Croatian Emigration

GeoJournal : An International Journal on Human Geography and Environmental Sciences

April 1996 vol. 38 no. 4, pages 431-436

The Republic of Croatia Mediterranean and Central European States

Emigration and emigrants from Croatia between 1880 and 1980

by Cizmic, Ivan, Institute for Applied Social Research, Zagreb, Republic of Croatia

Abstract: Croatia ranks among those parts of Europe which have taken very high part in all forms of emigration flows in almost all periods of the last few centuries. The emigration from Croatia was caused by different reasons, such as historical, political, national, religious, social and other. It started in the 16th century and has been going on more or less intensively in different historical periods up to now. The first emigrations were caused by Turkish invasion, and those from the later periods came as a result of economical, social and political circumstances in which population of Croatia lived at the time. About 500,000 people had emigrated from Croatia in the period from the end of the century up to World War I. Most of them went to the USA. World War I had made a break in the mass emigration. After the war the emigrant problem came up again, but with some essential changes which were the consequences of the war. World War II stimulated a great wave of emigration from Croatia. Emigration occurred either voluntarily or involuntarily. For the entire period 1948-1981, statistics show that modern overseas emigration from Croatia totalled roughly 140,000 persons. Finally, we would like to emphasize that the problem of emigration was and is still actual for the Croatian nation, especially in view of the fact that emigration from Croatia did not stop and continues up to this day. As a result, today two million and half Croatian immigrants and their descendants live abroad.

Emigration before World War I

Emigration from Croatia began as early as the fifteenth century and, with varying intensity, it has continued to this day. This emigration achieved mass proportions with the Turkish occupation of Croatian territory. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, thousands upon thousands of people saved their lives by settling in neighbouring lands.

While the first mass emigration was caused by the Turkish wars, later emigration was caused largely by new economic, political, and social conditions in the Croatian homeland.

In the second half of the nineteenth century poor economic conditions were the main reason for emigration. The years of poor harvest with their food shortages and unpaid loans and, in the maritime provinces, the decline of such industries as wooden-ship building, fishing, and wine-making, in addition to the political neglect of the region, triggered mass emigration. In spite of its economic nature, that emigration was also political.

The Croatian politician, S. Radic, notes in his book "Moderna kolonizacija i Slaveni" (Modern Colonization and the Slavs) that the reason for emigration is "that somewhere in the world there is more
good and justice" (Radic 1904).

One should also add to the reasons for emigration the efforts of young men to avoid military duty, as well as the tradition of "emigration for the sake of emigration", even when there were no personal reasons in particular. There were also reasons for emigration that were independent of developments in Croatian territory. The rapid industrial growth of certain countries, especially the United States, constantly attracted a new working force from underdeveloped countries. In connection with this component of migration we must single out the activity of countless agents of steamship companies and industrial concerns who convinced many people to emigrate.

The large number of roughly five hundred thousand people left the Croatian lands prior to World War II (Lakatos 1914).

The slow growth of the population and the decline of its density clearly shows that emigration had an unfavourable effect on the population increase in Croatia.

The return of the emigrants

To enable us to determine more clearly the consequences of emigration from Croatia, it is essential to note some of the basic characteristics of emigration and emigrants. The emigrants from Croatia belonged to the group of so-called "temporary emigrants", who, even before leaving their homeland had an "animus revertendi" or an "intent to return". At the beginning of our century, the temporary character of migration abroad was always stressed in Croatia as one of the peculiarities of Croatian emigration. However, conditions beyond their control forced quite a high percentage to remain abroad permanently for various reasons.

There are estimations that about one third of Croatian emigrants returned to their homeland. The decision whether to remain permanently outside or to return home depended primarily on the economic conditions of the immigrant (Kraljich 1978).

Profession, occupation, sex, and age of emigrants

Statistical data at our disposal show that over eighty-six percent of emigrants were peasants (Lakatos 1914). Urban emigrants included only a few shop assistants or apprentices; some craftsmen also asked for permission to emigrate but nevertheless, the proportion of apprentices was always small. In 1908, only 1,052 of the 20,472 immigrants were craftsmen. These men, however, also included sailors who had jumped ship. As we can see, the majority were peasants and day labourers: sixty-five percent of all emigrants in 1908, and seventy-four percent in 1909. Immigrants made a complete change of occupations in their new environment. Most of them found work as manual labourers in factories, in mines, in forestry, and on construction sites and the like. In the process, peasants became unqualified manual workers whose employment qualifications were earned during their long working lives.

In the beginning, emigration did not occur in family units. Typically, a young man who was underemployed at home was first sent to work abroad, to earn the money that the family needed for its various expenses: to repay debts, to build a house, and so forth. In the first period of emigration from Croatia to America there were very few women among the emigrants. Even during the era of mass immigration before World War I, a great majority of the Croatian immigrants were men. Because, as noted above, most of them did not intend to remain permanently in America, women stayed at home waiting for the men to return after spending several years abroad. Both the immigrants who travelled to America with the intention of staying there permanently, and those who changed their minds and decided to remain in America, faced difficulties and endured long years of waiting before their families could join
People who intended to emigrate did not normally have enough money at home to pay for the voyage. It was difficult to raise the fare and many ended up borrowing from relatives and friends who were in America already. When enough money had been collected, the man judged to be physically the strongest in the family went to America. He created the financial basis for the rest of the family; the women, children, and possibly the old people, to follow him.

In the years before World War I the percentage of women requesting permits to emigrate increased. They either set out to join their husbands, or to get married in America. In 1913, entire families in ever-growing numbers started to emigrate. Of the migrants of 1901 roughly ten percent were women but by 1912 this figure had increased to more than thirty percent.

Data were also collected about the age of the immigrants. According to age, the following percentage of persons emigrated in the period 1900-1912: 25.8 percent were under twenty; 35.6 percent were between twenty and twenty-nine; 24.3 percent were between thirty and thirty-nine; 13.3 percent were between forty and forty-nine; and 3 percent over fifty years of age (Lakatos 1914). Emigration statistics also show the level of education among Croatian emigrants and from these it is clear that one of the drawbacks they faced was their widespread illiteracy. Clearly, many of the difficulties that Croats encountered in their new environment arose because of their inability to read and to write. Between 1901 and 1904, over one third (almost thirty-four percent) of all Croatian emigrants were illiterate and in the period 1905-1909 this figure increased to almost thirty-five percent. Of the 367,239 Croats and Slovenes in the United States in this period, some 128,438, or almost forty-five percent, were illiterate.

Emigration in the inter-war period

Even after World War I the emigration from Croatia did not stop completely. This process continued although with a lower average of 18,000 people annually, because at that time the countries of immigration began most energetically, one after another, to limit the flow of emigration.

According to the records of the Emigration Department in Zagreb for the period beginning in January 1921 to the end of December 1939, a span of nineteen years, some 195,937 persons emigrated overseas. If the number of those who moved to European countries (88,642) between 1927-1934, is added to the above figure, the total number of emigrants is about a quarter of a million. Similar data on the number of emigrants from the former Yugoslavia can be obtained from compilations of statistical data in the countries of immigration and from the data of the Emigration Department in Zagreb.

According to this estimate, in the period between the two world wars, about 195,580 people immigrated overseas, the above data, from the Yugoslav service may be considered realistic. Sixty percent of the immigrants from the region of the former Yugoslavia were Croats (Holjevac 1967).

Besides overseas emigration, a movement that reached its peak during the inter-war years, the period under examination, that is, the period up to the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s, was characterized by pronounced return migration. The highest return migration rate of more than forty percent was recorded for Croatian migrants from the United States of America in the first five post-war years. The intensified return of emigrants from the United States is easy to understand in view of the fact that Croatian emigration to the United States had been occurring for some time.

However, the inability of industry in the Croatian homeland to employ significant numbers of returning emigrants, the rapidly spreading economic depression, and the fact that those who did return quickly spent their savings so that they did not have enough money to pay their travel expenses to leave again, contributed to the fact that the greatest part of South Slav emigrants never returned to their homelands. In
addition to these economic reasons we should also mention those of a political nature that discouraged migrants from returning; in particular, the oppression of the Croatian people that occurred in the former Yugoslavia between the two world wars.

The period between the two world wars is a special one in the history of emigration from the former Yugoslavia. Of a short duration of only eighteen years it was marked by significant economic, social, and political turmoil in the world. The United States of America, known until the early 1920s for its unrestricted and liberal immigration policy, imposed restrictions on immigration, taking a lead in regulated migration. The volume of international population movements was decreased by the years of war at the beginning and at the end of this period, and by what remains to this day the severest world economic crisis yet experienced. In individual years, the flows of migrants returning to their homeland gained momentum but at the same time, the former Yugoslavia could not successfully resolve economic, social, and political problems, which in turn contributed to continued emigration, especially from its traditional regions.

On the eve of World War II there were almost one million immigrants resident overseas and they were concentrated mostly in various industrialized parts of the countries of immigration. There were two main reasons for such high immigrant concentrations in the given regions. On the one hand, long-standing chain emigration from individual regions of Croatia led to a concentration of immigrants in the previously established enclaves; the enclaves, on the other hand, 433 were established at the places and in the regions of those immigration countries which could offer prospective settlers employment possibilities.

While men formed the majority of immigrants in the period before World War I, in the post-war years, and during the economic crisis of the 1930s, the number of women in the immigrant flow grew considerably and at times reached more than forty percent.

The training and work qualifications of Croatian emigrants in the inter-war period remained more or less unchanged from what it had been in the earlier period; most emigrants were unskilled farmers and the number of craftsmen who emigrated increased by only a small amount. However, in the countries of South America which became very important emigration targets in the post-World War I period agricultural workers or other labourers were still in demand, and in those destinations the bulk of emigrants took up employment in agriculture (Argentina and Brazil) or in the mines (Chile and Bolivia).

Unlike the pre-World War I period, when the bulk of South Slav migrants had emigrated to the United States of America, emigration flows in the inter-war period, until the 1930s, branched off to include South as well as North America and the number of emigrants departing for Australia and New Zealand also increased. These changes occurred for several reasons. The United States introduced immigration quotas for immigrants from eastern Europe and in this move the former Yugoslavia was allocated an insignificant number of annual immigration visas - 671 visas in 1924, and 845 visas in 1929. This almost marked the end of the relatively free migration of the pre-war period, when more than 10,000 persons from the Southern Slavic area had immigrated to the United States each year. At the same time, various countries in South America opened a new outlet for European immigration through their desires to colonize the extensive plains of the pampas.

The legal restrictions to immigration in the United States of America, which were in force until 1965 under the name of the "quota system", coupled with a liberalization of immigration policy in the countries of South America, led to the bulk of Croatian emigration moving in the direction of the latter continent in the inter-war period. On the basis of data from the Emigration Department in Zagreb, those who emigrated from former Yugoslavia to the countries of South America in the 1923-1933 period are estimated to have numbered 95,418, roughly sixty-two percent of the overall South Slav overseas emigration registered in the same period (Statistical Yearbook 1923-1933). However, the actual figure is higher, because neither all the emigrants of the inter-war years nor, in particular, the "illegal" emigration
on the eve of World War II, were included in the records.

Croatian emigration after World War II

World War II stimulated a great wave of emigration from Croatia. Emigration occurred either voluntarily or involuntarily in the following ways: individuals were stranded in foreign lands as prisoners of war or as forced labourers; Croat soldiers and civilians left Croatia when Germany was defeated; occupants and inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia were annexed into Italian territories; and escapees left the Croatian homeland in the first post-war years. In the period between 1939 and 1948 over 157,000 persons migrated from Croatia. From 1945 to 1948 alone another 100,000 people migrated to Italy. All told, this "wartime" migratory contingent amounted to roughly 250,000 people (Nejasmic 1990).

From the late 1940s to the late 1950s there was a strong migration from Croatian lands. In fact, after 1948 migration from Istria and Dalmatia in particular assumed great proportions even without any illegal emigration that might have occurred. Those who were denied citizenship in the former Yugoslavia or who illegally, after 1945, settled in Italy or by using Italy as an intermediate migration point, in many other countries numbered some 210,000 people.

After the 1960s a new wave of migration started in the centuries-long process of emigration from Croatia. After a period of "closed borders" there came a renewal of economic migration even though it may not have occurred in its classic form. Rather, it was now oriented towards the labour needs of European markets and thus the more classical overseas migration lost its once dominant role. The character of modern emigration from Croatia changed to encompass a large number of countries but this occurred after the period between 1960 and 1966 when some 7,431 still left for overseas destinations of a total of 12,196 departures. This large number of overseas immigrants, sixty-one percent of the total, occurred because migration to Europe had not yet achieved what would become its prominent character (Nejasmic 1990).

Population records from 1971 show that 28,481 workers from Croatia gained employment overseas; this was almost thirteen percent of the total number of workers who were recorded as "temporarily employed abroad". However, if this figure is compared with sources from emigrant destinations, it is clear that it under represents by more than fifty percent the number of workers employed overseas. For example; the figures from the former Yugoslavia do not include members of migrant families, because the focus of the report was only on workers.

The 1981 census of the former Yugoslavia shows that only ten percent of Croatian workers and members of their families were overseas for a total of 18,929. For the entire period 1961-1981, statistics show that modern overseas emigration from Croatia totalled roughly 70,000 persons. Add to this the number of emigrants who left in the period 1948-1960 and the total that departed for overseas destinations between 1948 and 1981 can be seen to be some 140,000 people (Nejasmic 1990).

The main streams of the Croatian migrations

The migration of Croats to America is part of the European immigration process to the New World. A larger emigration from Croatia, the so-called modern colonization, started in Dalmatia and Hrvatsko Primorje. In the beginning only individuals emigrated, followed later by smaller groups from the Croatian coast. The people from Primorje settled in California because of its familiar climate. A greater number of immigrants, in the earliest period of colonization, established themselves along the Mississippi delta, in the Pacific Northwest, and in New York City. The first Croatian immigrants were mostly seamen, fishermen, and farmers.
The Croatian immigrants who came to the USA in the period between 1880 and World War I belong to the so-called "new immigration". Despite certain unique features, the inclusion of the Croatian immigrants in American life resembled the inclusion of other "new" immigrants.

Upon arriving in America, Croatian immigrants were mostly attracted by Pennsylvania's well developed industry which promised good salaries in the coal mines, the iron works, and in the railway and road construction industries. The first groups of Croatian immigrants gathered precisely around the mines and the smelters of Pittsburgh and its surrounding area. Another large center was Cleveland, Ohio, where the steel and engine industries were concentrated.

It was quite understandable that Croatian immigrants were attracted to Chicago as well, as it was one of the largest centers of commerce and industry. This meant new possibilities of employment in the very well developed iron, leather and food industries, as well as in the electrical and chemical industries.

It is impossible to list all of the places the Croatians inhabited. They settled down in all parts of the country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Driven by necessity, they changed places and states in search of better working and living conditions (Cizmic 1982).

The migration of Croats to Canada was a part of the Croatian migratory exodus. The fundamental characteristics of this migration were similar to the migration of Croats to other parts of the world. But still there was a specific nature to the migration to Canada. That is why during the time of the most massive emigration of Croats in the period of 1880 to 1914 Canada did not accept a great number of Croats, and of those who did arrive, they came after their migratory experiences in the USA. Immediately after World War I a greater number of Croats arrived in Canada due in the main to restrictive migration laws in the USA. In the inter-war period (1920-1939), over 12,000 Croatians arrived in Canada, settling in urban centres. They also settled throughout the mining towns of northern Ontario. After World War II, in fact after the 1960s, Canada became a country for massive immigration of Croats. The reason being the liberalization of the emigration policy in former Yugoslavia. During this time thousands of Croats immigrated to Canada through a Canadian immigration office in Vienna and Stuttgart. Next to Australia in the latest period Canada became a country of the greatest immigration of Croats. In the 1981 Canadian census, 35,000 persons were identified as "Croatians" by mother tongue. This figure has been criticized as being too low and some reports have estimated the number of Croatians in Canada at 75,000 to 100,000, with the majority living in Ontario (Rasporich 1982).

The South American continent was one of the first destinations of Croatian immigrants. In the first phases of settlement they went to Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru. Croatians could also be found in Uruguay, Brazil and Paraguay, while in the remaining countries of South America only individual and non typical immigrants could be found, such as missionaries, for example.

Due to the lack of fertile land in the Croatian province of Dalmatia, many Croatian migrants settled in Argentina and there belonged to the lowest working strata, such as those working in the ship yards of Buenos Aires.

Meanwhile Croatians on the Pacific side of South America fared much better, working as merchants, tradesmen or in industry. In the first post-World War II era, the Croatian communities were enhanced by a large group of newcomers, who had come from displaced persons camps in Italy and Austria. These people had fled from the Independent State of Croatia after its fall, and they included ex-military and government people and the well-educated elite.

More than half a century has passed in South America without any new waves of Croatian immigrants. The first generation are all either dead or old, while succeeding generations have assimilated into their home societies. Because of such a situation it seems that an organised Croatian ethnic group could cease
to exist altogether in the South American continent (Antic 1991).

Of all Croatian settlements throughout the world, those in Australia and New Zealand are undoubtedly among the farthest from home. The earliest preserved record of Croats in Australia and New Zealand dates from the 1850s. Among the crews on the ships that sailed around the Australian shores and to New Zealand some included Croats from the Dalmatian coast.

The earliest immigrants included some Croats who had participated in the gold rush of California before coming to Australia and New Zealand where they continued to dig for gold and kaury-gum (resin). According to naturalization records, these early miners were from the coastal strip of Croatia. Around 1879 emigration to Australia and especially to New Zealand increased and by 1900 a few hundreds Croats had settled Australia and more than 3,000 in New Zealand.

Along with the excavation of gold and resin, another primary occupation was wine-making. In the history of the Croatian immigrants wine is an important factor. Wine production was an economic foundation for a large number of Croats in the old country, and they continued this tradition in their new homes. Similarly, the Croatian immigrants made a considerable contribution to the development of the Australian and New Zealand fishing industry. A large number of Croatian immigrants also bought farms, especially in west and north-eastern Australia and northern New Zealand. Through hard work many become economically independent and successful. In Australia between two wars there were about 10,000 Croats. After World War II Australia, like Canada, became a country for massive immigration of Croats. According to realistic estimations there are about 150,000 Croatian immigrants in Australia. New Zealand did not later attract a bigger number of Croats. In New Zealand today there are 40,000 Croatian people, mostly descendants of those who came at the turn of the century (Cizmic 1981; Tkalcevic 1992).

This article did not mention Croatian migration to European countries. It has to be stated though that in the 1960s and 1970s about 500,000 Croatians emigrated from Croatia to Western European countries, especially to Germany.

References


Cizmic, I.: Iz Dalmacije u Novi Zeland (From Dalmatia to New Zealand). Zagreb 1981.


Holjevac, V.: Hrvati izvan domovine (Croats outside their homeland). Zagreb 1967.


Statistički godisnjak kraljevine Jugoslavije (Statistical yearbook of the kingdom of Yugoslavia). Beograd
1923-1933.


Be

Back to the Croatia page