongly criticized for walking to and from the construction site in old and ragged uniforms, although they had received new ones. The commanders reminded them that they would not be allowed to take the new uniforms home, no matter how well they preserved them, whereas walking through the streets of Belgrade in ragged clothes put the brigade in a bad light and only provided malicious reactionaries with additional arguments. MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-5, *Knjiga dnevne zapovesti 1. čačanske srednjoškolske ORB “Rade Azanjac” od 9.6. do 8.7.1949. i 2. čačanske srednjoškolske ORB “Rade Azanjac” od 8.7. do 5.8.1949.* In the Highway construction camp, there were cases of brigadiers abandoning the brigade without returning their clothes. SKOJ officials back home were instructed to regulate this issue. MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-1, *Spiskovi brigadiru 1. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade (po četama).*

41 MIAČ, VC, *Pribeležke za sastanke (1947).*

42 MIAČ, VC, *Poledina spiska članova SKOJ (1946).*

keeping peace between their campmates and the locals, since cases of theft, drunken brawls or stealing fruit were quite commonplace.⁴³ Cases of workers who were too rowdy with commanders or engaged in (arguably, a rather superficial sort of) dissent and confrontation were very rare and were connected to pragmatic material problems (i.e., brigadiers who were unsatisfied with their accommodation would sarcastically invite Tito to their luxury resort).⁴⁴ One of the rare instances of open vandalism among Čačak brigadiers occurred in 1948, when some youths who had not been provided new footwear tore down the performance graphs as a sign of protest.⁴⁵

One can offer several hypotheses regarding the reasons for this cooperative attitude. Firstly, brigadiers were mostly too young and immature to be actively politically engaged and form their own independent stance towards the communist regime. Secondly, the voluntary nature of the projects (casual, yet non-negligible aberrations of forced recruitment notwithstanding) made the “infiltration of reactionary elements” rather unlikely. Hence, this potential source of dissent and disobedience was apparently missing. Moreover, a great majority of brigadiers came from rather poor and backward areas, ravaged by the war and postwar poverty. Not only did labor projects present an opportunity for them to gain skills, knowledge, and personal contacts that could potentially improve their social status, but for many they were a rare place where they could secure their mere sustenance. Bearing this in mind, it is understandable that the few instances of resistance and conflict with party members and commanders usually derived from trivial reasons pertaining to personal character or simple material needs, rather than from any profound ideological stance or conflict. For most youths, eager participation in state’s reconstruction projects (coupled with occasional, rather unobtrusive resistance) offered much greater benefits and social capital than any sort of open opposition could ever have provided under the circumstances.

43 MIAČ, ORB, k-1, f-4, *Zapažanja dežurnog brigadira (1952)*; MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-4, *Opšta arbiva 1. čačanske srednjoškolske ORB “Rade Azanjac” (July–August, 1948)*.

44 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-3, *Zapisnici sa sastanka štaba i partijske ćelije (1949)*.

45 Some youths also threatened not to prolong their stay in the camp if there would not be more straw for beds and meat for lunch. The Party cell dismissed such complaints, claiming that there were “opportunists” who were taking two meal portions, thus leaving other comrades without any food. MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-3, *Zapisnici sa sastanka štaba i partijske ćelije 5. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade (1948)*.

Youth Education and Politicization

The activities that the Party planned for brigadiers did not come to an end after the seven-hour shifts at the construction sites. The rest of the day was filled with different kinds of additional tasks and programs, which can roughly be grouped into two categories. The first included physical activities aimed at keeping brigadiers fit and increasing their stamina. These activities included regular morning gymnastics, pre-military training, driving lessons, sport matches and athletic competitions. The second group of activities nurtured intellectual and political growth, with a clear intention to educate the youth in various spheres of life and equip them with new skills, yet always within the ideological and theoretical confines of communist dogma. By attempting to engage every single brigadier in as many of these activities as possible, the authorities hoped to disseminate their ideological tenets into all pores of youth life, as well as to erase the old era's accumulated social obstacles to the development of every individual's creative potential.

Pre-military training was supposed to acquaint boys and girls with the basics of combat skills and firearms usage in order to improve their efficiency in case of a foreign invasion. This fear became all too realistic after the 1948 break with Stalin, making pre-military training compulsory for all youths older than 17. Each brigade was supposed to have at least one specially educated military instructor, often a distinguished Liberation Struggle soldier, who would teach these classes every other day.⁴⁶ Lessons covered the skills necessary for the general functioning of camps (making beds, cleaning barracks, keeping guard), but also more strictly military topics (loading a rifle, shooting practice from various positions, bullet trajectory, marching steps, etc).⁴⁷ Providing youngsters with an education in military conduct was seen as a peacetime perpetuation of the People's Liberation Struggle, and indeed many instructors insisted that the wartime revolutionary combatant zeal must not falter in absence of actual battles. Yet many brigadiers avoided attending these programs, as can be seen from attendance sheets. Thus, except for the first two days of the shift, the 246-people-strong *ljubičko-trnavska* brigade working on the construction of New Belgrade in 1949 never had more than 190 brigadiers present at pre-military training (the overall participation at the Highway

46 Vežzagić, “Motorway ‘Brotherhood and Unity,’” 66. Military instructors also used their veteran status to transmit their personal experiences of the Liberation Struggle to younger brigadiers (MIAČ, VC, *Posetili su nas delegati našeg okruga*).

47 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-2, *Dnevnik zanimanja*, June 30, 1949.

site that year was approximately 95 percent).⁴⁸ Youths used various excuses, such as sickness or cleaning and cooking duties, but commanders also noted accusingly at Party cell meetings that even SKOJ members abused their political agitation duties as an excuse to skip gymnastics or military training. Another way to improve brigadiers' fitness was to engage them in team sports. It was especially important for camp commanders to organize matches (sometimes in league form) between brigades from different parts of the country in order to strengthen interethnic ties and showcase the volunteer movement's regional diversity. Athletic competitions were usually organized on state holidays (Tito's birthday on May 25, Labor Day on May 1, Day of Republic on November 29), prior to which the athletically talented brigadiers underwent preparations that lasted for weeks, as these events were often attended by important Party officials, and the individual competitor's success would increase the overall reputation of his or her brigade, eventually raising the brigade's chances of gaining shock status.⁴⁹

Political-ideological education was one of the most crucial non-labor programs organized for brigadiers, as it represented the most explicit means of influencing youth by exposing them to and indoctrinating them in the official ideology, as well as recruiting new members to the Party's youth organization. The curriculum consisted of essential socialist literature (works by Marx, Lenin and Gorki), but also of works of the domestic Yugoslav canon (ideological literature by Tito and Edvard Kardelj). Classes on theory were followed by textual analysis and often fierce debates, in which individuals interested in Party membership had to excel should they wish to gain admission rapidly. These meetings were also used officially to denounce derogatory texts about Yugoslavia, which were being published in organs of the East European press after 1948, which often spread rumors (not always without any basis in reality) about abuses of child labor and deaths in campsites.⁵⁰ This was supposed to prevent potential outbursts of political

48 Ibid., Vejzagić, "Motorway 'Brotherhood and Unity,'" 68.

49 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-5, *Knjiga dnevne zapovesti 1. u 2. učanske srednjoškolske ORB "Rade Azunjac" od 9.6. do 8.7.1949. i od 8.7. do 5.8.1949*; MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-1, *Evidencija dnevne zapovesti 1. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade, 20.4.-16.6.1950.*

50 Mihailović and Spasović, *Stvaraoći neodoljivog poleta*, 29. According to Selinić, at least 185 cases of death can be documentarily proven for the period 1946–1963, most of which occurred at the New Belgrade and Highway projects (Selinić, "Život na radnim akcijama," 123–124). The only documented case of death in Čačak brigades in this period was that of Radiša Stefanović, who was mortally injured by a truck at the New Belgrade worksite on August 1, 1950. This death was laconically mentioned in the brigade's official diary, without any further notice or comment (MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-3, *Dnevnik života i rada 3. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade na Novom Beogradu od 1.7. do 28.8.1950*).

dissent during that critical period. It was not a coincidence that Tito himself visited the Highway construction site only 15 days after the 1948 Cominform resolution.⁵¹

Party members had additional ideological classes, which provided forums for discussion of more advanced theoretical questions, but also for agitation planning and evaluations of the behavior of non-members. A new set of lectures for members and non-members alike was introduced in 1948. They consisted of sessions dedicated to the analysis of Yugoslavia's fall from Stalin's grace. Naturally, the purpose of these “analyses” was to defend Tito's position, proving that even Lenin himself established that every country had its own way to communism, regardless of the Soviet policies. The minutes from brigadiers' discussions reveal the depth of this diplomatic twist, since the meetings in 1948 were often dedicated to badmouthing Bulgarian pretensions to Macedonia, whereas previously there had not been any negative remarks about any other socialist country whatsoever. Other topics discussed at these meetings included rumors about Yugoslavia being involved in the failed assassination of Palmiro Togliatti in July 1948, justification of Yugoslav cooperation with USA concerning the restitution of Kingdom of Yugoslavia's gold reserves, the recommendation that Yugoslavia take part in the Danube conference, etc.⁵² Party cells also made decisions on future work norms, the organization of events, and disciplinary measures, regardless of the wishes of other brigadiers.⁵³ In the meeting transcripts, one can discern the timidly expressed antagonism of non-members towards the Party members, who wished to exercise unquestioned authority over the rest of the brigade, as well as to enjoy small benefits, such as being spared more tedious or tiring duties. Thus the nominally democratic decision-making in brigades usually came down to party members presenting their decisions (or preferred choices) to the rest of brigade (which was supposed to accept them), whereas the egalitarian discourse was often twisted in order to provide small everyday “privileges” for individuals who were more politically engaged.

The “War” on Illiteracy

One of the main emancipatory and educational efforts (and arguably the greatest success) of the People's Youth was the eradication of illiteracy among young people. This problem, which had already been a concern in previous decades,

51 Vežzagić, “Motorway ‘Brotherhood and Unity,’” 79.

52 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-3, *Zapisi sa sastanka štaba i partijske ćelije (1948)*.

53 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-3, *Zapisi sa sastanka štaba i partijske ćelije 5. ljubičko-trnavske brigade (1949)*.

was especially acute in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when schools in many areas were destroyed or difficult to reach for many school-age children. It was one of the new regime's priorities to advance the position of the working class (youth included) by ensuring that everyone was taught to read and write. Each youth brigade was thus supposed to have at least one instructor who specialized in such courses, and all illiterate volunteers were obliged to attend. The classes were organized in improvised classrooms or, weather permitting, in outdoor settings.



Figure 2. Literacy course of the 3rd Čačak brigade, 1946 (Source: Regional Historical Archives of Čačak)

Curiously enough, in addition to illiterate brigadiers (usually around a dozen per brigade), Čačak brigades had a much greater number (up to one third of all brigadiers) of “semi-literates,” proficient in only one script (in their case, Cyrillic). Commanders were adamant that both Latin and Cyrillic script be mastered, as this was considered one of the basic prerequisites for disseminating the ideology of brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav nations.⁵⁴ The brigadiers seemed to have diligently attended the courses. The internal diaries imply that most of them did master the basics of reading and writing both scripts, with only one

54 Žika Marjanović, “Dopis sa omladinske pruge,” *Slobodni glas*, May 1, 1947, 3.

mention of a former policeman who declined to learn the Latin script, claiming he did not need it.⁵⁵ Such enthusiasm was understandable, as it would have been hard for anyone to fail to see the advantages of literacy. Moreover, these classes were one of the rare activities the practical purpose of which was not subjected to blatant ideologization (although the increase in literacy rates was certainly cited in state propaganda as an example of the successful emancipation of the working class). And a vast success it was, as it is estimated that more than 70,000 people learned how to read and write during the first wave of labor actions (1946–1952), although one could definitely call into question the effectiveness of such quick learning while pupils were also involved in hard manual labor.⁵⁶

In addition to offering the workers a chance (or rather obliging them) to master the basics of reading and writing, labor camps and individual brigades also had their own modest libraries, and youths were constantly motivated to use them through involvement in literary circles. The book list of the library of the Camp “Jože Vlahovič” on the New Belgrade site indicates the openly politicized nature of these libraries. Of the 215 titles, only around 30 did not explicitly pertain to communist theory and revolutionary history. Yet, a glance at the 56-item loan list from the second *ljubičko-trnavska* brigade shows that brigadiers overwhelmingly preferred the non-political literature, with the exception of the novels of Maxim Gorki. On the other hand, this same brigade had its own small library with 75 books that for the most part dealt with communist themes, but it also had works by Shakespeare, Jack London and Jules Verne.⁵⁷ These details and other documented statistics indicate that one loaned book amounted to hardly two brigadiers from Čačak, which is even worse than the admittedly low ratio of just over one book per brigadier for the whole New Belgrade worksite.⁵⁸

Yet this low ratio for the Čačak brigades should not be interpreted as a sign of the irrelevance of these libraries for the few youths who did use them, since for many it was their first contact with books. The collectivist nature of all daily activities in isolated camp communities and external peer pressure obviously enticed many otherwise disinterested youths to start reading, as can be seen from one brigadier’s quote: “Here we have better conditions for reading and studying than in the countryside, because here we are all together.”⁵⁹ In addition to visiting

55 MIAČ, ORB, k-1, f-1, *Izveštaji 2. čačanske ORB “Ratko Mitrovič” (Bukinje – Orlova stena, August, 1946).*

56 Selinić, “Život na omladinskim radnim akcijama,” 126.

57 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-3, *Biblioteka logora ‘Jože Vlahovič’ and Inventar knjiga 2. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade.*

58 Selinić, “Život na omladinskim radnim akcijama,” 125.

59 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-3, *Zapisnik kulturno-prosvetnog odbora 3. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade, July 9, 1950.*

camp libraries, brigadiers could improve their writing skills by compiling articles for wall newspapers, as well as writing letters about their camp experiences, which were sent to newspapers and various economic and political enterprises back in Čačak.

Quite contrary to some authors' characterization of labor projects as "attempts to kill the youth's creative cultural instincts through exhausting physical toil,"⁶⁰ the documents of the Čačak brigades indicate that life in the camps was rich with lively amateur cultural and artistic activities. Choirs, theatre and recitation troupes were founded for individuals who prepared performances for their campmates. The surviving documents show that their repertoire consisted almost exclusively of material devoted to themes of communism and the Liberation Struggle. It included odes to Stalin (naturally, only up until 1948), plays and excerpts by Soviet authors (especially popular was Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, as well as Chekhov's *Diplomat*) and works by Yugoslav writers which could be interpreted in terms of social justice and class struggle (i.e. works by Branislav Nušić, but also Desanka Maksimović and Mira Alečković).⁶¹ Film screenings were also organized, either within the camp or by taking brigadiers to town cinemas, and for many it was the first time they had watched a motion picture. The choice of screenings was carefully premeditated, with a particular favorite being the first Yugoslav partisan film *Slavica* (1949), due to the "volatile reactions" of the viewers whenever they saw German soldiers on screen.⁶²

Cementing Brotherhood and Unity

Alongside their apparent economic importance as a source of free workforce, the youth labor projects came to be seen by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia as one of the most effective ways of cementing the ideological concept of "brotherhood and unity" among the Yugoslav nationalities. This aim was particularly important because there had been numerous interethnic massacres

60 Janičijević, *Rad omladine Kraljeva*, VI–VIII.

61 MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-3, *Zapisi knjižnice kulturno-prosvetnog odbora 3. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade, July 9–August 22, 1950.*

62 MIAČ, ORB, k-3, f-3, *Dnevnik 5. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade od 7.9. do 29.11.1949.* In this regard, it should be mentioned that the official discourse frequently accented cinema visits as an advent of modernization. All the more peculiar was the consternation of the 3rd *Ljubičko-trnavska* brigade commander (working at New Belgrade in 1950) at the fact that during film screenings, apart from being very noisy and littering, some male comrades did not even realize that they were not permitted to urinate inside the cinema hall (MIAČ, ORB, k-2, f-3, *Knjiga zapovesti 3. Ljubičko-trnavske brigade, 4.7.–29.8.1950.*)

during World War II, and chauvinistic movements had sown hatred among the nationalities. Under these circumstances, the victorious Communist movement inserted itself with its federal vision of Yugoslavia as a reconciliatory force, securing equal rights for all of the country's ethnicities, some of which (Montenegrins and Macedonians) came to be recognized for the first time only after the communists' accession to power. The most farsighted way of disseminating the “brotherhood and unity” ideology was to internalize it among members of the younger generations, whose worldview had not yet hardened and many of whom had been too young to remember the ethnically motivated atrocities that had taken place during the war. Federally organized actions proved an invaluable tool in this endeavor, as they attracted brigades from all of the republics. Tito himself emphasized their importance, deeming them even more important than local projects, the “localist tendencies of which might eventually gain a chauvinistic character.”⁶³

Camps of federal labor actions provided the preconditions for the propagation of such ideas. They were mostly set in isolated areas, bringing together youngsters from the most diverse parts of the country to live together in conditions that resembled those in which the army functioned in a secluded environment where they had to interact with one another on a daily basis. This way, young people from ethnically homogenous areas (such as the Čačak region) had the opportunity to spend time and build friendships with members of other nationalities for the first time. The brigadiers' reports and articles sent to *Slobodni glas* suggest that this experience left a most positive mark on them. Situations of cultural shock were all but rare, such as the bewilderment of Čačak men who for the first time saw Muslim women in their oriental clothes at the Brčko railway station,⁶⁴ while the typically exalted reports described scenes from bonfire parties, where youths from regions as diverse as Dragačevo, Šid, Orašac and Mitrovica joined together in the partisan *kožaračko* dance.⁶⁵ Some wartime mental wounds were healed, as indicated by a commander's evaluation of one young man whose father had been killed by Croatian fascists, but whose interaction with fellow Croatian campmates helped him overcome his hatred.⁶⁶ In order to ensure as much interethnic mingling as possible, commanders placed brigades from the

63 Mihailović and Spasović, *Stvaraoći neodoljivog poleta*, 78.

64 MIAČ, VC, *Dopis Gvozdena Jovanica o pristizanju u Brčko (1946)*.

65 Ljubiša Lazarević, “Druga dragačevska brigada na autoputu proglašena za dvaput udarnu,” *Slobodni glas*, July 23, 1948, 3.

66 MIAČ, VC, *Karakteristike članova ORB “Ratko Mitrović” (1946)*.

most distant regions of the country in neighboring barracks and also organized sports matches between them.⁶⁷

From the outset, the People's Youth of Yugoslavia invited foreigners to participate in labor projects. Thus, as early as 1946 over 1,800 foreign youths from both capitalist and socialist countries took part in the Brčko–Banovići project,⁶⁸ and in 1947 this number rose to 5,800 people from 42 countries. Several youths from Switzerland worked at the Brčko–Banovići action together with the Čačak brigade “Ratko Mitrović,” and despite the language barrier they developed strong friendships, as indicated by warmhearted farewell diary entries. Naturally, Swiss brigadiers had been professing a leftist political standing, as could be seen in their plans to “undertake an even stronger and more decisive fight against capitalism in Switzerland.” Such enthusiasm for spreading revolutionary zeal could not be tarnished by one incident, when a Serbian girl was accused of stealing a pair of trousers from a Swiss brigadier.⁶⁹ That same year, Greek brigadiers were added to Čačak brigades, which fell in line with the Yugoslav interventionism concerning the civil war in Greece.⁷⁰ This transnational exchange of voluntary youth labor was mutual. Already in 1946, a Yugoslav brigade went to Poland to help in the reconstruction of Warsaw, and another such brigade was sent to Czechoslovakia in 1947. Both brigades had members from Čačak and Kraljevo.⁷¹

The primary aim of hosting foreign brigades was not to increase their work capacity, but to propagate communist ideas among youths from the West, as well as to strengthen ties with “friendly” countries (until 1948 socialist, after that Western and non-aligned ones). The authorities often noted the practical uselessness of foreign brigadiers, who usually regarded their stay in Yugoslavia merely as a vacation. However, the propaganda value of having foreigners among the volunteers compensated for their inefficiency as workers. Much as isolated camps offered a perfect setting for creating social networks between members of different Yugoslav nationalities, they also served as an ideal site to establish personal connections between Yugoslavs and their peers from both ideological blocs in order to help address the political isolation of Yugoslavia after 1948.

67 Ljubiša Lazarević, “Druga dragačevska brigada na autoputu proglašena za dvaput udarnu,” *Slobodni glas*, July 23, 1948, 3; Radisav Pajić, “Čačanska omladinska brigada vratila se triput udarna,” *Slobodni glas*, July 16, 1949, 4.

68 Mihailović and Spasović, *Stvaraoći neodoljivog poleta*, 29, 114.

69 Marija Krnjajić, ed. “Spomenar komandanta čačanske brigade ‘Ratko Mitrović’ Miodraga Obrenovića sa omladinske pruge Brčko–Banovići,” *Izbornik, grada Meduopštinskog istorijskog arhiva Čačak* 28 (2013): 211.

70 MIAČ, ORB, k-1, f-1, *Fotografije sa Omladinske pruge Brčko–Banovići (1946)*.

71 Janičićević, *Rad omladine Kraljeva*, 313; *Udarnici prve smene*, 23, 72.

Conclusions: Youth Projects – From Social Glue to Nostalgic Memento

In the immediate postwar years, the authority of the Communist Party was still not completely solidified, since many strata of the population opposed (mostly in a silent and passive manner) the new system for various reasons. The younger generations, however, especially those living in regions most stricken by the disastrous civil war and occupation, represented a *tabula rasa* on which the regime could “inscribe” its program for the future, to a greater or lesser extent, according to its own needs and ideological tenets. The local perspective of the Čačak brigades that were sent to participate in federal labor projects offers illuminating insights into political and social mechanisms of this early socialist social engineering project, often not perceptible in the “grand” perspective of the state-level narratives. The predominantly voluntary nature of the recruitment process (with sparse, yet notable exceptions of formally and informally coerced mobilization) ensured that the most “hostile” segments of the youth would be excluded. This prevented them from potentially disseminating politically inappropriate ideas among other youths. Thus, labor camps represented isolated “islands” where youths could be exposed to a diverse set of politicized influences and agitation by Party members. Spatial consciousness represented a very important feature of the ideological construct of the projects. Not only was the geographical seclusion of the camps essential for effective indoctrination, but at the very core of these projects was the idea of conquering and taming a previously uncontrollable space, be it static spatial entities (such as marshes on the left bank of the Sava river) or a dynamic reconceptualization of distance and movement (such as in connecting remote and inaccessible parts of the country with highways and railways).

Simultaneously, the performance of the brigadiers (be it at work, in extra-labor activities or interpersonal communication) was carefully scrutinized and evaluated in order to enable the authorities to select the most reliable and promising party cadre for the future. Thus, the social, regional and generational base of party membership and support was expanded and further diversified. The “bond by blood,” which had developed among partisan soldiers during the war, slowly evolved during the early peacetime years into the “bond by labor” among brigadiers who for the most part had been too young to have partaken in the Liberation Struggle. After leaving these “social laboratories,” former brigadiers were supposed to spread the newly acquired skills, knowledge and especially the freshly internalized political and social ideas. The youth also proved

a reliable communicator of the “correct” interpretation of Tito’s 1948 conflict with Stalin to other segments of population. Through Tito’s personal visitations and an elaborate ideological homogenization within the camps’ classrooms, the brigades’ Party cells apparently succeeded in alleviating more harmful forms of ideological misgivings among the youth.

The generations involved in the first phase of youth labor actions grew up under wartime conditions, surrounded by destruction and devastating poverty. Most of these youths, even had they been spared a direct contact with the ravages of war, were nevertheless deprived of a proper education, and their economic situation was bleak, with very slow signs of improvement in the immediate postwar years. Labor projects, with their wide variety of extra-labor activities and educational and professional programs, offered a unique opportunity for young people to compensate potentially for these disadvantages and obtain skills that would improve their prospects for social mobility. For the state, these programs also meant improving the educational profile of its citizens. These efforts, which ranged from decreasing rates of illiteracy and “semi-literacy,” creating various literary circles and cultural troupes, and directly preparing rural youth for jobs in industry, were intended to improve the educational structure and diversify the vocational profile of the younger generations in order to overcome the general backwardness of the Yugoslav society. However, the effect of these short-term educational programs should not be overemphasized, since they often produced a workforce that was insufficiently qualified, far too swollen for the needs and capacities of the early period of industrialization, and ultimately unable to fulfill the authorities’ ambitious modernizing agenda, in the long run even burdening economic development itself.

Another important aspect of Yugoslav youth labor projects that was always stressed by the Party was their pan-Yugoslav character. For many youths, especially those living in the mono-ethnic regions (such as Čačak), participation in the projects was the first chance to meet and interact personally with peers from different ethnic, religious and cultural milieus. This element was especially valuable in light of horrifying memories of ethnic cleansing and mass exoduses from just a few years earlier. Thus, the Communist Party’s axiom of “brotherhood and unity” between the Yugoslav peoples could be developed in practice. Moreover, involving foreign youth brigades (or simply inserting foreigners into the domestic ones) helped promote Yugoslav efforts to build a unique type of society, especially in the critical period after the split with the Soviet Union in 1948. Mingling with foreign peers from both the eastern and western side of the

Iron Curtain enhanced the desired perception that Yugoslav citizens belonged to a united global working class, despite the country’s diplomatic isolation at a time when conflict with USSR was in full swing but the support of the West had not yet been won.

With their far-sighted emancipatory measures in mind, all reservations of some Party officials concerning the financial viability of organizing and sustaining “mammoth” federally supported youth projects were eventually cast aside, as the projects came to represent the social glue for the up-and-coming generations, deemed able to build an intrinsically socialist and multicultural society (supposedly) from scratch. This was the reason behind the decision to renew grand federal volunteer-based projects in 1958, sustaining this system (with significant modifications during the 1970s) almost until the end of the federation itself.⁷² Labor actions subsequently moved into the sphere of national mythology, becoming one of the defining symbols of the socialist era, as well as one of the most widespread uncritically cherished nostalgic memories for many former brigadiers in the post-socialist times. On the other end of the political spectrum, they were also used as a notorious example of the communists’ supposedly totalitarian tendencies. Eventually, the projects’ primary political aim of blatant and omnipresent indoctrination of young people with communist ideology proved far more superficial and shorter-lived than their secondary effects, mirrored in a far-reaching (albeit in many aspects incomplete) reconfiguration of the postwar social habitus in Yugoslavia.

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