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"Hidden Religious Landscapes":** Religious Minorities and Religious Renewal Movements in the Borderlands of the Serbian and Romanian Banat[1]

Abstract: The paper explores the ways religious grassroots actors in the borderlands contribute to the new understanding of cross border regions and religious groups in the space between the Serbian and Romanian Banat from the perspective of the anthropology of borders. The border region included in this paper was the place of interreligious and interethnic encounter, where religions and languages mixed and there was a continuous interaction between Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Protestants. By studying the region that had strong cultural, historical and religious connections, the aim is to provide new insights on the borders and religious groups that are understudied. This article explores the "liminal" character of religious identities, development of renewal movements and crossing symbolic boundaries with the examples of the "home-grown" religious movement of the Lord's Army (Rom. *Oastea Domnului*) emerged in the first decades of the 20th century.

Keywords: Orthodox Christian renewal movements, the Lord's Army, Romanians, grassroots religious movements, neo-Protestants, the Serbian and the Romanian Banat.

Introduction

Borders, especially in periods of their change, represent important symbolic boundaries between ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. From the perspective of ethnographic research on borders and borderlands, according to Marta Sánchez it "emerges as a methodology and a stance to deconstruct the ways in which ethnographers and ethnographies are radically situated in their own histories, and how radical contextualization of those histories is required

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to understand across borders and uncover the limits of cultural representation, language, and ethnography as a tool to understand the lives of people, their histories, and communities. Borders are necessarily evoked – geopolitical, social, cultural, national, regional, global, and personal ones, such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity".[2] As Victor A. Konrad argues, "it is necessary to change perspectives to focus on the dynamic interaction that occurs at the border and, in particular, on mobility, instead of focusing on the borderline. Moreover, borders of different types encourage and stimulate some actors or networks to participate more eagerly than others".[3]

Research on borders and religious groups in this part of Europe raises several important questions: What impact do the borders between nation states have on religious groups and their practices? How do borders echo and reverberate as religious geographies? What was the role of religious groups in crossing borders? What means were used by religious communities to preserve continuity or religious practices?

The border regions included in this paper were historically the places of interreligious and interethnic encounter, where religions and languages mixed and there was a continuous interaction between Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Protestants. The area of the Serbian and Romanian Banat is also characterised by the presence of different home-grown religious and renewal movements, as well as the presence of neo-Protestant groups. The movements of religious renewal among Orthodox believers date back to the end of the nineteenth century and occurred almost simultaneously in different areas of Europe, often taking the form of informal gatherings of believers.[4] The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by the development of their organizational capacities, which allowed them to become mass phenomena in the interwar period.[5]According to James Kapaló, "from the nineteenth century onwards a proliferation of movements, networks and splinter groups have emerged to occupy liminal or marginal spaces in relation to the official Church Orthodoxies of Central and Eastern Europe. The emergence of these groups has been interpreted as a symptom of the processes of late modernity in Orthodox societies. The increased mobility of people within the Russian Empire, new formations of the self-brought about by increased social differentiation and freedom of expression, and expo-

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[2] See M. Sánchez, "Ethnography Across Borders" In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. 28 Aug. 2019 (accessed 23 Sep. 2021) https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093–e-552.

[3] Victor Konrad, "Toward a Theory of Borders in Motion", *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *30*(1), (2015), 1–17.

[4] Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, Radmila Radić (eds). *Christian Orthodox Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 11–22.

[5] Ibid.

sure to religious diversity and missions from the West, especially in the form of Evangelical and radical Protestant groups, are all cited as catalysts for the dynamic and enthusiastic religious movements that appeared in the Orthodox East."[6]

The theoretical framework this research paper is based on relies on the concepts developed within the anthropology of border studies of P. Ballinger,[7] R. Alvarez,[8] H. Donnan and M. Wilson[9] and the liminal character of home-grown religious groups following the research of religious studies scholar, James Kapaló[10]. The paper is also based on the results of several ethnographic fieldworks in the Serbian and Romanian Banat with the focus on religious agency of non-nation forming religious minority groups of neo-Protestants and Orthodox Christian renewal communities. Contemporary research on religious expression and practice in the Serbian and Romanian Banat reflects the internal complexity and dynamics of religiosity in the region that has constantly faced various challenges, including shifting borders, ethnic and religious groups' diversity and migrations. This landscape in which people talk about ethnic and religious co-existence as a matter of history was a place of encounters with the Other. In the religious sense, this encounter was mostly a result of the spread of various forms of Reformation movements, in the form of new Protestant communities which had a significant influence on the emergence of the renewal movements as well.[11]

The paper focuses on the dynamics of religious practices in the border area of the Serbian and Romanian Banat, growth of movements of religious dissent and their existence during different historical periods, more precisely during the interwar period and during the communist era and the period of the so-called "hard" borders. Including a segment of contemporary ethnographic material, the paper also sheds light on the existence of renewal movements in the present-day Romanian communities in the Serbian Banat. The main research aim is to explore the ways grassroots actions in the borderlands contribute to

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[6] James Kapaló, "*Liminal* Orthodoxies on the Margins of Empire: Twentieth-Century Home-Grown Religious Movements in the Republic of Moldova", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 23:1 (2017), 33–51, DOI: 10.1080/13537113.2017.1273673

[7] Pamela Ballinger, "Authentic Hybrids, in the Balkan Borderlands", *Current Anthropology*, vol. 45, no 1, (2004), 31–60.

[8] Alvarez, R. R. "The Mexico – US border. The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, (1995), 447–470.

[9] Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson (eds.), *Borders. Frontiers of Identity, Nation, State* (Oxford, New York: Berg Press, 1999).

[10] James Kapaló, "*Liminal* Orthodoxies on the Margins of Empire", 33–51,

[11] Bojan Aleksov, "The Nazarenes among the Serbs: Proselytism and/or Dissent?", in: A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić, *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Eu*rope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 105–136.

the new understanding of cross border regions and religious groups in the space between the Serbian and Romanian Banat in different historical periods. By studying the region that had strong cultural, historical and religious connections, the aim is to provide new insights on the borders and religious groups that are understudied and to showcase examples of the permeability of borders for religious groups in different historical periods.

The emergence of neo-Protestant groups and the change of religious landscape

The Nazarenes were the first Protestant-origin religious group with a significant number of converts from the predominantly Orthodox population – Serbs and Romanians. The Nazarenes are colloquially called "Followers of Christ", "The New Believers", or "Evangelical Baptists". [12] The Nazarenes formed sizable communities mostly in rural settlements in the Banat and Bačka regions. In multiethnic and multidenominational Austria-Hungary, the Nazarenes were of a very mixed ethnic origin, which enabled their rapid spreading to different settlements.[13] As a movement of religious dissent, emphasizing strong community commitment, the Nazarenes were in conflict with the state authorities from the moment they appeared in the southern areas of Austria-Hungary. One of the strengths of this religious community was its ability to recruit members from all the ethnic groups that inhabited this ethnically mixed area. In spreading the Nazarene teachings and conversion, the use of the vernacular language and even several languages had an important role in religious services and hymn singing. In 1868 the British and Foreign Bible Society reported on the distribution of copies of the Bible among Serbs, stating that there were a large number of the Nazarenes. Before WWI there were 236 congregations and more than 86,000 believers in the Empire. Severe persecution of the Nazarenes started in the newly formed Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia and it continued in the communist time as well.

Beside the Nazarenes, the largest of the neo-Protestant groups were Baptist, Brethren, Pentecostal, and Seventh Day Adventists. The term "Protestant" refers to the denominations coming directly out of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation (Calvinists, Lutherans), while the Neo-Protestants, seen as off-shoots of Protestant churches, developed out of subsequent religious revivals and attempts to carry further the reforms of the sixteenth century Reformers.

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[12] See more on emergence of Nazarenes: Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Dissent Between the Modern and the National. Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850–1914* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag).

[13] Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, *Dvostruke manjine u Srbiji. O posebnostima u religiji i etnicitetu Rumuna u Vojvodini* (Beograd: Balkanološki institut SANU, 2015).

In the public discourse they were deemed sectarian, heretical, and dangerous proselytes. Their presence among both Serbs and Romanians was the most visible in the border regions of Banat, but also in other regions such as Bačka and Crișana-Maramureș, and their history, intimately linked to ethnic minorities (particularly Germans, Hungarians and Russians), made them particularly suspicious and a hindrance to projects of national consolidation. The neo-Protestants were perceived as a direct national threat by the Orthodox Church hierarchy, much of the Romanian elite, and by the government officials. Nevertheless, neo-Protestant congregations continued to grow despite marginalization.

There are a number of possible explanations why the growth of these religious minorities persisted and grew significantly especially in ethnically mixed areas (particularly among ethnic minorities). For some members, these communities offered the means for spiritual and even social advancement, seen in the increased literacy as a result of the emphasis on the Bible reading within these communities. The importance of an individual in the decision of repentance through baptism was evident but its efficacy lay in the public acknowledgement of new commitments, which was stressed to the body of believers. Despite the fact that all of them practised adult baptism, their theologies, rituals, and aesthetics of communal worship were different. Their unique relationship between the individual and the community was formed through the importance placed on an individual reading the Bible as God's word, through giving the personal testimony (speaking the word read) in the presence of the church community, and then through engaging in corporate singing of the word that had been read and whose potency had previously been testified through personal accounts.

As Birgit Meyer argues in relation to aesthetics and meaning, for neo-Protestant groups the sensational form developing around the icon was replaced by the one which developed around the Bible. Among the growing neo-Protestant communities, the power that a religious artefact is perceived to have over a person, as Meyer describes it, is seen in the power attributed to the physical Bible, and reverence toward it due to the words inside.[14]

The Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in the Balkans

The emergence of these new religious communities at the end of the nineteenth century had a profound social, cultural and political impact on the region in the following decades. In this encounter with the *religious Other*, the Orthodox churches responded differently. In the dynamic and polyphonic religious sphere during the interwar period, new religious impulses significantly contri-

[14] Birgit Mayer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109(4), 741–763.

buted to the emergence of several renewal movements within different Orthodox Churches. What was common for all these renewal movements among Orthodox believers was their simultaneous appearance in different areas of South-eastern and Eastern Europe.[15] From the period of early Christianity, there have been movements that aimed to intensify religious experience and life. Thus "since the early centuries Christianity has known movements that have intensified and radicalized religious life. The aim of such movements has often been to regain the simplicity and zeal of the church of New Testament days, or to restore some lost or neglected aspect of primitive church life. Sometimes such movements leave a lasting mark on Christian teaching, institutions, worship and patterns of conduct. Some deeply affect the institutional church; some divide it; some are driven from it; some run into the sand. All reflect a desire to renew the Christian community, to bring to it new life and vigor".[16]

Reform movements, apostasy from the Orthodox Church and desires for restoration had already begun in Russian Orthodoxy in the late eighteenth century and lasted until the first half of the twentieth century.[17] They were born as a reaction to the general crisis in the Russian Orthodox Church. The evangelical movements of Stundism (*Maliovantsy*), Pashkovism and Baptism that had begun to spread in the nineteenth-century Imperial Russia, particularly in Ukraine, had a significant influence on Orthodox believers and others.[18]

In Greece, the community founded by Apostolos Makrakis in 1876 ran Sunday schools for children, philosophical lectures and sermons for adults and published its own magazine "Logos". In 1907, Makrakis collaborated with Archimandrite Eusebios Matthopoulos and founded Zoe. The community expanded after 1927, when Archimandrite Seraphim Papakostas took over the lead and started opening hundreds of catechetical schools for young people. Zoe functioned as a community, having an almost semi-monastic character. According to Logotheti ,"the main purposes of Zoe were twofold: the spiritual growth of its members according to the principles of Orthodox spirituality and com-

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[15] For a more detailed overview of different Orthodox Christian renewal movements see: A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić (eds.) *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe*.

[16] A. Walls, L. Sanneh, B. Stanley, Religious Movements of Renewal, Revival and Revitalisation in the History of the Mission and World Christianity, 2012 (https://divinity.yale.edu/faculty-research/programs-and-initiatives/yale-edinburgh-group-world-christianity-and-history-mission/religious-movements-renewal-revival-and-revitalization-history-missions-and-world-christianity)

[17] Sergei I. Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millenialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830–1917* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004).

[18] A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić (eds.) *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe*, 14.

plete dedication to the expansion of Orthodoxy within Greece in a framework of growing urbanisation and secularisation".[19] The main mission of Zoe was to introduce reform to the Church, as it was the case with other renewal movements.

According to Galina Goncharova, the Bulgarian case is specific. The White Cross monastic fraternity in Bulgaria shows how renewal movements functioned when they succeeded in negotiating church politics and aligning them with ecclesiastic and national goals. Influenced by the Protestant example, the brotherhoods had a communal, semi-monastic character and accepted the three virtues of traditional Orthodox monasticism: celibacy, poverty and obedience. The case of the Union of the Christian Orthodox Fraternities in the Kingdom of Bulgaria was to some extent different because it was founded within the framework of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The main reason for its establishment was to foster monasticism in the country and revive the influence of the Church in society. It was inspired by Catholic orders and social organizations such as the Red Cross and the Child Protection Union, and it combined monastic life with social activities and public events. It consolidated existing organizations at the parish level "into one living spiritual body", validated charity as a meaningful relationship between the clergy and laity and supported the restoration of the traditional authority of the BPC in social and national terms.[20]

The renewal movements were all characterized by intensity of personal religious experience, holiness, discipline, communion, Scriptural authority, the use of vernacular languages in liturgical practice, hymn chanting, prayer, and the revival of pilgrimages and monasticism. There are sources that confirm the first founder of the so-called Pious (Ser. *Pobožni*) group, as the initial informal bands of the new religious movement were called, was Vitomir Maletin (1826–1873), a pious peasant and church sexton in Padej in Banat. His mystical visions, which he described in two booklets, were widely read and attracted a following among peasants in neighbouring villages. The God Worshippers (Ser. Bogomoljci) developed a life almost independent from the Church. However, they saw themselves within the 'framework of Orthodox Faith'. They also adopted some of the protestant principles: worship services in the native language, singing hymns, reading and interpretation of the Bible, printing religious brochures. Informal groups of believers would gather for prayer meetings at homes on which occasions they were reading parts of the New Testament. They also organized

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[19] Amarylis Logotheti, "The Brotherhood of Theologians Zoe and its influence on the twentieth century Greece". in: A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić, *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Eur*ope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 285–302.

[20] Galina Gonchareva, "The Case of *Chrystianka Journal:* The Bulgarian Orthodox Charity Network and the Movement for Practical Christianity", in: A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Eur*ope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 303–322.

regular pilgrimages to Orthodox monasteries. They lived almost ascetic lives, avoiding alcohol and tobacco; they dressed modestly and they called each other 'brother' or 'sister'. The God Worshippers took over some of the hymns from the Nazarene hymnbooks and published them in the first hymnbooks of their own. The religious practices of the God Worshippers resembled a great deal those of the Nazarenes, which themselves were created under the influence of one of the radical fractions of the Reformation – Pietism. Their mission was a moral renewal of people through the faith in God, spiritual awakening and spreading of the Holy Gospel, increased piety of the folk, through establishing brotherhoods and gathering at the God Worshippers' congregational meetings. The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by the development of their organizational capacities, which allowed them to become mass phenomena in the interwar period. The established churches responded differently according to the specific circumstances, but most sought to channel these movements, aware that they could provoke religious renewal but also might have devastating consequences if they developed beyond the Church control. The appearance of these movements was significantly influenced by the spread of Evangelical or neo-Protestant movements, since their number grew dramatically in the interwar period (Baptists, Nazarenes, Brethren, Seventh Day Adventists). Orthodox reforms, such as regular preaching, were a response to the Nazarene influence. In particular, the God Worshippers belonging to a grassroots movement emphasizing individual piety and holiness learned to read the Bible from the Nazarenes. Therefore, it could be said that Orthodox churches encountering these new forms of religious expression that emphasized personal religiosity responded in a struggle to redefine religion in the 20th century.

How was the Lord's Army movement founded?

Simultaneously with the emergence of the God Worshippers, the Lords Army (Rom. *Oastea Domnului*) was founded in Sibiu by the Romanian Orthodox priest Iosif Trifa in 1923. Iosif Trifa was a village priest in Vidra de Sus in Alba where he served from 1911 until 1921. Upon the call of Nicolae Bălan, Metropolitan of Ardeal, to come to Sibiu, Trifa became the chaplain of the theological academy, director of a church orphanage and he established a newspaper called the "Light of the Villages" (Rom. *Lumina Satelor*). Balan completed his studies at the University of Czernowitz and later studied Protestant and Catholic theology in Breslau. His efforts in promoting the Bible study and increasing theological literacy among Romanians led to his support of publishing the Light of the

Villages newspaper with the main aim of reaching out to peasants.[21] It was a period of growth of the neo-Protestant or Repenter's communities among Romanians. Thus, the need for preaching and consolidating religiosity in the Orthodox Church was one of the central motives. Trifa published a pamphlet "What is Lord's Army?" (Rom. *"Ce este Oastea Domnului?"*) in which he emphasized the importance of morality of believers, preaching the Holy Gospel, singing hymns, reading the Bible and prayer. As early as the 1920s, Trifa's journal *Lumina satelor* was regularly sent to some parish libraries. In the spreading of the Lord's Army movement one of the most important roles was held by various articles in the newspapers, especially in the 1920–1930 period. The aim of these articles was to popularize the movement among the readers. The mission of the movement was the moral renewal of people through faith in God, spiritual awakening, the expansion of the role of the Gospels in lay worship and increasing people's piety through fraternities and assemblies. The movement growth was rapid and impressive. *Lumina satelor* reported that the movement reached 60,000 members in 1932. New members had to sign an oath and in every new newspaper issue, new members were announced. Sometimes, their personal stories of joining the movement were also included. The distribution of printed material, newspapers, hymnbooks and pamphlets had a significant impact on the movement spreading in the country but also across borders in the Romanian parishes that existed in the neighbouring regions such as the Serbian and Hungarian Banat. In over 40 books he wrote, Trifa was stressing the importance that sinners should return to the right path of salvation through the faith in Jesus Christ. "Soldiers", the colloquial name for the members of the movement, could be recognized by the way they behaved: not drinking alcohol, smoking and swearing, reading the Bible, praying, calling each other "brother and sister". Their personal spiritual rebirth was very similar to the neo-Protestant discourse of conversion. Another similarity with neo-Protestant communities was demonstrated in free and inspired sermons and prayers, personal devotion, singing hymns backed up with musical instruments, which very much resembled neo-Protestant communities. In his monograph *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania: the Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-building*[22], Roland Clark argues that the Lord's Army is an example of liminal Orthodoxy emerged in Transylvania. Responding to repeated complaints, according to Clark, "about apathy and irreligion of Romanian Orthodox believers, a number of church leaders engaged in concerted campaigns to renew the interest of parish priests and lay Christians alike in attending church ser-

[21] Roland Clark, *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania. The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 145–146.

[22] Roland Clark, *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania. The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building*.

vices, reading the Bible and cultivating holy living".[23] Religious poetry, which was one of the central elements of the Lord's Army religious practice, developed in the late 1930s by Trifa's followers Ioan Marini, Traian Dorz and Simion Paraschiv. The songs used were reflecting the questions of salvation, love for Jesus Christ and the importance of gathering as a community of believers. Due to the complicated relationship and personal disagreements, Bălan removed Trifa from the leadership position and took over the movement as well as the printing house. In 1932 when Bălan took control over the movement, the movement also introduced certain changes, turning its course to a more nationalistic orientation.[24] Trifa died in 1938 and the movement leadership was taken over by teacher Ioan Marini together with a young Christian poet Traian Dorz until the movement was banned by the communist authorities in 1949. Clark notes that "communists would arrest anyone who continued holding meetings, but despite heavy persecution the movement outlived socialism and continues today as a parachurch movement affiliated with the Romanian Orthodox Church."[25]

The Lord's Army across the border in the Serbian Banat

In the early 1930s, the Lord's Army started to spread among Romanians in the Serbian Banat. As an integral part of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Romanian parishes in the Serbian Banat maintained a strong connection with the dioceses in Caransebeș and Arad, from which they received circular letters, journals, and other publications. The parish libraries from the Serbian Banat were on the list for the regular reception of the journal *Lumina satelor*: Mramorak, Ecica, San Mihai (Lokve), Sarcia (Sutjeska). From the circular letters and exchange that existed between local priests and Eparchies in Romania, it can be seen that a lot of uncertainty and tensions emerged in the 1930s period when the movement gained more visibility and influence. Church leaders were constantly underlining that the the Lord's Army movement was emerging from the Romanian Orthodox Church and that local branches should be led by the Romanian Orthodox priests only. The role of the local priests was even discussed at the Holy Synod meeting in 1931 in Bucharest.[26] In one of the circular letters, archbishop of Caransebeș Iosif Traian Bădescu wrote that "the Lord's Army was established with the main aim to confront the emergence of sects, to raise reli-

[23] Ibid, 35.

[24] Ibid. 164–165.

[25] Ibid. 166.

[26] Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, Mircea Măran, *Biserica Ortodoxă română din Banatul iugoslav in perioada interbelică (1918–1941)*, (Cluj Napoca, Caransebeș: Presa Universitară Clujeană, Editura Episcopiei Caransebeșului, 2019), 166.

giosity and morality of people, to promote anti-alcoholism. It is important that in the lead of each local branch we have a priest in front."[27] He emphasized that the movement represents "a reaction against sects which exist among our people, which aims to intensify religious experiences"[28]. The attitude regarding the new movement was ambivalent. One of the reasons were religious songs which were one of the main identity markers of the Lord's Army. However, they were very similar to those of neo-Protestant communities.

The first significant meeting of the Lord's Army movement in the Serbian Banat was held in Sveti Mihailo on August 16, 1931. One of the common religious practices for renewal movements were pilgrimages. In the interwar period, one of the main pilgrimage sites was the monastery of Malo Središte (Rom. *Pârneaora*), where both the Lord's Army and God Worshippers gathered starting from 1933.[29] The call for pilgrimage was announced in the church press for the members of the community across the border in Romania.[30] All Romanians from the Serbian Banat were invited to take part in the pilgrimage on September 14 for the Feast of the Holy Cross (Rom. *Înălţarea Sfintei Cruci*). Around 3,000 of believers from 50 localities of the Serbian but also Romanian part of Banat, gathered in this pilgrimage with great enthusiasm from 1933 to 1935.[31] There was even a record stating that one of the pilgrims said to the priest: "Father, for Jesus even the border is open" (Rom. "Parinte, pentru Cristos și granița se deschide").[32] One of the pilgrimages took place in 1935, organized by the local Lord's Army along with choirs' members from Uzdin, Nicolinț and Sân-Mihai. Publications in the Romanian language published in the Serbian Banat in Vršac (ex. *Nădejdea*, *Foaia Poporului Român*) and Caransebeș (ex. *Foaia diecezană*) regularly reported on pilgrimages organized in the two most relevant sites for the Lord's Army in the Serbian Banat: Malo Središte and Seleuš.

In the interwar period, alongside the Lord's Army, the Romanian Orthodox Church tried to strengthen its position by establishing other associations of a religious character, such as the Society of Saint Gheorghe (Rom. *Societatea Sfântul Gheorghe*) and the Holy Mother Parasheva (Rom. *Cuvioasa Pa-*

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[27] A.P.P. Protocolul circularelor, 1925, no. 81, 65–66.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Mircea Măran, "The *Oastea Domnului* (Lord's Army) Movement in the Serbian Banat", in: A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Eur*ope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 277.

[30] *Iisus Biruitorul*, nr. 34 din 18 august 1935, Sibiu, p. 2.

[31] Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, Mircea Măran, M. *Biserica Ortodoxă română din Banatul iugoslav in perioada interbelică (1918–1941).* Presa Universitară Clujeană, Editura Episcopiei (Cluj Napoca, Caransebes: 2019), 80.

[32] A.P.P. nr. 215/1937

raschiva). These two societies had no success or long-term existence among the Romanians in the Serbian Banat because of the active cultural life that already existed.[33] After 1949 the Lord's Army movement was officially banned in Romania by the communist government. Their gatherings were prohibited, although communities tried to keep their religious activities in secret and underground.[34] However, this prohibition could not be consistently implemented in the Romanian parishes in the Serbian Banat: this was because the Yugoslav authorities tolerated the movement's existence. During the socialist period in Yugoslavia, new local branches were established in the village of Vojvodinci near Vršac in 1956. The status of the Church also deteriorated in socialist Yugoslavia, which meant that the local Lord's Army branches could not undertake activities at the pre-war level: some, apparently, even stopped gathering entirely, but a number of local parishes still had an active group of the Lord's Army members. According to Măran, at the end of the 1980s, the movement was active in the following localities: Alibunar (founded in 1971), Sočica (1980), Malo Središte (1980), Lokve (1972), Barice (1979), Straža (1973), Kuštilj (1985), Mali Žam (1972), Nikolinci (1972), Uzdin (1972), Ečka (1975), Veliki Torak (1984), Markovac, Seleuš (1975), Vršac (1980), Vojvodinci (1956), and Grebenac (1972). In 1998, a local branch of the Lords' Army was founded in Jablanka.[35]

During the communist period, religious communities, especially the persecuted minority groups, avoided leaving any written documents or other material traces of their community's history. This was especially noticeable in the Nazarene community whose history is difficult to trace in archival sources.[36] Other neo-Protestant groups had a similar "hidden identity". The marginalization of religious minorities was also caused due to their international and transnational networks and missionary work especially during the communist period. Some communities were persecuted for their pacifism and refusal to take an oath and carry arms in the military (Nazarenes, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists). Being condemned to long and repeated prison sentences, a number

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[33] Mircea Măran, "The *Oastea Domnului* (Lord's Army) Movement in the Serbian Banat", in: A. Djurić Milovanović and R. Radić (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Eur*ope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 276.

[34] More about underground religions during the communist period in Eastern Europe, see a recently published edited volume: James A. Kapaló and Kinga Povedák (eds.) *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-communist Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[35] Mircea Măran, "The *Oastea Domnului* (Lord's Army) Movement in the Serbian Banat", 279.

[36] Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, "The possibility of researching religious minorities in the secret police archives of the former Yugoslavia", in: James A. Kapalo and Kinga Povedak (eds.) *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-communist Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021), 289–302.

of community members emigrated, very often illegally crossing the border to Italy and Austria and searching religious freedom in the West.[37] Some communities were left without men while they were imprisoned for many years. Consequently, there was a significant role of women in these movements that preserved religious practices alive.

The period between 1947 and 1971 involved only a minimal contact between the religious communities in Romania and Yugoslavia, as no religious community was allowed to maintain relations with communities outside the country without an official approval. Due to their missionary activity, members of the neo-Protestant churches encountered problems with the communist authorities more often than any other religious group. Although the majority of neo-Protestant churches were active during the communist period, they were persecuted and their religious activities in the public space were strictly forbidden – suc as public baptisms in rivers or lakes, as well as organizing any sermon activities. Furthermore, the distribution of the Bible was limited. Members of the Baptist community were severely persecuted and illegal actions of smuggling religious books were sanctioned by the authorities, while the Bibles were confiscated. When these Bible smugglers[38] were discovered, they were accused of illegal trade (i.e. smuggling) and punished by imprisonment.[39] Beside the already-mentioned members of the Baptist communities in the border area, there were also trade channels involving foreign tourists who brought literature from the West to Romania between 1947 and 1989.[40] The Romanian secret police (Rom. *Securitatea*) took various actions to prevent these illegal imports into the country: namely, two actions named Channel 80 (Rom. *Canalul 80*) and Channel 81 (Rom. *Canalul 81*). During the Channel 80 action at the Stamora Moravița border crossing, the authorities confiscated 2,355 religious brochures, 20 audio tapes and 2,000 postcards with images of Jesus from a German 'tourist'.[41] The fieldwork I have conducted in 2010 among the Serbian communities

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[37] See: Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, "On the road to religious freedom": a study of the Nazarene emigration from South-eastern Europe to the United States, *Journal for Ethnography and Folklore* (2017), 5–27.

[38] In the European Baptist history, there were preachers who dedicated their lives to the needs of their Christian brothers in communist countries. One of them was Andrew van der Bijl (known as Brother Andrew), a famous Christian missionary who distributed Bibles during the Cold War in communist countries and who earned the nickname *God's Smuggler*.

[39] Aleksandra Đurić Milovanović, "Smuggling Bibles": Everyday Life of Baptist Serbs in Communist Romania," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 32 (4), (2012), 33–40.

[40] Denisa Bodeanu, *Neoprotestanții din Transilvania în timpul regimului comunist. Studiu de caz: Baptiștii din județul Cluj* (Cluj Napoca: Argonaut, 2007), 45.

[41] Elis Neagoe-Pleșa, and Liviu Pleșa, "Cultele neoprotestante din România în perioada 1975–1989," In Petcu Adrian Nicolae (ed.) *Partidul, Securitatea i Cultele: 1945–1989*

in the Danube Gorge (Rom. *Clisura Dunarii*) reveals continuous religious and personal connections across the border. This underground evangelism and missionary activity eventually led to an increased number of new believers in this region even during the period of the state repression:

> "During communism, we were allowed to go only 100 km away from our village. But we went further, crossing the border in Bela Crkva and then going even to Belgrade. It was good. The only problem was that they had Bibles and we did not." (Baptist, Pojejena)
> "In Yugoslavia, they had Bibles. Once when I went there, we had a blessed transport. But when I came to the customs, one Bible that I held under the coat fell down in front of a customs police officer. I was so afraid what would happen, but he did not see it. God made that, God made that he did not see anything" (Baptist, Pojejena). [42]

Foreign missionary organizations provided financial assistance necessary for building new prayer houses, printing Bibles and religious literature in all communist countries.[43] In 1968, as Fosztó stresses, "Baptists were the strongest denomination, with 66,670 members in 862 assemblies and growth in church accelerated during the most repressive years of Ceauşescu regime".[44]

For those neo-Protestants living in the border area, going to Yugoslavia to meet "brothers and sisters in Christ" from the neighbouring churches was the usual way of acquiring new literature in different languages. When it comes to Baptist Serbs living in the Romanian Banat, the vicinity of Yugoslavia encouraged their continuous religious and personal connections across the border.[45] This was not the only example of such cross-border religious contacts. Diverse religious groups deployed various means to spread their beliefs and practise their religion. Therefore, the border regions, places in-between in an anthropological sense, presented "hidden religious landscapes". One of the examples of transborder religious practices was an example from 1975. During the socialist years in Yugoslavia, a concrete cross was built in a village field near the border in order to be visible for the villagers' co-religionists on the far side in Romania.

(București: Editura Nemira, 2005), 368.

[42] Transcribed part of the ethnographic fieldwork material was published in: A. Djurić Milovanović, Serbs in Romania: Between Ethnic and Religious Identity, *Balcanica XLIII* (2010),117–142.

[43] Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the converted. Ukrainians and Global Evangelicalism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 139.

[44] László Fosztó, *Ritual revitalisation after socialism. Community, personhood and conversion among Roma in a Transylvanian village* (Berlin: Lit. 2009), 52.

[45] On the topic of borderline villages and collective memory from the perspective of the Serbian minority in Romania see the paper of Biljana Sikimić, "Poljadija: Život u pograničju", *Ishodišta* 6, (2020), 381–397.

This visualization of religious markers in the landscape can still be found in the border areas charting the "invisible" routes by which the borders were crossed by religious actors.

According to anthropologist Victor Turner, who reintroduced the concept of liminality into anthropological discourse, liminality, in terms of social structure and time, is an intermediate state of being *in between* in which individuals are striped from their usual identity and their constituting social differences while being on the verge of personal or social transformation.[46] Viewed in this frame, border regions fundamentally connect liminality and liminal activities, such as language, trade and religious practices which require transaction or crossings, with marginality, or being on the edge or the periphery,[47] generating centres of the creative or destructive potential. The shifting state boundaries, which also brought with them changing religious jurisdictions, demanded that actors, be they political, economic or religious, engage in "boundary work." Their existence represented the "embodied" acts of resistance to the emerging totalitarian regimes and the competing religious institutions of the time that were seeking the total control of the religious field and of spiritual life.[48]

Members of ethno-religious minority groups frequently crossed borders between states, between religious communities and between ethnic groups, acting as strong network and cohesion builders between two sides. In parallel, a similar phenomenon exists in some groups who crossed the boundaries – of their communities, state or ethnic/linguistic/religious groups, which brought new types of diversity.

Contemporary aspects of the movement

The ethnographic fieldwork of the present-day Lord's Army movement among Romanians shows that only few communities remained active within the local Romanian Orthodox Churches. Although, after the fall of communism in Romania, the Lord's Army movement was officially registered and intensified its activities especially with local parishes in the Serbian Banat, this did not result in the increased number of their members. Several new communities were founded, and some old ones were renewed. The community in the border village of

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[46] Victor W. Turner, Betwixt-and-between: The liminal period in rites de passage. In Turner, Victor W. *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–112.

[47] Arpad Szakolczai, "Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events," *International Political Anthropology* 2(1), (2009),141–172.

[48] James Kapaló, "*Liminal* Orthodoxies on the Margins of Empire: Twentieth-Century Home-Grown Religious Movements in the Republic of Moldova", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 23(1), (2017), 34.

Jablanka was founded on February 10, 1998 by cantor Iosif Căzan when he saw how women from the church gathered to sing after the church service.[49] With the support of branches from more numerous communities in the villages of Uzdin and Grebenac, a new 15-member community was established, according to my informant from Jablanka:

> "I was going to the church with my husband. We were a religious family, my husband would pray a lot before going to bed and I would do the same with him. One day our cantor Iosif Căzan brought members of the Lord's Army from Uzdin and Grebenac to our village. They were teaching us how to sing those songs. We went to Rugă Alba together, with people from other villages and from the Lord's Army to sing and to pray for the protection of the land and harvest. They would come with fanfares. My son also went there. *Did you have men in the Lord's Army?* Mostly women. *And why is that?* Well, women liked to pray more for children and family. Women would wear long skirts and head coverings. It was said that prayer was better heard if you covered your head with a scarf. *Did you gather with other Lord's Army communities?* Yes, in the Monastery of Malo Središte, all Lord's Army communities would gather from the Serbian Banat and sleep over in the monastery on September 14. We would sing and pray all night, dressed in Romanian folk costumes. Sometimes we would go to Biserica Alba (Ser. *Bela Crkva*) as our Bishop wanted to make this Romanian church alive again. We would gather there and sing and one day a white pigeon entered the church. It was a sign of the Holy Spirit and a blessing. Romanians would come from Romania to bring us books. *They came even in the communist time?* Yes, those who were living in the USA and had their passports. They could cross the border and bring us books. Books were printed in the USA in Romanian, the hymnbooks. *Did you have any other communities in the village?* Yes, we had Baptists. *You didn't have any Nazarenes?* No, this was more in *Pustă* near Lokve. In *Codru*, we had Baptists.[50] Sometimes they would invite us to sing as our songs were similar. And they would come to us. But once the priest told us not to mix with them as they didn't believe in the Mother of God and they were not on the right path but far from God's path. They would come to preach but I told them I didn't want to leave my ancestors' religion and I believed I should serve in the church where I was born."[51]

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[49] Recent studies indicate a significant number of women in both neo-Protestant and renewal/home-grown religious movements in Eastern Europe. See more in: Emily B. Baran, *Dissent on the Margins. How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach about it*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). James A. Kapaló, "She Reads me like a Prayer, and I read it Back to Her": a Gagauz Women, Miraculous Literacy and the Dreaming of Charms, *Religion and Gender*, vol, 4(1), (2014), 3–30.

[50] Romanians from the hills around Vršac are locally called *codreni* (highlanders) and those from the plain de la *pustă*.

[51] Interview was conducted with a member of the Lord's Army AS on September 11, 2021 in Romanian language.

Descriptions of the local community gathering show that singing would start with the song *Oh Lord, You Have Gathered Us* (Rom. *O, Doamne Tu ne-ai adunat*), written by "brothers" from Uzdin and printed in the hymnbook used by the Lord's Army movement among Romanian speaking communities:

O, Doamne, Tu ne-ai adunat pe toți aici să ne rugăm și-a Tale Sfinte-nvățături cu dragoste să te ascultăm	Oh, Lord, it is You who have gathered us all here to pray and to listen to Your Holy teachings with love.
Nădejdea Tu ne ești Hristoase, Preabunule Mântuitor In Tine au crezut toți sfinții Și-aflat-au mântuirea lor.	Hope is what you are, our Christ, most holy Saviour, all the saints believed in You, and in You they will find salvation.
Spre-o altă viață mai curată Tu pașii-ndreaptă-ni-i de sus Ca-n veci să fim mereu cu Tine Să Te slăvim in veci Isus...	From the Heavens our steps towards another purer life so that we may always be with You, to forever glorify You, Jesus

Women had very important roles in the transmission of religious knowledge, rituals, prayers, hymn singing and pilgrimages. Therefore, the gender dimension cannot be neglected when we discuss religious practices in the borderlands. An example of a local pilgrimage renewal where the Lord's Army has an active role is the Cross with Four Pillars.[52] The religious monument called The White Prayer or the Cross with Four Pillars (Rom. *Ruga Albă* or *Crucea cu patru stâlpi*) is the one of the most important religious symbols for the Romanians living in the border area.

Concluding remarks

Renewal movements represented communities which evolved and developed from Orthodoxy itself. The socio-historical context in which renewal movements developed was strongly influenced by the appearance of neo-Protestant communities who were perceived as "foreign" religions or new religions in this part of Europe. The influence of neo-Protestantism on the renewal movements' development indicated the need for change and development of Orthodox Christianity in a new and more dynamic direction. What attracted a number of converts from Orthodoxy into neo-Protestantism was often described as: personal relationship with God, singing and praying, personal reading of the Bible, more pious believers, rigorous abstinence from the "world" including alcohol,

[52] On the Cross with Four Pillars see the study: Aleksandra Đurić, "The Cross with Four Pillars as the Centre of Religious Gahtering: Discussing Micro Regional Identity", *Ethnologia Balkanica* 11, (2007), 171–184.

smoking, swearing, etc. Being a more committed believer meant being a "real Christian", devoted to live a life lead by Christian values. In this sense, the prevailing feeling regarding the situation in the Orthodox Church at the beginning of the century, where a number of believers were distanced from the church, was the one of dissatisfaction. The Lord's Army, as well as the God Worshippers, evolved out of Orthodoxy and developed into communities which had a number of similarities with neo-Protestants and were founded in the region with a high presence of neo-Protestant communities. Border regions, as places in-between, can be perceived as "hidden religious landscapes", but also as the places where religious agencies and networks can be strengthened. In this religious encounter with the religious Other, mutual influences, reactions, and even intergroup tensions, contributed to the development of renewal movements in a particular historical period. This research has revealed some aspects of lesser-known history, the ways people constructed their social relations through religion, and practised their faith in everyday life, while transcending the ethnic, linguistic and state boundaries. Religious minorities and home-grown religious movements spread in the liminal areas where permeability of both the state and other group/community boundaries had an important role in their existence.

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