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EUROPEAN MISSIONARIES AND RELIGIOUS CULTURAL TRANSFER IN INTERWAR YUGOSLAVIA: THE CASE OF THE ADVENTIST CHURCH*

Abstract: The theory of cultural transfer usually includes the fields of intellectual history, literature, material culture, art, and science, but it can be applied no less fruitfully to the religious sphere, whether to the exchange and influence of religious ideas or religious practices. Religious transfers and the mobility of religious practices were explored in stand-alone studies, although religious transfer is usually seen as part of cultural transfer in the broadest sense of the word. This paper focuses on the emergence of European neo-Protestant missionaries, especially from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the interwar period, Adventism was already established in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Kingdom of Yugoslavia). Adventism's roots in this region date back to the late 19th century, with the first Serbian-speaking believers appearing in 1901–1902 and the first church building erected in Kumane in 1905. Despite internal growth, the Adventists faced scrutiny from the SOC clergy and local authorities, particularly as their pacifist stance clashed with state expectations during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s. The Adventist community faced internal divisions influenced by the global schism that led to the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement. The chapter analyzes the emergence, development, and challenges of the Adventist religious movement in interwar Yugoslavia. It sheds light on how religious transfers impacted the socio-religious landscape of the period, focusing on Adventism's growth, internal schisms, and external opposition. By examining the movement's interactions with the Serbian Orthodox Church, state authorities, and other religious groups (such as the Nazarenes), the paper provides a nuanced understanding of how a neo-Protestant group navigated its position as a religious minority amidst political, cultural, and social complexities.

Keywords: Adventism, religious cultural transfer, religious communities, Kingdom of Yugoslavia

Introduction

Research of religious transfers primarily involves examining elements of dogma and religious practice that made their way into other languages within a new confessional and cultural context. We can observe and analyze religious transfer as the transfer of religious ideas, religious texts, and religious practices that influence the lives of individuals and communities and, consequently, the broader society. Religious transfers take various forms, and in interwar Yugoslavia, a number of religious communities of neo-Protestant origin played a role in changing the religious and social landscape. These

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trends started in the late 19th century, but the interwar period was especially diverse and characterized by wider historical changes that arose after the First World War. Between the First and Second World Wars, Adventism was already widely present in the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, i.e., the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Once it became visible, the presence of Adventist religious groups, like other neo-Protestant groups, of which the Nazarenes are the most notable example, attracted the attention of the clergy from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). According to Adventist sources, in the territory of the latter Kingdom of Yugoslavia, this religious movement emerged during the last years of the 19th century, attracting its first Serbian-speaking followers as early as 1901 or 1902² and erecting the first church building in the village of Kumane in 1905.³

Beginnings of Adventism

Adventism is a religious movement that arose in the early 1830s thanks to the work of the preacher William Miller. Although a Baptist by affiliation, Miller preached that the end of the world was near and managed to attract a group of followers who became known as “Millerites”. When Miller’s prophecies of the Second Coming and end of the world failed to materialize in 1843 and 1844, his followers split into several different religious groups, the most famous of which is the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁴ Shortly after the “Great Disappointment,” under the strong influence of the prophecies of Ellen White, in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded, whose believers became known for celebrating Saturday as Sabbath.⁵ Ellen White, Joseph Bates, and James Springer White, all of whom had been Miller’s followers, played prominent roles in the founding of the community.

For the next 70 years, White remained the key figure in the subsequent development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, during which she had over 2,000 visions and wrote over 80 books, 200 treatises, and 4,600 articles.⁶ White’s writings dealt with a range of topics, including health reform. Soon, health and the closely related issue of adequate nutrition became very important among the members of the community, and vegetarian-

2 Milan Šušljčić, *Bićete mi svedoci* [You will be my witnesses] (Belgrade: Preporod, 2004), 114–118.

3 Ibid. 118; Miodrag Živanović (ed.), *Adventisti vaši prijatelji* [Adventists your friends] (Belgrade: Preporod 2006), 38.

4 Gerhard J. Belinger, *Veliki leksikon religija* [The great lexicon of religion] (Belgrade: Lento, 2004), 184–185.

5 Gordon J. Melton, *Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions, eight edition* (Gale Cengage Learning, 2009), 577.

6 Zorica Kuburić, *Verske zajednice u Srbiji i verska distanca* [Religious Communities in Serbia and Religious Distance] (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2010), 164.

ism remains prevalent among Adventists around the world even today. The community very quickly took on a missionary character, so its members started preaching all over the USA, soon spreading to other continents. According to official community statistics, the Seventh-day Adventist Church today has over 20,000,000 members, and Adventist groups can be found in almost all countries in the world.⁷ Adventist theology is based on 27 (today 28) fundamental doctrines, thematically divided into teachings about God, man, salvation, the Church, Christian life, and last events.⁸

The global community is centralized and hierarchical. The basic administrative unit is the local church, i.e., a group of believers in one area – a city or a village. Several local churches are united in a church area or mission that operates in one geographical area. Whether a certain entity will be characterized as a mission or an area depends on the degree of its financial independence, so the mission is directly dependent on the financial resources of the Union, while the church area represents an entity that functions independently, self-funding its work. A set of missions and areas in a given territory forms a Union. All existing Unions in the world constitute the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has its own departments in different continents, i.e. divisions, which are responsible for the work of local Unions or other church units.⁹

The emergence of Adventism among the Serbs

According to some non-Adventist sources, the missionary efforts of Jovan Surdović from Erdelj facilitated the distribution of copies of over 200 Adventist books printed in Hamburg and London and translated into the Serbian language. Similarly, Surdović is to be credited for the presence of groups of believers in 1903 in the villages of Boljevci, Titel, just like Kumane and Mokrin.¹⁰ In the formative period of the community, the village of Kumane, alongside the village of Mokrin, served as the earliest Adventist center in today's northern Serbia. Available documents indicate that some SOC members had been familiar with the Adventist presence and teachings even before the Serbian Orthodox clergy published their first periodical writings. A mere year after the establishment of the first

7 <https://www.adventist.org/statistics/>.

8 Bakioki, Samuele, Frenk Holbruk, Filip Ožandr, Frensis Ogsburže, David Maršal et al. *Adventistički hrišćani veruju... Biblijsko izlaganje 27 osnovnih doktrina* [Adventist Christians believe ... A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines] (Belgrade: Preporod, 1994).

9 <https://www.nadadventist.org/about-our-church/organizational-structure>.

10 R. Grujić, "Subotari" [Sabbatarians], in *Narodna enciklopedija. Srpsko-Hrvatsko-Slovenačka, IV knjiga S-Š* [National Encyclopedia. Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian, 4TH book S-Š], eds., St. Stanojević (Bibliografski zavod d.d. Zagreb, Gundulićeva 29, 1929), 493.

Adventist church, the activities of this religious community attracted the attention of a man named Gr. (first name most likely being Goran – MG) Kuzmanović, a Serbian Orthodox parish priest from Kikinda, a town close to the early Adventist centers, who published an article in the Sarajevo-based SOC journal called *Istočnik*, where he “warned” about the presence and growth of the “newest sect” in Mokrin, the “Sabbatarians”.¹¹

Partially referring to the observations of a local village priest from Mokrin, Gr. (perhaps Goran as well – MG) Stajić, Kuzmanović said that something about this village made it “fertile ground” for “religious innovations” and that, just like the “Sabbatarians,” various other groups had appeared and grown in the village, including the Nazarenes, the Movement of the Faithful, and the Iconoclasts.¹² Although it is hard to gauge the reason for the rise of religious pluralism in this village, perhaps it had something to do with its proximity to the Romanian border, with a few studies suggesting a possible correlation between its geographical location and denominational heterogeneity. However, the Adventists were already present in Belgrade, the country’s capital, in 1909, when the Adventist theologian and missionary Max Ludwig arrived to spread their religious message in the Kingdom of Serbia.¹³ As Adventism spread in the country, SOC members carefully monitored it to see in which direction the movement would go. To gather more information about the structure, teachings, and work of the Adventist congregation, which most likely arrived in Belgrade around 1909, a parish priest named Ljubomir Mitrović, on the orders of a local *protoiereus*, managed to infiltrate into the community and attend several meetings in 1911. Almost two decades after his work among the Adventists in Belgrade, Mitrović published two brochures: *Verske lutalice* [Religious Wanderers] in 1929 and *Iz tame na svetlost* [From Light into Darkness] in 1926, offering detailed personal reflections and information about the Adventists present in Belgrade at the time and their beliefs and religious practices, including the names of members. According to the Serbian Orthodox theologian Lazar Milin, Mitrović was the first Orthodox priest to do proselytizing work among the members of Protestant minority groups.¹⁴ On the eve of the First World War, the Adventists were present in different parts of the territory that would become part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slo-

11 Gr. Kuzmanović, “O ikonoborcima” [About the fighters against icons], *Istočnik* XX-6 (1906), 148–149.

12 Ibid.

13 Branko Bjelajac, *Protestantizam u Srbiji: prilozi za istoriju reformacijskog nasleđa u Srbiji, tom I* [Protestantism in Serbia: contributions to the history of the Reformation heritage in Serbia, volume I] (Belgrade: Alfa & Omega, 2003), 190.

14 Lazar Milin, *Naučno opravdanje religije: Apologetika crkva i sekte, knjiga 6* [Scientific justification of religion: Apologetics church and the sects, book 6] (Belgrade: Institute for the theological research, 2019), 95.



Albin Močnik with members of the Adventist Church from Prilep, 1923.

venes, mostly in Vojvodina, where they tended to concentrate in rural areas such as Lok, Alibunar, Čurug but also lived in some urban environments, including Novi Sad, Zemun and Kikinda.¹⁵

Even before the First World War, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was present in the territories that would later become part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Adventist missionaries came from abroad to Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to share religious literature and do missionary work. Adventism reached Vojvodina, more specifically of the city now called Zrenjanin, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, at the end of the 19th century, when pastor Ludvig Konradi set out from Cluj (present-day Romania) to preach in the Monarchy's southern regions. During his stay in Austria-Hungary, Konradi, a German, wanted to start translating Adventist literature into Serbian and Hungarian for missionary work among Vojvodina's Serbian and Hungarian population. On June 19, 1893, in today's Zrenjanin, he met with the pastor of the Reformation Church, Jozef Szalaj, and his associates Bogdan Popović and Mita Pavko, with whom he founded the "Adventist-Reformation-Evangelical" missionary society to work on translating and distributing

15 Branko Bjelajac, *Protestantizam u Srbiji: prilozi za istoriju reformacijskog nasleđa u Srbiji, tom II* [Protestantism in Serbia: contributions to the history of the Reformation heritage in Serbia, volume II] (Belgrade: Alfa & Omega, 2010), 121.

Adventist literature.¹⁶ In this period, the circulation of religious literature and the preaching of Adventism was supported by members of the Reformation Church, who published translations of Adventist texts in their magazines and allowed Adventist preachers to spread the “good news” in their places of worship.¹⁷ Through the Adventist texts translated and published in the Reformation Church’s newsletters in this early period, in addition to theological messages, messages related to health reform reached Serbian-speaking areas. At this time, the center for distributing Adventist literature was in Hamburg, and this establishment printed the earliest translations of Adventist literature into the Serbian language.¹⁸ The magazine *Zions Wachter* reported Adventist missionary activities around the world, including in Vojvodina. The fact that the center of missionary activities was abroad and that the Serbian-language literature distributed in Vojvodina in the Serbian language was printed there seemed to bother some members of the community, such as Lazar Eremić, an Adventist pioneer in Serbia, who, after leaving the Adventist church, published a book in which, among other things, he accused the head office in Hamburg of financially exploiting believers.¹⁹ During the formative period of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States of America, vegetarianism was not particularly widespread in society, and the refusal to consume meat, nicotine, and alcohol made the early Adventists different from the average American. The promotion of vegetarianism as a desirable lifestyle by a “foreign” community, as is the case with the Adventist message in general, could easily be seen by a more conservative population as the spread of an American product through European channels, with a dubious and probably politically motivated goal. After the end of the First World War, there was a rift among the Yugoslav Adventists caused by the attitude towards the secular authorities that some Adventists had. Namely, while many Adventists had actively participated in the First World War and their members continued to sign up for military service after the war ended, some refused to participate in any activities that involved using weapons, which led to an in-group conflict among Adventists and problems with the authorities. The root of this clash, according to several sources, was the frequent conversion of Nazarenes to Adventism. Given the Nazarenes’ broad presence in the territory of Vojvodina even before the rise of Adventism and the Adventists’ expansion in Vojvodina, unparalleled in any other area

16 M. Šušljic, op. cit. 106–107.

17 Ibid. 107–108.

18 Dragana Todoran, “SEEUC Publishing House“. Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists (2021), 1–2. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9CNJ>

19 R. Grujić, op. cit. 493.

of the country's eastern part, the members of these two minority groups expectedly came into contact with each other. Nazarenes who became Adventists often retained some habits uncharacteristic of Adventism. For instance, Albino Močnik, one of the most prominent Adventist preachers in former Yugoslavia, an alumnus of the famous Faculty of Theology at Friedensau Adventist University in Germany, said that after his arrival and that of other foreign missionaries – Robert Schillinger, Max Ludwig, and Alfred Thomas – around 1908, there were about 40 Adventists, mostly former members of the Nazarene community, in Vojvodina. These “Adventists”, he said, added a non-working Sabbath to their old beliefs and remained Nazarenes in everything else, which essentially prevented them from participating in military and missionary activities.²⁰ In late 1919, the Yugoslav Adventists had their first split, resulting in the founding of the Reformed Adventist Church. The members of this community are remembered as “vegetarians” due to their strict opposition to any kind of meat consumption.²¹

Adventists in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

During the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, one can observe a fairly high level of propaganda with the ultimate goal of suppressing the activities of various neo-Protestant communities, including the Adventists. These criticisms mostly came from the ranks of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the early 1920s, the Seventh-day Adventist Church clashed with the authorities, and the main Adventist branch, the Reform Movement, was banned.²² For a year, the Minister of Religion allowed the Adventists who agreed to do military service and go to war to operate; however, by 1923, both were banned again. Thus, an article titled “On the Adventists and Nazarenes” was published in the Sarajevo-based newspaper “Brotherhood” in 1925. Its author warned about “sects” of the Adventists and Nazarenes “...which have established themselves on our land, carrying out their destructive effect not only on Orthodoxy but also on all the Serbian people in today's free state.”²³ As we can see here, the Adventists were seen as a destructive religious community and a threat to the Serbs and their ancestral religion. The author em-

20 Albin, Močnik. *Otpad posle 1914* [Waste after 1914]. (*Unpublished document*).

21 Tomislav Branković, *Protestantske zajednice u Jugoslaviji* [Protestant Communities in Yugoslavia] (Belgrade: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2011), 111.

22 Albin Močnik, “Sloboda vere i savesti” [Freedom of belief and conscience], *Glasnik*, 2–2 (1927), 10–13.

23 Dragoljub Milivojević, „O adventistima i nazarenima“ [About the Adventists and the Nazarenes], *Bratstvo*, 1–3 (1927), 38.

phasized that the Adventists were sympathetic to communism and strove to “suppress Orthodoxy as much as possible” under the leadership of their “chief teacher” Albin Močnik, in cooperation with certain wealthy Jewish families. Media outlets, especially those whose editors were members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, saw the rise of Protestantism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as a latent political influence from abroad,²⁴ while the Adventists who operated in Sarajevo in the mid-1920s were labeled “foreign agents, whose goal is the destruction of Orthodoxy and nationalism.”²⁵ Thus, in 1930, Hieromonk Dionisije published the book “Adventism in the Light of Orthodoxy or the Distortion of Adventist False Beliefs,” in which the author, in addition to a general critique of Adventist teachings from an Orthodox point of view, also devoted several pages to Adventism in Yugoslavia. Namely, he said that the three most active “Adventist teachers” in Yugoslavia were Albino Močnik, Robert Šilinger, and Živan Janać, describing Močnik as the most proactive among them.²⁶ After presenting the organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its sources of funding (donations, tithes), the author ended with the remark that “...the help that the Jews secretly give them to promote the celebration of Saturday in the world as much as possible” was a particularly important funding avenue for the Adventists, claiming that this was an undeniable and proven truth.²⁷ Just as some members of the Serbian Orthodox Church viewed Adventism as something “foreign,” it seems that the members of the Adventist community were not particularly fond of the foreign factor either. After the end of the First World War, Robert Schillinger and Max Ludwig, who were Germans, and Albin Močnik, a Slovene, headed the Adventist mission in the newly founded kingdom. The fact that in Vojvodina these “foreigners called the shots” bothered many believers, who, led by Pavle Krainean and Živan Janać, a Romanian and a Serb from Vojvodina, and several other prominent “local” Adventists, founded their own movement at an assembly in Čurug.²⁸ On the other hand, after the First World War, the Yugoslav Adventists launched a local newsletter called the *Missionary Representative*, later renamed the *Glasnik*, which became the most popular newsletter of the Yugoslav Adventists decades later. Re-

24 „Sektanti“ [Sectarians], *Bratstvo*, 1–11 (1925), 262.

25 “Sarajevski adventisti” [Adventists from Sarajevo], *Bratstvo* 1–6, (1925), 142.

26 Jeromonah Dionisije, *Adventizam u svetlosti pravoslavlja ili izobličenje adventističkih lažnih verovanja* [Adventism in the Light of Orthodoxy or Distortion of Adventist false beliefs] (Kragujevac: E. Štamparija, Biblioteka narodne hrišćanske zajednice, 1930), 12.

27 Ibid., 13.

28 M. Šušljic, op. cit. 206–208.

ardless, in the 1920s, the Adventists were generally in a disadvantaged position: their community was officially approved for work as late as 1930, and then with some limitations: they could not gather publicly and had to report their gatherings to the authorities.²⁹ In the mid-1920s, the Yugoslav Adventists, or at least the Seventh-day Adventist Church, tried to improve their relations with the political establishment. The constitution of the community adopted in 1927, at the Second Great Assembly of the Yugoslav Union Mission in Novi Sad,³⁰ the prominent preacher Albino Močnik wrote, strove to pave the way for a rapprochement with the authorities and explicitly stated in several places that the Yugoslav Adventists were willing to comply with the existing laws of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as can be seen in Paragraphs 5 and 9.³¹ This was certainly not the only attempt of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to “wash away the stain” on its name. Two years earlier, Močnik had sent his book “Adventism to prominent figures in the Kingdom’s political life and tried to explain that the Adventists had a pronounced national consciousness and were obedient citizens. To support his claims, he included photographs and life stories of Adventists who had distinguished themselves in the Great War.³² At this time, John Huenergardt was still active. In 1929, he was invited by the General Conference to lead the Yugoslav Union, which resulted in the opening of the Yugoslav Mission School in 1931. During his presidency, the membership continued to grow, and in the first half of 1933, there were 2,232 members distributed across 99 churches.³³ In the interwar period, the Adventists in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia grew increasingly independent, intensifying their publishing activity. Thus, in this period, besides the *Glasnik*, the community’s long-standing official newspaper, several other magazines were launched, including *Život i zdravlje*, *Preporod*, *Vest mira*, and *Dobri Samarjanin*, which were available in Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Macedonian, Hungarian, and Romanian.³⁴

29 Aleksandra Djurić-Milovanović, *Double Minorities in Serbia: Distinctive Aspects on the Religion and Ethnicity of Romanians in Vojvodina* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2015), 107.

30 M. Šušljic, op. cit. 295.

31 Albin Močnik, *Ustav zajednice Jugoslovenskih adventista* [Constitution of the community of the Yugoslavian Adventists] (Belgrade, 1927).

32 Albin Močnik, *Adventizam* [Adventism] (Belgrade: Odbor zajednice Jugoslovenskih Adventista S.D, 1925), 113–118.

33 Zoltán Rajki, “Huenergardt, John Frederick (1875–1955)”, *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, (2021), 6. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=FFS5>.

34 Dragana Todoran, “SEEUC Publishing House”. *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, (2021), 3. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9CNIJ>.

Internal problems and political conflicts in the newly founded Kingdom of Yugoslavia

The period after the end of the First World War proved highly turbulent for the Adventists, as the members of this religious group faced numerous difficulties in the 1920s and 1930s due to internal problems while also having a fraught relationship with the newly established government and dominant religious traditions. Those internal tensions were partly reflections of the schism that erupted inside the community on a global level, out of which emerged a new off-shoot movement called the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement (SDARM); on the other hand, they were caused by local social and religious dynamics. Those problems made the church formation process rather difficult in this period, forcing the Adventists to join the struggle for religious rights. The official reason for the schism inside the SDAC was that some members from Germany had refused to take part in the war. The establishment of a new religious congregation ensued in 1919.³⁵ Like Adventists in some other countries,³⁶ some Adventists from the South Slavic regions had also refused involvement in the war, causing local SDAC officials, just like the recently established government, to react once the war ended.

When the war ended in 1918, Albin Močnik, one of the most prominent SDAC preachers and missionaries in the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, published a number of articles and writings on the Adventists who had chosen to be non-combatants in the war. Although the stance towards the war was cited as the official reason for the schism on the local level as well, an analysis of the periodical writings of Močnik and other SDAC officials suggests that some other factors may have played a role, most notably certain forms of religious syncretism and the emergence of nationalistic individuals among the Adventists. In a private, unpublished text titled *Otpad nakon 1914* [Drop-outs after 1914], Močnik argued that the decision of many local Adventists, especially those from Vojvodina, to be non-combatants in the war was most likely due to the Nazarene background of the vast majority of first-gen-

35 Helmut H. Kramer, *The Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement* (Biblical Research Institute, 1988), 11.

36 For the same reasons, separately from the new congregation established in Germany, some Adventists worldwide (arguably much fewer) refused to take part in military operations during the First World War and afterward. Another schismatic movement emerged. It is important to note that the Reform movement was a “bottom-up” movement, meaning that it did not emerge in one center and spread from there; instead, a number of schismatic congregations simultaneously cropped up in different parts of the world, see: Alfons Balbach, *History of the SDA Reform Movement* (Reformation Herald Publishing, 1999).

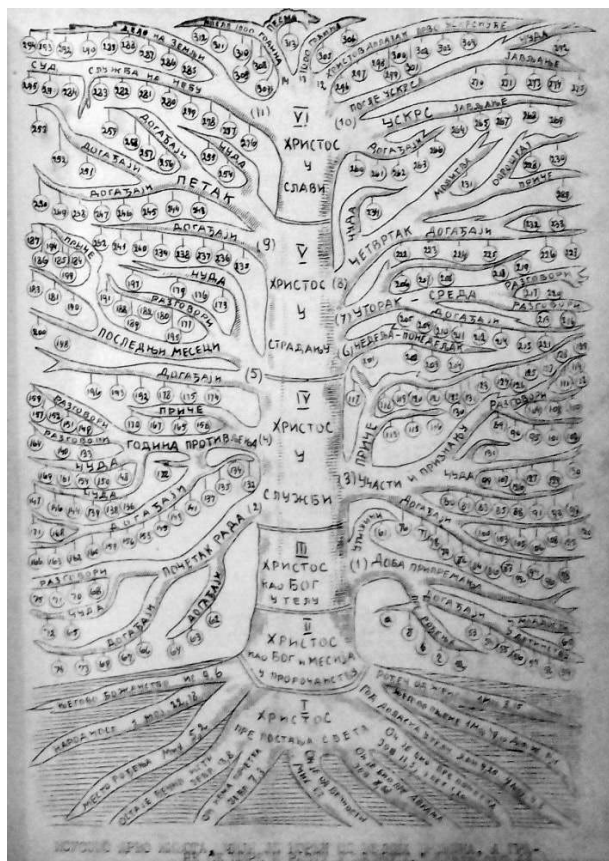


Illustration from the book *History of the New Testament Church*, Albin Močnik, 1937.

eration Adventists in this geographical region.³⁷ In a short message from 1912, Lazar Šijačić, a leading member of the early Adventist center in Kumane, mentioned that a “brother” from the village of Melanci, near Kumane, who had been a Nazarene for 30 years, had converted to Adventism.³⁸ Interestingly, he also briefly said that this person had never refused to pay the tithe,³⁹ possibly implying that some other Nazarene converts had. This implication would go hand-to-hand with Močnik’s claim that Nazarenes-turned-Adventists were strictly against missionary activities and circulating religious literature⁴⁰, which is unsurprising given that the publication and spreading of religious literature was uncommon,

37 Albin Močnik, *Otpad posle 1914* [Waste after 1914] (Unpublished document), 11.

38 M. Šušljčić, op. cit. 162.

39 Ibid.

40 Albin Močnik, *Otpad posle 1914* [Waste after 1914] (Unpublished document), 11.

yet not entirely unheard of, among the Nazarenes in Vojvodina.⁴¹ Indeed, the claim that a number of Adventist pioneers from Vojvodina (or more precisely from Srem and Bačka) were former Nazarenes appeared in non-Adventist publications as well⁴² including writings by the SOC clergy. Additional proof of the interrelation between the Nazarenes and Adventists comes from the observations of early Adventist meetings in Belgrade in which, according to the abovementioned priest Ljubomir Mitrović, Adventists used a Nazarene songbook titled *Sionova harfa* [The harp of Zion] in their ceremonies, and at least one of the present members was a former Nazarene.⁴³

According to Močnik, although these Nazarenes (around 40 of them) who had converted to Adventism, probably sometime before 1908, formally switched their denomination, they held on to most of their beliefs, only replacing Sunday with Saturday as the Lord's Day.⁴⁴ This essentially meant that many of these newly "converted" Adventists were, in fact, a sort of sabbatarian Nazarenes, with their old beliefs and values still playing a central role in their everyday lives.⁴⁵ SDAC sources claim that the leaders of this new Adventist group, Živan Janać and Pavle Krainean, were indeed former Nazarenes who had migrated to the United States of America in the early 20th century to avoid military service, which probably made them more likely to show sympathy for the SDARM after its formation in Germany.⁴⁶ Ultimately, based on the oral accounts of several informants he interviewed during his ethnographic fieldwork, Djenović reported that sometime after the First World War, a few Nazarenes and Lutherans from the village of Gložan (Bačka region) started observing Saturday as Sabbath after reading the Bible "more carefully." These "sabbatarians" – as they simply called themselves – remained officially unor-

41 B. Bjelajac, *Protestantizam u Srbiji, tom II*, 41.

42 R. Grujić, op. cit. 493.

43 Ljubomir Mitrović, *Verske lutalice* [Religious wanderers] (Belgrade: Gundulić, 1929), 19.

44 Albin Močnik, *Otpad posle 1914* [Waste after 1914] (Unpublished document), 11.

45 Change of the denomination among neo-Protestants, especially in northern Serbia, was not uncommon thing. Moreover, several examples can be mentioned. One of them concerns Frantz and Maria Tabori, Baptist colporteurs who established first Baptist church in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) were in fact former Nazarenes who converted to Baptism sometime around 1862 under the influence of the Romanian Baptists: William H. Brackney, *The A to Z of the Baptists* (The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 100.

46 M. Šušljic, op. cit. 206. Additionally, it is mentioned that Krainean convinced some of his former Nazarene friends to convert to Adventism, see: Jovan Balan, *Adventni pokret i lažni pokreti* [Advent movement and false movements] (Unpublished brochure based on the personal memoirs of Jovan Balan, written in the town of Vršac during the 1990s).

ganized until Radovan Madžarev, the first elected leader of the schismatic Adventist movement,⁴⁷ managed to convert some of them to his Adventist group in 1942, while the remaining members remained unorganized until the 1960s when they formed a separate Sabbatarian, non-Adventist religious congregation called Crkva Božija hrišćana sedmog dana [Church of God of the Seventh-day].⁴⁸

If we accept the claim mentioned by various Adventist and non-Adventist sources that the early members of this religious group were indeed former Nazarenes, the reason some of them refused to take part in armed conflicts makes perfect sense because uncompromising pacifism was and still remains central to Nazarene teachings and was also the reason why numerous members of this religious group faced persecution and imprisonment in the past.⁴⁹ However, even if this “Nazarene-inherited” pacifism can explain some Adventists’ refusal to take up arms, it fails to account for other diverging views held by the members of this schismatic movement, most notably vegetarianism and their firm anti-divorce stance. Moreover, a Nazarene background cannot adequately explain the emergence of pacifistic Adventist movements in countries where there were no Nazarenes at the time. However, this explanation is highly context-sensitive and not applicable worldwide.

Another reason that might have contributed to the schism among the Yugoslavian Adventists in Vojvodina perhaps had a non-religious background and may have had to do with nationalistic tensions inside the community. Since at least a decade before the First World War ended, the leading members of the SDAC were “foreigners,” Max Ludwig, Robert Schillinger, and Albino Močnik, two Germans and a Slovene. Before the official break-up, while the leaders of the latter schismatic movement were still members of the SDAC, Močnik complained that ethnic animosity was causing internal problems. In the unpublished article cited earlier, Močnik described how Pavle Krainean, who was of Romanian ethnicity, had wanted to preach among Romanians, whereas Živan Janać, an ethnic Serb, had wanted to limit their missionary activities to Serbs.⁵⁰ Because of his allegedly “too liberal” interpretations of the Scripture, Krainean

47 M. Šušlić, op. cit. 222.

48 Draško Đenović, “Male adventističke i subotarske zajednice i pokreti u Srbiji” [Small Adventist and Sabbatarian communities and movements in Serbia], in *Protestantizam u Srbiji: prilozi za istoriju reformacijskog nasleđa u Srbiji, tom I* [Protestantism in Serbia: contributions to the history of the Reformation heritage in Serbia, volume I], eds. Branko Bjelajac (Belgrade: Alfa & Omega, 2003), 190.

49 Aleksandra Đurić-Milovanović, *Double Minorities in Serbia: Distinctive Aspects on the Religion and Ethnicity of Romanians in Vojvodina* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2015), 80.

50 Albin Močnik, *Otpad posle 1914* [Waste after 1914] (Unpublished document), 11.

was punished by the SDAC officials and moved from his native Banatsko Novo Selo to Slavonska Požega. According to the SDAC sources, the Adventists from Banatsko Novo Selo, predominantly ethnic Romanians, did not take kindly to his relocation, accusing the “foreign” leadership of the local Adventists of depriving them of their “favorite preacher.” Those ethnic Romanians, alongside some local ethnic Serbs, joined Krainean when he returned to the village after his exclusion from the SDAC to form a new Adventist community. Adventist historian Milan Šušljic claims that this break-up between SDAC members undoubtedly had a nationalistic and ethnic background.⁵¹ Although convinced that the excommunication of Krainean, Janać, and Ostojić was morally correct, Močnik wondered whether the emergence of a schismatic movement could have been prevented if those three preachers had been allowed to work in their preferred ethnic groups.⁵²

Problems with church formation

The internal problems the Adventists faced after the end of the First World War were just a reflection of a much larger obstacle the community struggled with at this time. Other problems included the widespread politicization of Adventism in the press and constant suspicions about the “true nature” and “motives” of their work in the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia, mostly coming from the SOC clergy and some political circles. Some Adventists’ refusal to take part in the war, like their avoidance of military service in the new Kingdom, additionally bolstered the “anti-cult” discourse that had existed since the pre-war period.

While criticism of Adventism was quite present in public discourse, the movement continued growing, with all of its groups attracting a certain number of converts. However, while the members of the Reform movement held on to their anti-military stance, local SDAC, with Albin Močnik being by far the most vocal, started a campaign to distance themselves from the non-militant schismatic group and prove their patriotism. Even before the war ended, in 1917, Močnik published an article in the SDAC periodical *Misionski poslanik* (later renamed *Glasnik*), providing a theological explanation and argumentation in favor of a pro-militant stance.⁵³

In the following two decades, his writings mostly revolved around two points: distancing the SDAC from the Reform movement and trying to convince the state leadership that “true” Adventists were a patriotic

51 M. Šušljic, op. cit. 207.

52 Albin Močnik, *Otpad posle 1914* [Waste after 1914] (Unpublished document), 12.

53 Albin Močnik, “Hrišćanin i rat” [Christian and the war] *Misionski poslanik* 1–2, (1917), 29–40.

group keen to serve their country whenever needed. Shortly after the establishment of the Kingdom, adult men were invited to fulfill their duty and sign up for military service. While SDAC members accepted the call, proponents of the Reform movement refused to do so, leading to some confusion as the members of both groups called themselves Adventists.⁵⁴ According to some sources, to distance themselves, a few “zealous” members of the SDAC reported the existence of a schismatic Adventist group influenced by the pacifistic teachings of the Nazarenes to the authorities.⁵⁵ This attempt proved futile, and in 1921, the Ministry of Religion banned both religious groups, most likely because of the sweeping belief that all Adventists were staunch pacifists. Interestingly enough, a narrative regarding the Adventists presented in different state-owned periodicals appears to have been heavily influenced by the community’s legal status. A year after both Adventist groups were banned, Krstelj, the Minister of Religion, in 1922 lifted the ban on “Adventists of the Hamburg direction” (referring to the SDAC), while the activities of the “International Missionary Community of the Seventh-day Adventists” (Reform movement) remained prohibited. So, while writings about Adventists after their official prohibition were mostly negative, as we will show later, an earlier mention of the Adventists from the 1920s described them quite neutrally as literal interpreters of the Bible who believe in the Second Coming, whose members are baptized in rivers like John the Baptist baptized Jesus, and have an obligation to be faithful and moral.⁵⁶

This proved quite challenging given that numerous anti-Adventist “warnings” and accusations emerged in the press in the early 1920s, claiming that Adventism had a political background and was destabilizing and undermining the ethnic unity of Serbs⁵⁷ and that the community itself was being “propagated” from the USA.⁵⁸ Although (financial) support from the “West” often featured as the primary reason for the growth of Adventism, some saw the conversion of the local (ethnic Serb) population as a result of the SOC clergy’s inadequate care for the religious and charity needs of the Orthodox population.⁵⁹ These early writings from the early 1920s anticipated another prohibition that followed in 1923, shortly after the SDA church was declared legal, forcing SDA officials to resume their fight for their status in society. Occasionally, some journals

54 M. Šušljic, op. cit. 248.

55 B. Bjelajac, *Protestantizam u Srbiji, tom II*, 122.

56 “Sedmodnevne adventiste” [Adventists of the seventh day], *Žastava* 39-LII, (1921), 39.

57 “Protiv adventista” [Against the Adventists], *Žastava* 231-LIV, (1923), 2.

58 “Vesti” [News], *Žastava* 55(LIV), (1923), 2

59 “Širenje adventista” [Expansion of the Adventists], *Žastava* 255-LIII, (1922), 2.

published articles on the Adventists with no negative connotations about the community itself. One such text described the Adventists as “harmless and good people” who live according to the laws of God and refrain from cursing, drinking, and eating pork while helping the poor, being loyal to the state, and duly signing up for military service.⁶⁰

The Adventists’ predominantly negative public image, heavily promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church and politicians close to it, influenced an “anti-sectarian” stance widespread in the country’s general population. Living in a period that saw the emergence and growth of various religious “innovations,” many people in both rural and urban areas, members of traditional religious communities, carefully monitored the activities of their “sectarian” co-residents, constantly wondering about their true intentions. One such example came from the village of Čukojevac, close to the town of Kraljevo, where a local village chief noticed an Adventist presence. He described them as a predominantly male religious sect (with just one female member) whose members were Biblical literalists, strict vegetarians, and opponents of marriage. Interestingly, the same source claimed that the members of this group were mostly fellow villagers who had had “sinful youth” and were now using religion as a coping mechanism to deal with their past. Moreover, he opined that even if village officials rapidly reacted and prevented any further missionary activities of this group, it was still doubtful if they would be able to attract any significant number of villagers, given their conservative mentality.⁶¹ In rural areas, villagers sometimes were openly hostile or even aggressive towards the Adventists, causing additional problems for the members of this religious group.

While various religious and spiritual communities were seen as “foreign factors” that needed to be closely monitored, the “defeatism” of the Nazarenes and some Adventist groups, allegedly “purposely promoted from abroad”,⁶² marked these two religious communities as anti-state actors. In 1924, this perception eventually led to the imprisonment of approximately 2,000 Nazarenes,⁶³ with around 1,400 of them from Vojvodina,⁶⁴ and the state’s non-recognition of all Adventists.⁶⁵ In a document addressed to the Orthodox clerics and the administration of the City of Belgrade, Minister Janić noted that the government was well

60 “Poslednji dani” [The last days], *Politika* 5526, (1923), 5.

61 Archive of Yugoslavia, fond no. 69, fascicle no. 64, article number 3482 from the 02.01.1923.

62 “Pitanje adventista i nazarena” [Question of Adventists and Nazarenes], *Vreme* IV-736, (1924), 1.

63 Aleksandra Đurić-Milovanović, Mirča Maran & Biljana Sikimić, *Rumunske verske zajednice u Banatu* [Romanian religious communities in Banat] (Vršac: Visoka škola strukovnih studija za obrazovanje vaspitača “Mihailo Pavlov”, 2011) 55.

64 B. Bjelajac, *Protestantizam u Srbiji, tom II*, 57.

65 “Ekspoze ministra vera” [Expose of the minister of religion] *Zastava* 5, (1924), 1.

within its legal rights to prevent the activities of religious groups whose teachings were incompatible with the law and were undermining it. He accused the Adventists and Nazarenes of not fulfilling their civic duties, undermining the country's reputation, and purposely weakening the resolve of the people to advance their foreign goals. To prevent them from "fulfilling their mission," Janić proposed shutting down all of their houses of worship, dismantling their organization, and banning their preachers from doing any missionary work.⁶⁶ By 1925, the Adventists, alongside the Nazarenes and Methodists, remained officially unrecognized by the state, unlike eleven other groups, including some (neo-)Protestant ones, e.g., the Evangelicals and Baptists.⁶⁷

Despite the non-recognition of Adventist religious communities, including the pro-military and pro-government SDA, and constant accusations of being "undoubtedly politically motivated"⁶⁸ and "foreign agents whose goal [was] the destruction of Orthodox Christianity and Serbian nationalism",⁶⁹ SDA officials continued trying to share their side of the story, which had, purposely or accidentally, remained unheard by the state officials. To that end, in 1925, Albin Močnik published a book entitled *Adventizam* [Adventism], in which he explained the fundamental beliefs of the SDA, dedicated several pages to the distinction between divergent Adventist groups, and offered "proof" and the theological underpinnings of the congregation's patriotism and pro-military sentiment.

To explain the roots of the confusion, Močnik recounted that in 1920, a few individuals, mostly concentrated near the town of Pančevo, the village of Banatsko Novo Selo, and the surrounding area, had established a separated Adventist community, misinterpreting the doctrines about taking oaths, carrying arms, and marital sexual relations. Even though these individuals had been expelled from the SDA church, the fact that their newly established religious group carried an almost identical name probably gave rise to the confusion that eventually marked all Adventists as "defeatists".⁷⁰ Elsewhere in the book, Močnik presented reports and pictures of various Adventists who had participated in the First World War, with some even receiving decorations and medals for their service, as proof of the patriotism and heroism shown by the members of this religious group during the Great War.⁷¹

66 Archive of Yugoslavia, fond no. 69, fascicle no. 64, article number 69–282–462, 5 May 1924.

67 "Zakon o dozvoljenim i zabranjenim verama" [Law about the allowed and prohibited faiths], *Vreme* 5–1143, (1925), 3.

68 "Sektanti", op. cit. 262.

69 "Sarajevski adventisti" [Adventists from Sarajevo], *Bratstvo*, 1–6 (1925), 142.

70 Albin Močnik, *Adventizam* [Adventism] (Belgrade: Odbor zajednice Jugoslovenskih Adventista S.D, 1925) 113–118.

71 Ibid. 112–118.

Močnik's book was published in a period that seems to have been the peak of Adventist persecution in the Kingdom of SCS. Banning the Adventists and the Nazarenes by the Minister of Religion, Vojislav Janić, also meant the prohibition of their public gatherings, including closing down their places of worship.⁷² For the Adventists, whose evangelization tactics primarily relied on colportage, this also meant banning their missionary activities. To prevent the Adventists from gathering and spreading their "anti-state propaganda," the police launched some actions, including breaking into an Adventist meeting in Palilula (an urban settlement in Belgrade) and the arrest of around 40 members and confiscation of the literature intended for distribution.⁷³ After an investigation, the arrested Adventists were released, but the authorities decided to press charges and sent the paperwork to the court.⁷⁴ Shortly after their prohibition, writings about the Adventists continued to appear in different journals, with some warning that their and the Nazarenes' activities were not being monitored closely enough, leading to the rapid growth of these congregations, whose number in the Kingdom, according to this source, had reached "around 150.000" in 1925.⁷⁵ Interestingly enough, while all Adventist religious groups in the country in this period were banned and persecuted, some other sabbatarian groups fared much better. One of those groups was an obscure sabbatarian movement called *Novozavetni sionisti* [New Testament Zionists], which operated as a denominational union, just like non-aligned sabbatarians from Belgrade and the village of Sivac, who Vojislav Janić, Minister of Religion, allowed to openly preach their beliefs, while their publications had to be authorized by the Ministry of Religion prior to distribution.⁷⁶

The leading members of the SDAC saw the 1926 appointment of a new minister of religion, Miloš Trifunović, as an opportunity to try and change their legal status. To do so, some sent a request to the newly appointed minister to allow their meetings in private houses, claiming that their beliefs and practices were not against any law.⁷⁷ The same year, hundreds of Nazarenes were incarcerated for refusing to actively participate in military exercises, with some facing ten years of imprisonment, which was the case in the town of Veliki Bečkerek (modern Zrenjanin).⁷⁸ Backed into a corner, Nazarenes had no choice but to follow the Adventists' example in their struggle for official recognition and a generally better status

72 "Zabranjene verske sekte". *Žastava* 256-LVI, (1925), 1.

73 „Upad policije u skrovište adventista“. *Vreme* V-1156, (1925), 5.

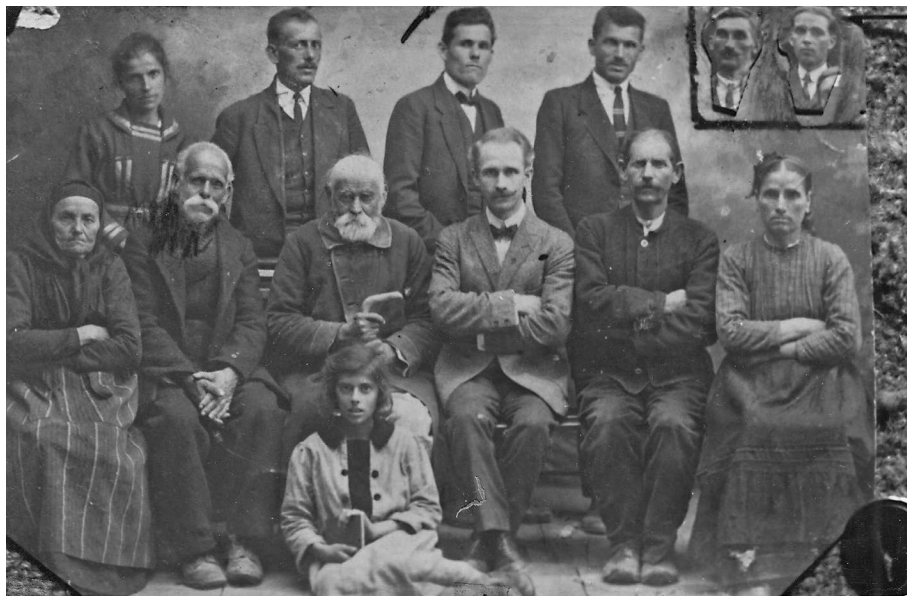
74 Ibid.

75 "Sektanti i naša crkva". *Bratstvo* I-3, (1925), 69.

76 D. Đenović, op. cit. 216–217.

77 "Adventisti" [Adventists], *Vreme* VI-1464, (1926), 2.

78 B. Bjelajac, *Protestantizam u Srbiji, tom II*, 59.



Albin Močnik with Adventist believers, 1920

in society. Shortly after the Adventists, the Nazarenes sent five representatives to Minister Trifunović's office, asking for a more favorable status for their religious group.⁷⁹

Even though SDAC members persistently attempted to change their legal status and the negative attitude towards them in society, the following period saw several additional reports of the Adventists' difficulties. Different written sources from this time provide insight into the troubles of ordinary Adventists. For example, a telegram signed by an Orthodox priest, most likely from the town of Šabac, and addressed to the Ministry of Religion described that "they caught" an Adventist missionary called Stefan (Stephan) Pajić in the act of distributing Adventist "propaganda" by selling the books and preaching. Even though the missive did not specify whether Pajić encountered any problems, the author asked the Ministry officials if this religious group was recognized by the law of the Kingdom because the locals had noticed their activity.⁸⁰ Certain SDAC sources reported that three members from Macedonia, accused of "blasphemy", had been arrested and imprisoned for 10 days and banned from doing any missionary work in the future.⁸¹

79 "Pitanje nazarena" [The Nazarene question], *Vreme* VI-1495, (1926), 2.

80 Archive of Yugoslavia, fond no. 69, fascicle no. 64, article number 6538, 10th May 1926.

81 Đorđe, Šemković, „Nevolje u Mačedoniji“ [Troubles in Macedonia], *Glasnik* 2(II) (1927), 10–11.

Despite the undesirable position of the Adventists, Albin Močnik continued trying to find a solution to somehow change the legal status of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the last months of 1927, Močnik addressed another petition to the Ministry of Religion, reiterating that the prohibition of his Adventist congregation was baseless because they were not breaking any laws. To support his argument, Močnik named eight members currently serving the army, claiming that not only had they voluntarily signed up for military service but were among the best soldiers in the army. To additionally distance his congregants from extreme pacifism and prove his group's patriotism, he said that many Nazarenes who had converted to the SDAC had changed their stance regarding military service and took the oath, influenced by other believers.⁸² In 1927, while the persecution of Adventists was still ongoing, members of the SDAC published the official constitution of their community, providing the necessary information on their beliefs, organization, administration, and funding.⁸³ Again, the constitution explicitly said that this religious group respected the laws and that its members did not eschew any civic duties.⁸⁴

The Ministry of Religion had tight ties with the SOC. Its heads were often theologians or priests and routinely consulted with the SOC before making their decisions about religious minorities. State officials tended to see the clergy of the SOC and other traditional religious communities as experts on religious minorities, taking their writings, publications, and advice into consideration while making their decisions. In 1928, things began to change, and several state officials suggested to the head members of the SDAC to register their largest congregations as companies, which would allow them to gather and hold meetings. Therefore, the Belgrade congregation was registered as a company called *Preporod* [Revival], while the congregations in Zagreb and Novi Sad were registered as *Samarićansko društvo* [Samaritan society]. The SDAC continued functioning as a company until 1930 when it was finally recognized as a religious community.⁸⁵

Concluding remarks

Religious transfer in early 20th-century Yugoslavia played a significant role in reshaping the country's religious and social landscape. The spread of Adventism, like other neo-Protestant movements, represented a new

82 Archive of Yugoslavia, fond no. 69, fascicle no. 64, article number 14884, 17th September 1927.

83 Albin Močnik, *Ustav zajednice Jugoslovenskih adventista* [Constitution of the community of the Yugoslavian Adventists] (Belgrade, 1927).

84 Ibid. 10–11

85 M. Šušljic 2004, op. cit. 340–341; Močnik, Albin. “Naša zajednica prihvaćena” [Our community is accepted], *Glasnik* 5, (1930), 66–67.

religious element that faced both internal challenges and external opposition. Adventism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through missionary work and literature dissemination. It initially faced suspicion from the Serbian Orthodox Church and challenges due to its pacifist and health-focused beliefs, which differed from traditional religious norms and raised concerns about foreign influence. The schism within the Adventist community, primarily rooted in conflicting attitudes toward military service and nationalism, highlighted the complexities of religious identity in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Former Nazarenes who had converted to Adventism often retained their pacifistic beliefs, leading to tensions within the broader Adventist church. The state's distrust of Adventism, perceived as both a religious and a political threat, resulted in persecution, prohibition, and difficulties in church formation. Despite these challenges, the Adventists attempted to navigate the complex religious and political environment. They sought to align with the state, distance themselves from the more radical Reform Adventist Movement, and ultimately achieved legal recognition as a religious community by 1930. The Adventists' resilience and their ability to adapt organizationally and theologically underline the broader dynamics of religious transfer and accommodation in the rapidly changing socio-political context of interwar Yugoslavia. The interplay between religious minorities, state policies, and dominant religious traditions offers insight into how religious transfers can profoundly influence both religious groups and society at large.

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