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# British Youth Brigades' Participation in the Yugoslav 1947 Youth Labour Action

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Focusing on the Šamac–Sarajevo railway project, this article examines how Yugoslavia's Youth Labour Actions (*Omladinska radna akcija*; ORAs) served as incipient attempts by the Yugoslav state to develop its cultural diplomacy. Adopting a bottom-up perspective, it explores British volunteers' participation in Yugoslavia's post-war reconstruction, situating their mobilisation within broader contexts of international reconstruction, idealism and solidarity. Targeting enthusiastic leftist youth, the Yugoslav government strategically employed the ORAs to promote its image in Britain, turning an economic development project into a vehicle for cultural branding. This article argues that Yugoslavia's attempt to promote its image through the inclusion of British youth was only partially successful. Despite the seemingly idealistic narratives offered by the brigadists, practical challenges and contradictions remained. It examines the complexities of the British youth brigades' experiences and how their intended propagandistic role was met with scepticism in Britain.

## Introduction

During the early post-war period, socialist Yugoslavia initiated several projects to promote its national image to make the country more visible in the international community. It aimed to create an image of a newly established communist country that was striving to develop and modernise in many ways. Propagating Yugoslavia culturally was predicated on showing its efforts in building socialism and its socialist achievements. Among these early post-war cultural diplomatic efforts, the Youth Labour Action (ORA) played a crucial role. It was used to attract leftist young people and sympathisers in Britain and other countries in the West to promote Yugoslavia.

The ORA mobilised both domestic and foreign youth. Although the latter comprised only a relatively small number of participants, their symbolic meaning was significant as it served to 'propagate communist ideas among youths from the West, as well as to strengthen ties with "friendly" countries'.<sup>1</sup> While similar initiatives took place in other People's Democracies, Yugoslavia's use of the ORAs was distinctive. Promoting the ORAs abroad as well as inviting the foreign youth to participate enabled the

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<sup>1</sup>Nikola Baković, "No One Here Is Afraid of Blisters or Work!" Social Integration, Mobilisation and Cooperation in Yugoslav Youth Brigades: The Example of Čačak Region Brigades (1946–1952), *The Hungarian Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (2015): 50. There were at least 14,000 foreign youth taking part in the ORA between 1946 and 1963. There were 5,800 people from forty-two countries participating in the ORA in 1947. See Slobodan Selinić, 'Omladina gradi Jugoslaviju (Savezne omladinske radne akcije u Jugoslaviji 1946–1963)', *Arhiv* 1, no. 2 (2007): 119–37.

Yugoslav government to develop its soft power by transforming an economic project into a cultural vision for the country, while also establishing a national cultural brand in Britain and the West.<sup>2</sup> Viewing foreign brigadists as potential promoters of the country, the Yugoslav government invited foreign youth to participate in construction work and experience the building of socialism first hand. The propagandistic effect – through press coverage, celebration events and related publications – made the participation of foreign youth ideal for Yugoslavia's cultural offensive. In addition, film screenings, exhibitions with books and other materials related to the ORAs, particularly the 1947 Šamac–Sarajevo railway, were organised in Britain.<sup>3</sup>

Using the case study of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway in 1947, this article highlights the cultural dimension of the ORAs within early post-war Yugoslav cultural diplomacy (1946–51). The time frame centres on the 1947 construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway and its continuing influence following the return of the British brigades to Britain in 1948. The article aims to demonstrate how Yugoslavia employed its ORAs to promote the image and secure recognition of its socialism. It argues that Yugoslavia's aim to ideologically cultivate British youth to enhance its prestige through the ORAs was only partially successful. Although the project served as a symbolic calling card for socialist Yugoslavia, it also revealed discrepancies between official ideals and the realities experienced on the ground. In addition to the usual top-down perspective of the state in cultural diplomacy, this article approaches Yugoslav cultural diplomacy from a bottom-up perspective, looking into its implementation through individual agency. By inviting British youth to participate in the construction project, Yugoslav authorities sought to promote the country from a grassroots perspective, fostering international friendship. Like many international communist initiatives of the time, the youth railway was designed to demonstrate that ideological and political divisions could be overcome through goodwill and internationalism. In this sense, the ORAs were not merely about physical labour or economic development; their ideological and political significance was central. As Selinić has argued, the presence of the foreign youth primarily served political purposes, supported by varied educational programmes and organised tours showcasing Yugoslavia's natural beauty and political system.<sup>4</sup>

The Yugoslav government was aware of the propagandistic effect of both the construction projects and the role played by the foreign youth. As stated in the 1947 meeting of the Ideological Commission of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the building of the youth railway in Bosnia-Herzegovina was counted as the 'greatest merit' of that year, and similar 'big and beautiful object and action' should be

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<sup>2</sup>The line between the concepts of 'cultural diplomacy', 'public diplomacy' and 'soft power' is often blurred in the context of the Cold War, where politics, ideology, culture and social-economic concerns were deeply intertwined. In scholarly discourse, these terms are frequently used interchangeably. See Martina Topić and Cassandra Sciortino, 'Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Imperialism: A Framework for the Analysis', in *Cultural Diplomacy or Cultural Imperialism*, ed. Martina Topić and Siniša Rrodin (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 9–48. Soft power, a concept within international relations theory, is commonly understood as the opposite of hard power. It emphasised 'the power that comes from attraction instead of military force of coercion'. Soft power is related to 'intangible assets such as culture' and 'rests on some shared values'. See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5–6. Cultural diplomacy, often considered a synonym for public diplomacy, involves using diverse cultural elements to promote positive images of a country, influence public opinion and cultivate long-term affirmative attitudes.

<sup>3</sup>In the Yugoslav Exhibition of Books, Folk Handicrafts and Photographs in London in 1948, the initial design of the exhibition poster featured a background showing a construction scene depicting the building of the youth railway; see Diplomatic Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia (DAMFARS), F–29, 1947. The pamphlet *Omladinska pruga* by Franjo Mraz featuring sketches of the youth railway Brčko–Banovići was exhibited; see Telegram from the Culture and Arts Committee to the MFA, 12 Jan. 1948, Archives of Yugoslavia (AJ), F–314–21–82. The youth publications and photos also displayed on the exhibition included *Mladi Udarnik* and *Omladinski list*; see Telegram from the Yugoslav Embassy in London to the Information Office of the MFA, 5 Mar. 1948, DAMFARS, 1948. The film *Omladinska Pruga* was shown multiple times in Britain to appeal to foreign audiences. See Telegram from Jelena Tucaković at the Information Office of the Yugoslav Embassy in London to the Information Office of the MFA, 8 June 1948, DAMFARS, 1948.

<sup>4</sup>See Slobodan Selinić, 'The Beginnings of the Socialist New Belgrade: The First Phase of Building of New Belgrade 1947–1950 (Počeci socijalističkog novog beograda. Prva faza izgradnje Novog Beograda 1947–1950)', *Tokovi istorije* 4 (2007):75–96.

made to attract attention from abroad.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, the Information Directorate at the Federal Government provided the materials on the Šamac–Sarajevo youth railway for the quarterly bulletin *Yugoslavia Today and Tomorrow* published by the British–Yugoslav Association (BYA) in London.<sup>6</sup>

The BYA played a significant role in bilateral cultural relations at that time, as much of Yugoslavia's cultural work in Britain was implemented and organised with the BYA. It also maintained close contact with the Yugoslav Embassy in London. The BYA aimed to facilitate friendship between the two countries and served as the primary channel for Yugoslavia's cultural contact with Britain. Similar to other friendship societies with communist countries, most BYA members were either members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) or left-wing fellow travellers. Because of this, the Foreign Office regarded it as an affiliate of the CPGB. The BYA was one of the main organisations in Britain responsible for enrolling and organising brigades to go to Yugoslavia. Many young members of the BYA were also brigadists who travelled to Yugoslavia for reconstruction work. This included a member of the CPGB, future historian E.P. Thompson. As commander of a British brigade at the Šamac–Sarajevo railway, Thompson was keen on introducing socialist Yugoslavia and edited the pamphlet *The Railway*, introducing life on the railway construction site after, he came back to Britain in 1948.<sup>7</sup>

The ORAs were closely linked with Yugoslavia's communist ideology and served as a cultural symbol of the communist value system. For instance, the ideal of being a *Stakhanovite*, disciplined shock worker (*udarnik*), was integral to the ORAs. Its educational and ideological importance was emphasised as a character that a socialist 'new man' should possess.<sup>8</sup> Andrea Matošević has argued that those 'shock workers' became the 'embodiment of the dignity of the labour movement of the entire country', with the 'shock worker movement' being 'imbued with political significance' that had a lasting influence long after its popularity in the early post-war years faded.<sup>9</sup>

Since the state identified Yugoslav culture very broadly, a wide range of activities that could raise the country's cultural profile were promoted. These included documentary film screenings on youth life, the country's natural beauty, social and agricultural development, cultural and artistic life, as well as feature films centred on partisan themes.<sup>10</sup> The Yugoslav government also organised concerts and

<sup>5</sup>Minutes of Agitprop Meeting: Propaganda for Foreign Countries (Zapisnik sa sastanka Agitpropa: Propaganda za inostranstvo), 12 Dec. 1947, AJ, F–507, Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Centralni komitet Saveza komunista Jugoslavije), the Ideological Commission (Ideološka Komisija), VIII, II/2–b–(4) (K–4), 1. The Šamac–Sarajevo railway was the largest construction project of the first year of the first Five-Year Plan. See Telegram from Assistant Director of Information Directorate at the FPRY Government Erih Kos to Department of Information of the MFA, 8 Dec. 1947, DAMFARS, F–29, 1947.

<sup>6</sup>Telegram from Assistant Director of Information Directorate at the FPRY Government Erih Kos to Department of Information of the MFA, 8 Dec. 1947, DAMFARS, F–29, 1947. It can be speculated that these materials were used in the article titled 'Youth's Target', featured on the first page of the 1948 spring issue, which reported enthusiastically on the upcoming participation of British youth in the 1948 'Brotherhood Unity Highway' between Belgrade and Zagreb.

<sup>7</sup>His role will be discussed in detail later in the article.

<sup>8</sup>The idea of shock work was based on the Russian Stakhanovite movement, which means that an individual worker could over-fulfil his production task by a large amount through hard work. For the use of shock worker competition in Yugoslav communist ideology, see Carol S. Lilly, *Power and Persuasion: Ideology and Rhetoric in Communist Yugoslavia, 1944–1953* (Oxford: West View Press, 2001), 118–20. The idea is similar to Luminita Gatejel's research on automobile production, in which she raises the connection between the symbolic meaning of cars and the different ideological systems in the East and the West. See Luminita Gatejel, 'The Road to Socialism Paved with Good Intentions: Automobile Culture in the Soviet Union, Romania and the GDR during Détente', in *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*, ed. Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk and Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 152–71.

<sup>9</sup>Andrea Matošević, *Socijalizam s udarničkim licem – Etnografija radnog pregalaštva* (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2015), 12–13; see also Andrea Matošević, 'Mediators in the Making of the Socialist Man's New Nature during Youth Labour Actions in Yugoslavia: Utopia, Dialectics and Time', *Südost-Forschungen* 76, no. 1 (2017): 64–81.

<sup>10</sup>*Placement of Our Films in England*, in Telegram from the Information Office of the Yugoslav Embassy in London to the Information Office of the MFA, 20 Feb. 1948, DAMFARS, 1948; Telegram from Jelena Tucaković at the Information Office of the Yugoslav Embassy in London to the Information Office of the MFA, 26 Mar. 1948, DAMFARS, 1948. At the same time, Yugoslavia kept pushing its political propaganda work abroad through publications, newsletters and radio broadcasts.

arranged guest visits as part of its broader cultural offensive. These events usually had a propagandistic character and revolved around themes of socialist construction, often highlighting the ORAs. The limited diversity of these initiatives suggests that Yugoslav authorities arguably lacked a clearly articulated vision for the scope and objectives of cultural diplomacy in the late 1940s. The engagement of British youth in the ORA projects represented an initial attempt by Yugoslavia to explore how to promote its image. Thus the ORAs became a key testing ground for Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy.

There is a rich historiography on the topic of international youth gatherings during the Cold War. Studying cross-border youth activities can help us better understand post-war politics, society and culture. For many, youth represented an idealistic life stage; as historians Mischa Honeck and Gabriel Rosenberg write, 'young people were found to be politically and culturally impressionable and unburdened by the past'.<sup>11</sup> Young people were specially targeted as potential cultural messengers during the Cold War, making their experiences of cultural exchange an important part of Cold War cultural history.

The majority of the literature on international youth activities from a cultural perspective focuses on the role of international youth organisations, conferences and youth festivals in facilitating national governments' cultural diplomacy in Cold War politics. In particular, this literature has emphasised how international youth festivals became a kind of cultural battlefield for countries with differing ideological and political systems.<sup>12</sup> In general, these works approach the topic through the lens of the cultural Cold War, understood as a competition between the East and the West to promote their culture or lifestyle to surpass 'the other' and win the hearts and minds of the public from the other side of the Iron Curtain.

For instance, Pia Koivunen uses the 1957 Moscow World Festival of Youth as a case study to document how the Soviet Union took the opportunity to propagate a new post-Stalin image.<sup>13</sup> Margaret Peacock highlights how the Soviet Union attempted to generate a brand-new vision of communism after Stalin for both domestic and international audiences at the 1957 Festival.<sup>14</sup> Similar research includes the study of the American cultural offensive at the World Youth Festival in Helsinki in 1962 and the evolution of West German cultural diplomacy at the World Youth Festivals during the 1960s to attract Third World youth.<sup>15</sup> Andrea Chiriu tracks the Italian government's concerns about communist propaganda at the 1953 World Youth Festival in Bucharest.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to exploring the high politics of governments during this period, Pia Koivunen studies Finnish youth at the World Festival of Youth. She contends that the majority of the Festival attendees were motivated by the idea of 'peace and friendship'.<sup>17</sup> Young people could have different agendas

<sup>11</sup>Mischa Honeck and Gabriel Rosenberg, 'Transnational Generations', *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (2014): 235.

<sup>12</sup>See Pia Koivunen, 'Overcoming Cold War Boundaries at the World Youth Festivals', in *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, ed. Sari Autio-Sarasmo and Katalin Miklóssy (London: Routledge, 2010), 175–92.

<sup>13</sup>See Pia Koivunen, 'The 1957 Moscow Youth Festival – Propagating a New, Peaceful image of the Soviet Union', in *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (London: Routledge, 2009), 46–65. Koivunen has also conducted similar research on how the 1957 Festival reflected changes in Soviet Union foreign policy. See Pia Koivunen, 'Friends, "Potential Friends," and Enemies: Reimagining Soviet Relations to the First, Second and Third Worlds at the Moscow 1957 Youth Festival', in *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World*, ed. Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 219–47.

<sup>14</sup>Margaret Peacock, 'The Perils of Building Cold War Consensus at the 1957 Moscow World Festival of Youth and Students', *Cold War History* 12, no. 3 (2012): 515–35.

<sup>15</sup>See Joni Krekola and Simo Mikkonen, 'Backlash of the Free World: The US Presence at the World Youth Festival in Helsinki, 1962', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 36, no. 2 (2011): 230–55; Quinn Slobodian, 'What Does Democracy Look Like? (And Why Would Anyone Want to Buy It?) Third World Demands and West German Responses at 1960s World Youth Festivals', in *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*, ed. Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk and Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 254–75.

<sup>16</sup>Andrea Chiriu, 'Summer 1953, Bucharest: The Third World Youth Congress and the Fourth World Youth Festival. The Italian Concerns', *Revista Română de Studii Eurasiatice* 1, no. 2 (2012): 105–18.

<sup>17</sup>Pia Koivunen, 'A Dream Come True': Finns Visiting the Lands of Socialism at the World Youth Festivals in the 1940s and 1950s, *Twentieth Century Communism* 4 (2012): 133–59.

compared to the top organisers of these events. The competitive dimensions of propaganda were usually initiated from the perspective of high politics. Similar to this non-state actors' perspective, Richard Jobs studies how independent youth mobility contributed to the process of European social and cultural integration from post-war reconstruction to Cold War confrontation.<sup>18</sup>

As part of Yugoslavia's early post-war cultural offensive, the ORAs were highly ideologically driven and had a strong propagandistic character. However, Yugoslavia's ORAs differed from international youth festivals in several ways. The arrangement of foreign youth participation in Yugoslavia's ORAs had a less festive dimension and focused more on daily labour work and the life of individual youth, which had a less 'performative' character compared to international festivals. Although sports events, dances and campfires were routinely held at the ORAs, the primary method for familiarising British and foreign brigadists with the country was through educational programmes and outings to factories, cooperatives and other sites.

The role of the ORAs in Yugoslavia's domestic policy is well established in scholarship. The majority of the literature on this topic adopts a domestic perspective, emphasising the significance of the ORAs in the ideological cultivation and mobilisation of Yugoslav socialist youth as well as their political and economic functions.<sup>19</sup> This was a crucial part of Yugoslavia's ORAs and the main goal to be achieved. In some studies, the ORAs have been considered ritualised to the extent that they were believed to be a form of returning 'to the sacrifice of the Partisans and the "gift of freedom" of the Communists . . . [and] in direct continuity with the People's Liberation Movements.'<sup>20</sup> Lyubomir Pozharliev expresses a similar view, interpreting the ORAs as 'a new ritual supporting the ideology'. According to him, the socialist identity was imposed on youth by ritualising and mystifying collective action, enabling young people to 'see and touch the ideological norm through the objectivation of the norms labour'. He also argues that the Brotherhood and Unity Highway functioned as 'a tangible symbol of the peaceful coexistence of the various Yugoslav peoples and of their new common Yugoslav identity'.<sup>21</sup> The concept of 'ritualisation' is also discussed by Nikola Baković, who introduces the idea of 'ritualised mobilities', which refers to the mobility of people in socialist Yugoslavia along the precisely established routes that were symbolically charged and ideologically significant. These routes connected places associated with symbolic meaning for Yugoslav socialist patriotism such as the People's Liberation Struggle and espoused the ideological principles of brotherhood and unity.<sup>22</sup>

However, little has been done on the role of the ORAs in Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy, especially with Britain. For the studies of the international volunteers, Tea Sindbæk Andersen argues

<sup>18</sup>See Richard Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors: How Youth Travel Integrated Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup>See Ivan Hofman, "Socijalističko takmičenje" na omladinskim radnim akcijama u Jugoslaviji 1946–1951' ("The Socialist Competition" at the Youth Working Actions in the Yugoslavia 1946–1951), *Istorija 20. Veka 2* (2014): 155–70; Dragan Popović, 'Youth Labor Action (*Omladinska radna akcija* [ORA]) as Ideological Holiday-Making', in *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism*, ed. Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 279–302; Sasa Vejzagic, 'The Importance of Youth Labour Actions in Socialist Yugoslavia (1948–1950): A Case Study of the Motorway "Brotherhood–Unity"' (master's thesis, Central European University, 2013); Selinić, "The Beginnings".

<sup>20</sup>Ivana Rajković, 'The Spirit of the Railway: Freedom, Gift and Labor on E.P. Thompson's "Youth Railway"' (Duh pruge: Sloboda, dar i rad na "omladinskoj pruzi" E.P. Tompsona), in *The Spirit of the Railway: A Collected Volume on the Book by E.P. Thompson* (*Duh Pruge Zbornik Radova o Knjizi E.P. Thompsona*), ed. Andrea Matošević and Tanja Petrović (Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga, 2020), 172. See also Reana Senjković, *Every Day a Victory: The Culture of Youth Labor Actions* (*Svaki dan pobjeda, Kultura omladinskih radnih akcija*) (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2016) and Rudi Supek, *Youth on the Road to Brotherhood: The Psycho-Sociology of Labour Action* (*Omladina na putu bratstva. Psiho-sociologija radne akcije*) (Beograd: Mladost, 1963).

<sup>21</sup>Lyubomir Pozharliev, *The Road to Socialism: Transport Infrastructure in Socialist Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (1945–1989)* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2023), 91, 82.

<sup>22</sup>Nikola Baković, *Brotherhood on the Move: Ritual Mobilities in the Second Yugoslavia* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2023), 3–4. Drawing on the case studies of partisan pilgrimages, mobility along the Brotherhood and Unity trainline and relay races, Baković argues that these activities were politically ritualised through their traversal of space and time, serving to consolidate the socialist ideology promoted by the Yugoslav state.

that the movement was a 'relatively successful instance of cultural diplomacy at the individual level', as evidenced by the positive feedback from her interviewees.<sup>23</sup> Similar positive feedback was also shown in official reports from Yugoslavia. The use of working construction projects to foster international friendship was not unique to Yugoslavia. Richard Jobs observes that, in post-war West Europe, transnational youth travel was encouraged through the proliferation of international work camps, as the internationalism of European youth was seen as essential to Europe's future peace and reconciliation.<sup>24</sup>

Recent scholarship on British youth participation in Yugoslavia's ORAs includes the publication of the Serbo-Croatian translation of E.P. Thompson's booklet *The Railway* and the accompanying volume *The Spirit of the Railway (Duh pruge)*, which brings together several studies related to Thompson's booklet, aiming to interpret their experience of socialism from a post-socialist perspective. Martin Pogačar highlights how the construction of the railway embodied Yugoslavia's technopolitical ambitions, giving rise to ideologies of progress (a better future) and brotherhood and unity.<sup>25</sup> Ivan Rajković approaches *The Railway* as an ethnographic work, describing it as a 'documentary description created after thorough participation in the processes.'<sup>26</sup> Reana Senjković notes the potential shift in tone between testimonies given by members of the British brigades immediately after the ORA and those given decades later. The latter tend to be more critical, which may reflect the changing social and political contexts in which these memories were later recalled.<sup>27</sup>

The materials used in this article are mainly official reports of the People's Youth of Yugoslavia (PYY) in the Archives of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. While it is necessary to approach these materials with some scepticism due to the ideological conditions under which they were written, they should not be dismissed as mere propaganda without value for researchers. These texts reflect the temporal situation of the Cold War and the texture of cultural issues at that time. The comments and evaluations of the British brigades by the PYY delegates reveal a discrepancy between Yugoslavia's communist ideology and the intended ideological education of the British youth. For instance, British youth thought it was unnecessary to arrive and leave work in formation, while the Yugoslav delegate believed it was related to the basic work discipline of the brigade. British youth insisted on arranging the brigade's issues in a democratic way (such as holding meetings and voting), which the PYY delegate viewed as excessive and bourgeois. These documents do not simply present an idealistic story but also show the tensions and conflicts that arose during the encounters between Yugoslav and British youth.

This article is divided into the following three sections: the background of the ORA; the case study of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway in 1947; and the stories of the brigades back to Britain and E.P. Thompson's booklet.

### Background of the *Omladinska Radna Akcija*

The organisation of the post-war ORAs in the form of work brigades was not unique to socialist Yugoslavia. In the Eastern Bloc, where communist parties held power, this approach was commonly used to engage youth in national construction projects. Some projects were completed solely by

<sup>23</sup>Tea Sindbæk Andersen, 'Youth Brigadiers at the Railway – Personal Perspectives on Tito's Yugoslavia in the Making', in *Machineries of Persuasion: European Soft Power and Public Diplomacy during the Cold War*, ed. Óscar J. Martín García and Rósa Magnúsdóttir (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 106.

<sup>24</sup>International work camps were organised across Europe to support the reconstruction of youth hostel networks, parks, schools and infrastructures, with the broader aim of promoting international camaraderie. Labour work was secondary to the primary goal of education in cultivating 'democratic goodwill and human solidarity'. See 'Youth Service Camps', *Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (March 1947): 1–2, UNESCO REC & REH/01, in Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors*, 12, 20.

<sup>25</sup>Martin Pogačar, 'The Infrastructure of Imagination: The Railway, Progress, Future (Infrastruktura imaginacije: pruga, napredak, budućnost)', in *The Spirit of the Railway: A Collected Volume on the Book by E.P. Thompson (Duh Pruge Zbornik Radova o Knjizi E.P. Thompsona)*, ed. Andrea Matošević and Tanja Petrović (Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga, 2020), 107.

<sup>26</sup>Rajković, 'The Spirit', 167.

<sup>27</sup>Senjković, *Every Day*, 86–7.

domestic voluntary youth, but it was also common to invite foreign youth to participate. For instance, young delegates from various countries helped rebuild the devastated Czech village of Lidice and construct the new town of Litvinov in 1947 while attending the World Youth Festival in Prague. Similarly, young people travelled to Bulgaria, Poland and Yugoslavia to take part in these efforts.<sup>28</sup> Participating in construction work became a trend in post-war socialist countries.

The ORAs in Yugoslavia lasted from the end of the Second World War until the 1980s, though their character evolved. The heyday of youth voluntary work was during the early years after the war. Key projects included the construction of the Brčko–Banovići railway (1946), the Šamac–Sarajevo railway (1947), the Doboj–Banja Luka railway (1951), the ‘Brotherhood–Unity’ highway between Belgrade and Zagreb (1948–1949) and the construction of New Belgrade and the university town in Zagreb. Yugoslavia’s Youth Labour Actions evolved into a symbol of the country and its socialist ethos, playing a significant role in both its domestic policy and cultural diplomacy, especially in the early years after the war.

Early youth construction projects (from the late 1940s to early 1960s) mainly focused on the construction of railways, motorways and industrial complexes.<sup>29</sup> Youth Labour Actions during the late 1940s were part of the broader developmental process of the entire country under the leadership of the communist party.<sup>30</sup> Yugoslavia initiated its first Five-Year Plan (also the first one outside the Soviet Union) in 1947, focusing on developing industry.<sup>31</sup> This period also marked the heyday of the ORAs in Yugoslavia. The Brčko–Banovići railway in 1946 was the first major voluntary ORA, and the construction of the ‘Brotherhood–Unity’ highway between Belgrade and Zagreb (1948–1949) was the largest project at that time in terms of the number of participants and the scope of construction.<sup>32</sup> These infrastructure projects were mainly undertaken by local students, rural youngsters and workers due to the need for a large workforce.<sup>33</sup> Foreign brigades also contributed to these projects.

The ORAs were carried out by volunteers aged between 16 and 25, who formed youth brigades and worked at construction sites to build ‘socialism’. The use of the slogan ‘we are building the railway, the railway is building us’ as the major part of the propaganda for the 1947 youth railway project Šamac–Sarajevo reflected the ideological goal of the project – to cultivate the new socialist man. The government attached great importance to these actions not only for their economic benefits but also for their political, educational and propagandistic functions.<sup>34</sup> This was especially the case during the early post-war period. Practically, a great deal of labour was needed for reconstruction, as the whole country had been devastated by the war. Politically, the construction sites and the organised brigades provided a perfect venue for the youth to become disciplined, dedicated and supportive of socialist ideals and ideology, such as the spirit of the collective and brotherhood and unity. The educational courses and programmes of the youth actions contributed to general education and combatting illiteracy.<sup>35</sup> For Yugoslav youth, participating in these labour actions was a point of pride and was seen as contributing to the building of their country and its socialism. The ORAs were also seen as a useful tool in ‘erasing disparities between social milieus – rich and poor, urban and rural, and diminishing cultural differences between Yugoslav ethnicities’.<sup>36</sup> In general, these projects were pivotal in popularising communist ideology and consolidating the party’s rule.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Youth Rebuilds Lidice’, *The Daily Worker*, 22 July 1947, 3; ‘World Youth Help Build Czech Town’, *The Daily Worker*, 4 Aug. 1947, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Popović, ‘Youth Labor Action’, 288.

<sup>30</sup> Vejzagic, ‘The Importance of Youth Labour Actions’, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Andersen, ‘Youth Brigadiers at the Railway’, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Dragosavac, 11, in Vejzagic, ‘The Importance of Youth Labour’, 30; Vejzagic, ‘The Importance of Youth Labour’, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Popović, ‘Youth Labor Action’, 290.

<sup>34</sup> For the propagandistic role of the Youth Labour Actions, see Carol S. Lilly, ‘Problems of Persuasion: Communist Agitation and Propaganda in Post-war Yugoslavia, 1944–1948’, *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 403.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>36</sup> Popović, ‘Youth Labor Action’, 281, 283; Vejzagic, ‘The Importance of Youth Labour’, 14.

The youth work actions also became a symbol of Yugoslav socialism. As part of Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy, they were extensively promoted abroad. The ORA projects attracted many foreigners, including governmental officials, cultural workers and celebrities, who came to visit the construction site. Yugoslav authorities also took the opportunity to invite interested foreign youth to participate in the construction projects, allowing them to experience Yugoslav socialism first hand. Such initiatives were popular under the banner of early post-war international peace and friendship and were closely related to the rise and popularity of communism and left-wing ideas in Europe.

Yugoslavia's connection with the European Left can be traced back to the inter-war period. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia had a lively left-wing intellectual culture in the cities of Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. Despite the government repression of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1921, publications promoting European 'radical political and aesthetic ideas and intellectual networks that reached from Paris to Prague to Petrograd' continued to circulate.<sup>37</sup> Leftist literature and left-wing intelligentsia were directly inspired by ideals in Soviet and German literature, searching for cultural paradigms in art and science in Western society.<sup>38</sup> The left-wing magazine *New Literature* 'systematically tried to introduce the domestic public to writers who raised social issues and advocated internationalism.'<sup>39</sup> Members of the intelligentsia under the influence of modernism were also left-leaning and participated in the Yugoslav liberation movement during the war, later becoming party elites active in the cultural field, especially after 1950.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the Spanish Civil War strengthened Leftist Internationalism, as 'Tito...and many other leading political, military and diplomatic figures in communist Yugoslavia, had either fought on the republican side in Spain or had been involved in organising the participation, showing the internationalist position of the Yugoslav volunteers.'<sup>41</sup>

These leftist connections were deepened during the Second World War and continued after the Communist government of Yugoslavia was established. For instance, with help and financial support from Swedish leftists, the Association of Yugoslavs in Sweden, 'Free Yugoslavia', with headquarters in Stockholm, was formed in January 1944. The Swedish communist paper *Ny Dag* reported on its founding meeting. Members were mainly Yugoslav fugitives (the majority of them partisans who fled from the Nazi concentration camp in Norway) in Sweden. In cooperation with the Norwegian Association and the Danish Association, the task of 'Free Yugoslavia' was to 'connect with ideologically programmatically related organisations in Sweden'. Several publications, including *Informacioni list*, *Aktivista* and a journal for cultural issues, *Novi Svet*, were printed.<sup>42</sup> The relations made between 'Free Yugoslavia' and Swedish left-wing parties 'laid the foundations of Yugoslav-Swedish relations after 1945'.<sup>43</sup> Such relations with the Left were also reflected in ORAs when many Scandinavian youth volunteers came to participate in railway construction.<sup>44</sup> There were other forms of cultural cooperation with Western European leftists such as French communists, which were conducted through communist organisations similar to the BYA and other channels.

<sup>37</sup> James M. Robertson, 'Literature, Revolution and National Aesthetics on the Interwar Yugoslav Left', *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 2 (2018): 301.

<sup>38</sup> Predrag J. Marković, *Beograd i Evropa 1918–1941: Evropski uticaji na process modernizacije Beograda* (Beograd: Savremena administracija, 1992), 220–1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>40</sup> See Vladimir Kulić, Maroje Mrduljaš and Wolfgang Thaler, eds., *Modernism in Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Berlin: JOVIS, 2012); Marković, *Beograd i Evropa 1918–1941*.

<sup>41</sup> Vjeran Pavlaković, 'The Spanish Civil War and the Yugoslav Successor States', *Contemporary European History* 29, no. 3 (2020): 279–80.

<sup>42</sup> Goran Latinović, 'Jugoslovensko-švedski odnosi 1941–1945', *Istoija 20. veka* 33, no. 1 (2015): 56–7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>44</sup> For the experience of young leftists who participated in the Youth Labour Actions in the summers of 1946–1948, see Andersen, 'Youth Brigadiers at the Railway', 105–20.

With the leftist influence, the ORAs became popular among European youth, leading many British youngsters to volunteer in Yugoslavia. The People's Youth of Yugoslavia (PYY), the youth organisation in Yugoslavia, arranged the work of the brigades.<sup>45</sup> They sent invitations to youth organisations in Britain, asking them to help with the organisation of the brigades. The youth committee of the British–Yugoslav Association (BYA) and the National Union of Students (NUS) were the main organisations responsible for recruiting the brigadists in Britain. The NUS, a national student organisation dedicated to domestic student issues, also maintained communication with foreign student organisations. Compared to the BYA, the NUS was more neutral because its members came from diverse backgrounds, although left-wing ideas were strong within the organisation after the war.<sup>46</sup> The British brigadists were usually registered through the joint committee of these two organisations. In addition, the Youth Communist League (YCL) sometimes participated in the organisational work.<sup>47</sup>

Many young Britons formed brigades and came to help with the building of Yugoslavia during the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>48</sup> In addition to the British brigades, there were also brigades from neighbouring countries and the West, including Albania, Hungary, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, the Scandinavian countries, Belgium and France. According to the report in the *Times Weekly Edition*, more than 400 British students and workers participated in the building of the youth railway in 1947.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that Yugoslav ORAs were primarily undertaken and completed by domestic youth volunteers. The participation of foreign youth in these projects was more symbolic and propagandistic than their actual contribution.

During the construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway in 1947, foreign volunteers were invited to work for three weeks in Yugoslavia, followed by a one-week holiday, as described in an article in the *Times Educational Supplement*. The author praised this initiative as it 'render[ed] the full fruition of the idea of the United Nations and the establishment of conditions for lasting peace'.<sup>50</sup>

The motivations of foreign youth coming to Yugoslavia were usually a mix of idealistic pursuit, political concerns and curiosity about the country. However, for many young Britons, the prospect of a free holiday in Yugoslavia was also a significant factor. When the Yugoslav delegate to the First British Brigade at the Belgrade–Zagreb highway asked several brigadists why they came to Yugoslavia, he found their answers generally overlapped:

First, this was an extraordinary opportunity to visit Yugoslavia cheaply (trip, summer holiday). Then, people in England are interested in what life behind 'the Iron Curtain' looks like. They come to see how communist social and economic system looks like in practice, with the emphasis on planned economy. Besides, the British communist youth considered it their duty to come to Yugoslavia.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, he was convinced that the first reason was the major motivation. According to the Yugoslav report of the Third British Brigade in 1951 on the Dobož–Banja Luka railway working site, 'whoever wanted to go to Yugoslavia paid 18 pounds and went'.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Yugoslavia was a place

<sup>45</sup>The People's Youth of Yugoslavia was responsible for all the youth affairs, especially the political and ideological work with youth in both urban and rural areas.

<sup>46</sup>In the Foreign Office memo, concerns were raised that the NUS might slide into the control of its communist and left-wing members.

<sup>47</sup>See Omladinska pruga "Šamac–Sarajevo" 1947, AJ, F–114–290.

<sup>48</sup>The British brigades came to work in not only Yugoslavia but also elsewhere. For instance, after two months of work in Yugoslavia in the summer of 1947, twenty-two young Britons continued to help with construction at the key mountain pass at Hainboaz in Bulgaria. See 'British Girls in Sofia March Past', *The Daily Worker* [London], 10 Sept. 1947, 6.

<sup>49</sup>'Youth and Yugoslavia – Work on the Šamac–Sarajevo Railway', *The Times Weekly Edition* [London], 29 Oct. 1947, 13.

<sup>50</sup>'The Yugoslav Youth Railway – An Educational Enterprise', *The Times Educational Supplement* [London], 11 Oct. 1947.

<sup>51</sup>Yugoslav Association of Socialist Youth, Report of the 1st British Brigade, 9 July 1948, AJ, F–114–291.

<sup>52</sup>Dragan Marković: Report of the Delegate of the 3rd English Brigade, 1 Sept. 1951, AJ, F–114–290.

that many Britons knew little about. Interest in the country consisted of both tourist curiosity and a desire to understand its society, politics, economics and culture.

Meanwhile, the political concerns of the British brigadists shifted over time in response to changes in international politics. This was particularly evident in the 1948 and 1949 brigades, when the feeling of solidarity among the young communists gave way to growing suspicion toward Yugoslav socialism following the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in June 1948.<sup>53</sup> The legitimacy of the Yugoslav communist party was challenged after its rupture with the Soviet Union. The Cominform Resolution also created a tense political atmosphere throughout the country, prompting the PYY to intensify its political work towards the British brigades. In this context, the ORAs became a platform for ‘changing the mind of the [British] brigadists’ regarding the Cominform Resolution.<sup>54</sup> By 1951, the majority of the youth who came to Yugoslavia were Labourites. They were mostly interested in the reforms initiated by the Yugoslav government and local culture, such as folk art. Political enthusiasm and idealism waned afterwards due to changes in international politics as relations with the British communists cooled down due to the Yugoslav–Soviet split. When the PYY resumed the ORA in 1958, only two young English workers went to Yugoslavia to work in the international brigade. British youngsters were unwilling to spend their holidays doing labour in Yugoslavia once the ideological attractiveness disappeared.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to labour, the daily life of the British brigades consisted of lectures, discussions and conferences as part of the educational programmes. Topics covered Yugoslavia’s socialism, such as social and economic systems, the Five-Year Plan, the Peasant Work Cooperatives and so on. These events were intended to introduce Yugoslav socialism to British youth and cultivate a friendly feeling towards the country. The opinions of the British brigadists about Yugoslavia were influenced by their respective political affiliations. Despite the apparent political character of the projects, the voluntary labour actions still provided young Britons with an opportunity to satisfy their curiosity about the newly established socialist country.<sup>56</sup>

### The Šamac–Sarajevo Railway

The Šamac–Sarajevo railway was inaugurated on 16 November 1947 by Tito. It was 240 kilometres in length and completed within seven months, thanks to the effort of voluntary youth groups from Yugoslavia and other countries.<sup>57</sup> Young people from Britain, France, Canada and Australia helped build the youth railway.<sup>58</sup> International brigades arrived in Yugoslavia during the summer, working for several weeks before travelling to the Dalmatian coast for a break as a reward.<sup>59</sup> By inviting the foreign brigade, the Yugoslav government regarded the railway construction as a valuable tool for propaganda.<sup>60</sup> This is evidenced in a letter from the Central Committee of the People’s Youth of Croatia

<sup>53</sup>The ensuing economic embargo from the People’s Democracies and the Soviet Union jeopardised most of Yugoslavia’s Five-Year Plan projects; see VI Kongres KPJ, 54, in Vejzagic, ‘The Importance of Youth Labour Actions’, 35.

<sup>54</sup>The 3rd British Brigade ‘Tom Mann’ Report from 23 July to 21 Aug., AJ, F-114–291.

<sup>55</sup>See Učešće strane omladine na radnim akcijama 1951, AJ, F-114–290; Dokumentacija Glavnog Štaba ORB na Izgradnji Auto-puta „Bratstvo–Jedinstvo“: Od Ljubljane do Zagreba, AJ, F-114–299.

<sup>56</sup>This particularly applied to those who joined the ORA out of touristic motives rather than strong political conviction. As Dragan Popović points out, work actions during this period can be understood as a form of having fun away from home, and a vacation that combined elements of striking work with the adventure of travel. Popović, ‘Youth Labour Action’, 283. According to Matošević and Senjković, some domestic youth also joined with the simple idea of having fun and entertainment. See Andrea Matošević, ‘Omladinske radne akcije. Kontinuiteti i odmaci iz iskustva akcijaša’, *Traditiones* 44, no. 3 (2015): 93–111; Senjković, *Every Day*.

<sup>57</sup>*Information Bulletin*, World Federation of Democratic Youth, Dec. 1947, The National Archives (TNA), FO 924/670, LC197/20/452.

<sup>58</sup>‘World Youth Help Build Czech Town’, *The Daily Worker* [London], 4 Aug. 1947, 3.

<sup>59</sup>Andersen, ‘Youth Brigadiers at the Railway’, 110.

<sup>60</sup>See Lilly, ‘Problems of Persuasion’, 396.

to all district committees, dated 24 April 1947: 'this year, many countries will come to the construction of the youth railway brigades, delegations and groups of foreign youth. Their visits and stay in our country are of great importance not only for our youth organisation but for our homeland in general.'<sup>61</sup> Tito also confirmed that the participation of foreign youth raised 'the reputation of [their] country in the eyes of the whole world.'<sup>62</sup>

Britain sent a total of ten brigades.<sup>63</sup> According to an internal report of the PYY, between 1 April and 15 November 1947, 471 English individuals came to work on the Šamac–Sarajevo railway, accounting for 8 per cent of the total participants. England also sent the largest number of youth to work in Yugoslavia compared to other Western countries. Among the 471 young people, 112 were workers, two were peasants, and 357 were intellectuals and others.<sup>64</sup> This demonstrates the strong momentum of internationalism among young British students, who were the major participants in such international projects. This also marked the heyday of post-war youth internationalism between the British Left and Yugoslavia, particularly in 1947 and 1948, when the Yugoslav communist party attached great importance to cultivating friendship and building cultural relations with the potential 'propagandists' of the country.<sup>65</sup>

The majority of the British brigadists in 1947 were either young communists or leftists. Enthusiastic about the post-war peace, friendship and internationalism propagated by the Soviets, they were idealistic and believed they could contribute to building a better world. Therefore, many participated in events such as the World Youth Festival and the volunteer brigades to strengthen international friendship and communication.<sup>66</sup> Communists and leftists believed these large-scale gatherings could serve as a useful platform for youth around the world to 'learn from each other'. For instance, thirteen hundred Britons came to participate in the World Youth Festival in Prague in 1947.<sup>67</sup>

Curiosity about the country and the idea of having some fun motivated many British youth to come to Yugoslavia. As one member of a British brigade later wrote in the *Times*, 'What most I had looked for, I suppose, and certainly my husband and I, was the chance to satisfy a natural curiosity about Yugoslavia.'<sup>68</sup> The organising secretary of the British Brigade at the Šamac–Sarajevo railway, Dorothy Sale, also described the intentions of the young British people who worked in Yugoslavia. According to Sale,

<sup>61</sup>Central Committee of the People's Youth of Croatia (Glavni odbor Narodne omladine Hrvatske), Zagreb, 24. IV. 1947., f 1231–3, RK SSOH, kutija 202.

<sup>62</sup>Josip Broz Tito, 'Speech at the Ceremony Marking the Opening of the Youth Railway Šamac–Sarajevo (Govor na svečanosti prilikom puštanja u saobraćaj Omladinske pruge Šamac–Sarajevo)' 16 Nov. 1947, in *Josip Broz Tito. Govori i članci, knjiga III*, (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1959), 150, in Reana Senjković, 'People Call It "Our" Railway (Ljudi za nju kažu "naša" pruga)', 190, in *The Spirit of the Railway: A Collected Volume on the Book by E.P. Thompson (Duh Pruge Zbornik Radova o Knjizi E.P. Thompsona)*, ed. Andrea Matošević and Tanja Petrović (Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga, 2020), 186–207.

<sup>63</sup>*Information Bulletin*, World Federation of Democratic Youth, Jan. 1948, TNA, FO 924/671, LC679/20/452.

<sup>64</sup>*Omladinska Pruga Šamac–Sarajevo* 1 Apr.–15 Nov. 1947, *Savezna Planska Komisija Državni Statistički Ured* (Federal Planning Submission State Statistical Office), AJ, F–114–127. Here, the PYY used the same classification system for the British brigades as it did domestically. The intellectuals presumably referred to the students.

<sup>65</sup>In 1951, there were only four British brigades working on the Doboj–Banja Luka railway construction project. Compared to previous projects, the total number of the brigadists decreased to ninety-six. See Popis inostranih brigada, koje su bile na radu na izgradnji omladinske pruge u 1951 godini (List of foreign brigades that were working on the construction of the youth railway in 1951), AJ, F–114–290.

<sup>66</sup>The momentum was evident in the large number of participants at the first World Festival of Youth and Students, which drew a total of 17,000 attendees. Many foreign young people came to the railway labour action directly from the Festival. See Senjković, *Every Day*, 59.

<sup>67</sup>'Youth Festival', *The Daily Worker* [London], 15 Aug. 1947, 2.

<sup>68</sup>'Youth Aids Yugoslavia – Work on the Šamac–Sarajevo Railway – Meeting of Volunteer Brigades', *The Times* [London], 22 Oct. 1947, 5. This curiosity might have been inherited from the previous interest in the Balkan region incurred by the related travelogues in the twentieth century.

Some people had come out of curiosity, some with a vague idea of doing some kind of social work, some to study the politics of the new Yugoslavia, some wanted a holiday with hard physical work, some just wanted a holiday, some came with all sorts of odd reasons 'to study the Yugoslav at home', or 'to observe the impact of the West on the East'.<sup>69</sup>

From these accounts, it is clear that most British participants gave little thought to the labour work they were about to undertake in Yugoslavia. Their curiosity about the country likely stemmed from a mix of interest in its natural beauty (particularly the Dalmatian coast) and a desire to see the construction site as a scenic symbol of socialism. The Yugoslav government welcomed these British visitors for their potential role as informal propagandists. Echoing its ideological goals for domestic youth, the railway construction site served as a place where young people, who might otherwise never meet, could interact and, in doing so, cultivate a sense of brotherhood and unity.

The British brigadists were struck by many aspects of their experience in Yugoslavia. Upon arrival, they were immediately taken aback by the enthusiasm of the local youth for their reconstruction efforts. The dedication of the local brigades, who worked diligently to become shock workers and shock brigades, was surprising. Political slogans, banners featuring the hammer and sickle and portraits of communist leaders were all new to the Britons. In this sense, political messages were sent through slogans, and the competitive spirit embedded in the shock worker/brigade system served to demonstrate the prestige: 'being a shock brigade meant being a hero'.<sup>70</sup> These scenes of Yugoslav socialist reality naturally became propaganda tools used to present the country's socialist identity to British youth, as an experience they rarely encountered at home. As such, the ORA became a platform for convincing foreign visitors of the authenticity of building socialism.<sup>71</sup>

Work on the railway proved challenging for the British youth, as it often involved heavy labour. While technically intensive work was undertaken by more skilled workers, most international brigadists were assigned to physical work, such as 'digging or moving soil in wheelbarrows'.<sup>72</sup> The brigadists were unfamiliar with the norms and tasks, finding it difficult to undertake the work efficiently. The constant changes in the composition of the brigade worsened the situation.<sup>73</sup> In addition to the demanding work, they had to endure the summer heat in Bosnia, to which the majority of the British were not accustomed. As one brigadist noted,

they lived in wooden huts and slept on straw palliasses. Getting up at 5 A.M., they worked for 8 hours until 1 pm with a break at 9 A.M. The food supplied was basic, with coffee or tea and a hunk of maize bread and a sticky sweet preserve for breakfast. Lunch might be a bowl of stew or some raw cabbage and a slice of Spam or similar tinned meat.<sup>74</sup>

The poor conditions of accommodation and food did little to improve the situation, even though they were arguably the best that could be expected in post-war Yugoslavia.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, it was also difficult for the brigadists to adapt to the collective way of life at the working site. As one brigadist wrote:

As most of the brigade was ex-service and heartily tired of acting in a group, this meant at first that there was little organisation in evidence. People tended to be determinedly individual and drift off on their own private concerns. For a week or two, there was a distinct lack of cohesion and a general unhappy feeling of 'muddling through' in the good old British fashion.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Dorothy Sale, 'The British', in *The Railway*, ed. Edward Thompson (London: British-Yugoslav Association, 1948), 43.

<sup>70</sup> Selinić, 'The Beginnings', 86.

<sup>71</sup> The concept of *displaying identity* was raised by Lyubomir Pozharliev in *The Road to Socialism*.

<sup>72</sup> Andersen, 'Youth Brigadiers at the Railway', 110.

<sup>73</sup> Report of the British Brigade, Belgrade, 8 Sept. 1947, AJ, F-114-290.

<sup>74</sup> 'Youth and Yugoslavia - Work on the Šamac-Sarajevo Railway', *The Times Weekly Edition* [London], 29 Oct. 1947, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Living conditions for ORA participants between 1947 and 1950 were generally poor. See Selinić, 'The Beginnings', 84.

<sup>76</sup> 'Youth Aids Yugoslavia', 5.

The Yugoslav side apparently did not hold a favourable view of the British brigadists' work performance. According to a PYY report, their work was considered poor, and they 'constantly insisted on occasionally leaving the Railway and travelling around the country'.<sup>77</sup> The brigadists were also criticised for failing to adapt to collective life and for their unwillingness to live a common life. There was little control over individual personalities, and their independence and discipline were described as very weak.<sup>78</sup> The PYY also complained about the careless enrolment of brigadists from Britain: 'there were many hostile elements, provocateurs and agents in it'.<sup>79</sup> Although the PYY delegate admitted in the report that the vast majority of brigadists came to the railway with a 'sincere intention to work and help', the outcome of the brigade's work was not that good.<sup>80</sup>

The comment by the PYY reveals a discrepancy between its goal of ideologically cultivating and engaging British youth with socialist ideas through labour, and the actual outcomes. The effort to build the identity of the 'new socialist man' – as was attempted with Yugoslav youth – through the strictly regulated daily life of the brigades and the merging of personal and collective identities through shared work experience did not realise as expected. The symbolic gesture of British youth participation could not compensate for the fact that their practical contribution was minimal.

In addition to the hard physical work and discipline, educational programmes and various recreational activities were organised for the British brigades. The organised lectures and discussions constituted a significant part of the political-ideological promotion of socialist Yugoslavia towards the British youth. Lecture topics included the youth railway and its significance, the Five-Year Plan, the People's Youth of Yugoslavia and Yugoslav cultural and educational policy.<sup>81</sup> The PYY delegate considered the lecture on 'The New Type of Democracy' to be a great success and satisfied that the brigadists 'tried to get as many favourable arguments as possible in terms of Yugoslavia and its democracy'.<sup>82</sup> The brigadists were reported to show great interest in the topics 'new democracy', 'constitution' and 'people's government'. Discussions following the lectures and general discussions about Yugoslavia were regularly held in the brigade.<sup>83</sup> The educational programmes were one of the most crucial non-labour programmes in promoting Yugoslavia and its socialist vision through the most explicit means of 'influencing youth by exposing them to and indoctrinating them in the official ideology'.<sup>84</sup>

The diverse recreational activities, including film shows, chess competitions, sports events and physical training, tended to create an atmosphere of communication and understanding among the young people from various countries. Orchestras and dramatic companies from the cities visited the line, and volunteers produced their own concerts, sketches and plays.<sup>85</sup> As one British brigadist remarked:

We grew to like and appreciate the different nationalities for their differing and particular characteristics. The Yugoslav students were as earnest about their play as about their work. You had to be careful when inviting a Yugoslav to a friendly game of chess or you would find yourself engaged in an international tournament, but when they relaxed they sang and danced with the cheerful abandon of the rest.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>77</sup>Western countries, AJ, F-114-290.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Western countries, AJ, F-114-290. In the PYY documents, it was not mentioned or discussed in detail what kind of provocative questions the brigadists had asked and how they had behaved.

<sup>80</sup>Report of British Brigade, Belgrade, 8 Sept. 1947, AJ, F-114-290.

<sup>81</sup>Report from Himbury, the Assistant Representative in Yugoslavia, on his recent visit to the Youth Railway, 24 Sept. 1947, TNA, BW66/4, YUG/8/1.

<sup>82</sup>Western countries, AJ, F-114-290.

<sup>83</sup>Report of the British Brigade, Belgrade, 8 Sept. 1947, AJ, F-114-290.

<sup>84</sup>Baković, 'No One Here', 44.

<sup>85</sup>Edward Thompson, 'Omladinska Pruga', in *The Railway*, ed. Edward Thompson (London: British-Yugoslav Association, 1948), 22-3.

<sup>86</sup>'Youth Aids Yugoslavia'.

Another brigadist, Martin Eve, who was a communist as well as the choirmaster at the railway, recollected such experience: 'there were more things than work on the Youth Railway'.<sup>87</sup> In his eyes, the railway also provided an opportunity to cultivate friendship and informal cross-cultural communication among young people of different nations.

These cultural activities represented another important aspect of promoting Yugoslavia among British youth. By involving brigades from diverse cultural backgrounds and various parts of the world, they embodied the ideological emphasis on brotherhood and unity, an ideal that extended to the fostering of international friendship and 'international anti-fascist identification'.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, they highlighted the diversity of participants in the ORAs. Through film screenings and gathered dance, brigadists were introduced to Yugoslav folk culture as a living tradition, reinforcing both national sentiment and the value of Yugoslav traditional culture.

### Back in Britain And Thompson's *The Railway*

When brigadists returned from the railway, they often gave lectures on their impressions of Yugoslavia, spoke at press conferences and wrote articles about their experiences for newspapers.<sup>89</sup> Many of these articles appeared in the CPGB daily newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, which effusively praised the Youth Labour Actions and socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>90</sup> For instance, a short note written by a returned brigadist emphasised that they 'had never seen such liberty and democracy as they had seen there [in Yugoslavia]'.<sup>91</sup> The painter Paul Hogarth, a CPGB member, published an illustrated article in the National Coal Board trade union magazine *Coal* (see Figure 1), introducing the Šamac–Sarajevo railway to miners in Britain. In the article, he introduced the general situation in Yugoslavia and how Bosnian miners and students from mining colleges contributed to the construction of the railway.<sup>92</sup>

Interest in the country among some brigadists, especially communists, did not ebb afterwards. B. Champeney, a member of the CPGB at Bristol University, sent a letter in February 1948 to the Central Council of the PYY, requesting a regular subscription to the *Information Bulletin*, a PYY brochure circulated in England.<sup>93</sup> The PYY, keen to promote both itself and the country, accepted Champeney's request and even offered to send more copies to his friends who were also interested in Yugoslavia.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, brigadist P.G. Myers asked for the booklet 'The Five-Year Plan of FNRJ' and other literature about industrial and agricultural issues.<sup>95</sup>

The BYA also organised social events after the brigadists returned from Yugoslavia. A reunion party in December 1947 was held for the brigadists who had worked on the Šamac–Sarajevo railway. Celebrities from Britain and staff from the Yugoslav Embassy in London were invited. The event featured selected performances from British concerts given on the railway, mass singing of Yugoslav songs and an exhibition of drawings and photos of the youth railway.<sup>96</sup>

Despite these efforts by enthusiastic youth and the BYA to promote Yugoslavia in Britain, some Britons remained sceptical. Using Youth Labour Actions to promote Yugoslavia's image sometimes had the opposite effect. This scepticism was reflected in an article published in the Scottish newspaper *the Scotsman*:

<sup>87</sup> Martin Eve, 'Recreation', in *The Railway*, ed. Edward Thompson (London: British–Yugoslav Association, 1948), 39.

<sup>88</sup> See Pozharliev, *The Road*, 95; a similar idea of enhancing inter-ethnic ties was raised by Baković; see Baković, 'No One Here', 44.

<sup>89</sup> Youth Section of the British–Yugoslav Association, AJ, F-114–244.

<sup>90</sup> The promotion of the Youth Labour Actions in *The Daily Worker* started in 1946 when the first youth railway was built between Brčko and Banovići in Yugoslavia.

<sup>91</sup> 'Youth Railway Builders Leave', *The Daily Worker* [London], 14 Aug. 1947, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Hogarth, 'Miners Help to Build A Railway', *Coal*, Apr. 1948, AJ, F-114–300.

<sup>93</sup> The Letter from B. Champeney to the Central Committee of PYY, AJ, F-114–244.

<sup>94</sup> The Letter from the Central Committee of PYY to B. Champeney, AJ, F-114–244.

<sup>95</sup> The Letter from P. Myers to the Central Committee of PYY, AJ, F-114–244.

<sup>96</sup> British–Yugoslav Association, AJ, F-114–244.

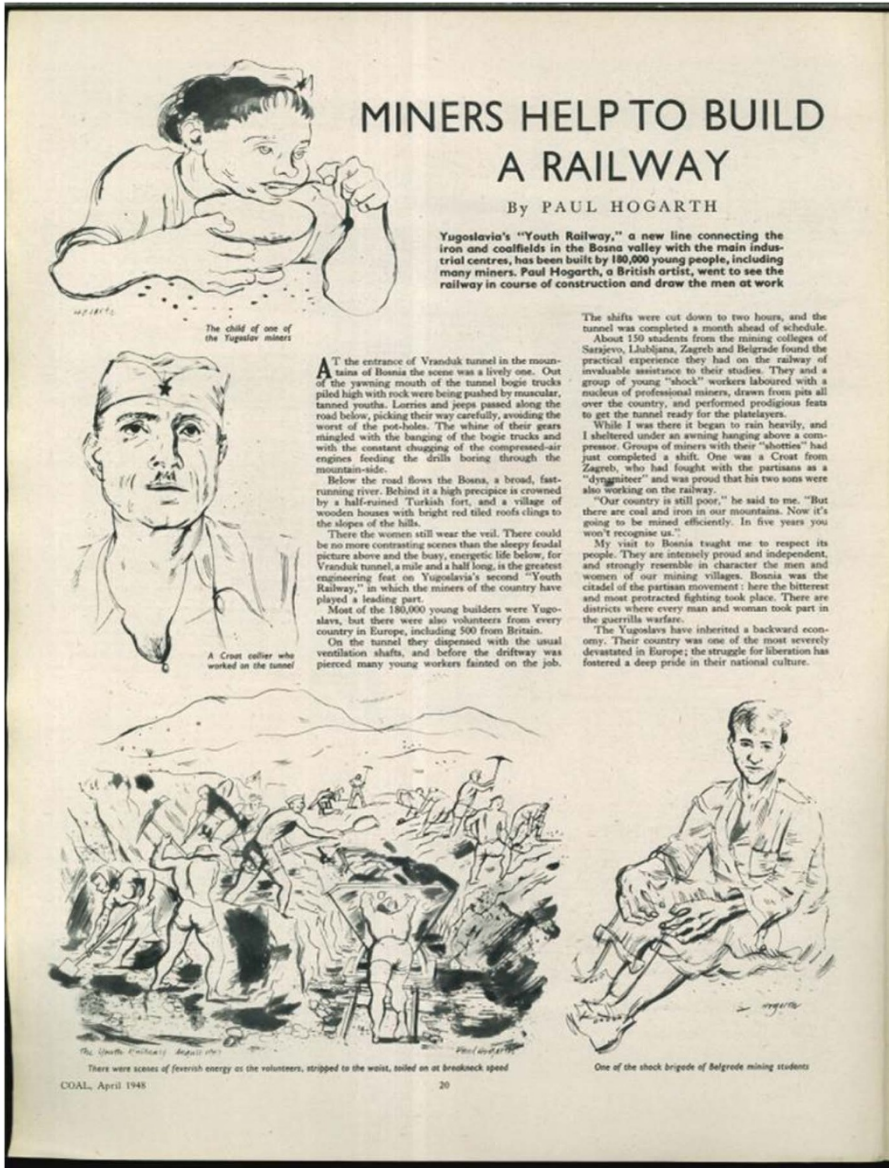


Figure 1. The article 'Miners Help to Build a Railway', written by Paul Hogarth in the magazine *Coal Magazine* (NCB), Apr. 1948, 20. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence V3.0; <https://www.ncm.org.uk/collections/research/digitised-coal-magazine>.

The minimum result on any healthy young folk who elect to spend a holiday this way must be to infuse in them the idea that the democratic Federal Republics of Yugoslavia are doing a great job. It is also a fair guess that, intermingled with the discussion groups and the lecture, goes a fair mixture of political indoctrination.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>97</sup>Patrici Maitland, 'International "Youth Brigades" – New Phenomenon in Eastern Europe', *The Scotsman* [Edinburgh], 26 July 1947, 7.

The author of the article, Patrick Maitland, was suspicious of the project. He compared the construction work to paramilitary training of an international brigade intended to fight in Greece and reiterated that it was merely indoctrination.<sup>98</sup> His attitude may have been influenced by his political views as a conservative and his previous working experience. Maitland had been a special correspondent in the Balkans and Danubian area for the *Times* during 1939 and 1941. Later, he joined the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office, where he ran the Yugoslav Department from 1943 to 1945.<sup>99</sup>

Similar distrust of the Yugoslav government was common. The *Scotsman* published letters from both supporters and opponents of such labour actions. Among these letters, Violet M. Henderson, a brigadist, held an opposite view:

The suggestion that we were subjected to Communist indoctrination during our stay is quite false. We had lectures – arranged entirely by one of our own brigade – on Yugoslav literature, education, the Five-Year plan, the Partisan war against the Germans; we attended classes in Serbo-Croat, and we had many opportunities of becoming acquainted with Yugoslav culture through the concerts at which young Yugoslavs revealed to us the wealth of their folk songs and dances.<sup>100</sup>

However, another brigadist, C.M. Coles, disagreed and explicitly expressed strong distaste. He compared Yugoslav youth to the *Hitlerjugend* and likened the work in Yugoslavia to brainwashing. He condemned the forced labour camps and religious persecution in Yugoslavia and was suspicious of the freedom of speech and press as well as the non-democratic political system.<sup>101</sup>

Among the supporters of Youth Labour Actions in Yugoslavia, E.P. Thompson, the returning brigadist and the future historian, was enthusiastic about promoting socialist Yugoslavia in Britain and fostering mutual understanding and a sense of community between the people of Britain and Yugoslavia. As a CPGB member and the commander of a British brigade, he was keen on building communist internationalism and friendship through the Šamac–Sarajevo railway project and attempted to improve the working performance of the brigade during their stay in Yugoslavia.

According to a Yugoslav report in September 1947, the group spirit and work performance of the British brigadists gradually improved as Thompson became the newly elected commander and had 'a clear line of work'.<sup>102</sup> Thompson took the brigade work seriously and regarded it as a valuable opportunity to 'seek inspiration and hope' from the socialist East.<sup>103</sup> On the occasion of his departure from the youth railway, he sent a letter to all the builders:

Be assured that when we leave your country we shall not betray the friendship we have made here.... It is therefore of very great importance that we should have come here, and that you should have greeted and received us as comrades. Every one of us is going home to tell his

<sup>98</sup>'Yugoslav Youth Brigade', *The Scotsman* [Edinburgh], 4 Sept. 1947.

<sup>99</sup>See the *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/dec/08/conservatives-lords-press-publishing> (last visited 3 Apr. 2025).

<sup>100</sup>'Youth Brigades in Yugoslavia', *The Scotsman* [Edinburgh], 1 Sept. 1947, AJ, F-114–300.

<sup>101</sup>'Yugoslav Youth Brigade – A Memory of the Hitler Jugend', *The Scotsman* [Edinburgh], 3 Sept. 1947, AJ, F-144–300.

<sup>102</sup>According to the report, 'the group that worked at the cavity in the cave in front of the tunnel constantly beat the norm.... The competition began to be well developed.' The new main administrative brigadists led by Thompson 'emphasised work performance at the site and achieved very good results in a short time'. See Report of the British Brigade, Belgrade, 8 Sept. 1947, AJ, F-114–290.

<sup>103</sup>Thompson noticed the prospect of having holiday and entertainment in Yugoslavia caused some problems with work performance, as some brigadists thought more about their holiday than the hard physical work. He also gave advice on how to improve the organisation and discipline of future brigades. In his letter to his Yugoslav friend, he emphasised the importance of better organisation: 'so many people wish[ed] to see for themselves the new Yugoslavia, that many of them [saw] the work as of only second importance'. He advised arranging a cheap travel scheme 'so that those who [were] not suited for work or have short holidays, could visit the country'. See Letter from Edward P. Thompson to Bogdan, 10 Mar. 1948, AJ, F-114–244.

friends the truth about your country. We shall strive to change the foreign policy of the British Government, to pull down the flag of imperialism and to hoist the flag of friendship. We shall succeed in our struggle. Perhaps we shall not succeed this year, perhaps we shall not succeed next year either; but we shall succeed.<sup>104</sup>

Thompson's letter was not merely an expression of goodwill as a communist internationalist. It fulfilled precisely the role the Yugoslav state expected from a foreign participant: that of a cultural diplomat. His letter was published in *Politika*, one of Yugoslavia's most prominent newspapers.

As promised in his farewell speech, Thompson made considerable efforts to promote summer work projects after returning to the United Kingdom. His experiences in Yugoslavia and other People's Democracies made him think about the development of communism in Britain. In a letter to a Yugoslav friend, he believed 'it was important to help the British people understand in human terms the problems of the new democracies and how they were being solved.'<sup>105</sup> He edited and published a booklet named *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction* through the CBGP-sponsored BYA (see Figure 2).<sup>106</sup>

Thompson described the booklet as 'one of the first detailed (as opposed to general and theoretical) descriptions of an aspect of life in Yugoslavia prepared by British eye-witnesses.'<sup>107</sup> He emphasised the journalistic method adopted in the book and even tried to pre-empt the possible ill-intentioned interpretations by stating that 'This book is not propaganda.'<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, reflecting Thompson's own membership in the CPGB, the narratives in the book were almost all provided by communist youth. The BYA, which published the book, was sponsored by the CPGB and had a close relationship with the Yugoslav Embassy. Even though he insisted that the booklet's main purpose was to inform more people about Yugoslavia, it still aroused suspicion from MI5, which had been monitoring the activities of the CPGB throughout the war, viewing it as communist propaganda.<sup>109</sup> MI5 was not the only one in the country suspicious of the book. A *Sunday Times* correspondent described it as 'undisguised and almost undiluted Communist propaganda.' This article, with its obvious anti-communist tone, warned that the BYA's sponsorship included members of Parliament.<sup>110</sup>

In a report from MI5, it was noted that Thompson's speech in Yugoslavia 'spoke completely in Communist style'. He promised that 'in England he would defend Yugoslavia of today against British reactionaries. It is therefore quite clear that all this delegation [youth brigades] will be very useful to the Yugoslav Embassy in London for their propaganda in Britain.'<sup>111</sup> At that time, as the Cold War was on the horizon, anti-communist sentiment was on the rise in British political circles in the decade

<sup>104</sup>Edward Thompson, Extract and Translation of an article in *Politika*, 14 Sept. 1947, TNA, KV 2/4290.

<sup>105</sup>Letter from Edward P. Thompson to Bogdan, 10 Mar. 1948, AJ, F-114-244.

<sup>106</sup>*The Railway – An Adventure in Construction* was republished in 2020 by Rab – Rab Press in Helsinki. It was reviewed by *Tribune* and *Counterfire*. *Tribune* was established in 1937 as a socialist magazine and has been revived today as representing the British Left. *Counterfire* is a revolutionary socialist organisation and its website focuses on the left. In the review in the *Tribune*, *The Railway* was regarded as a recollection of British activists' motivations and daily life on the project. This adventure of the British youth emphasised a strong socialist engagement and internationalism while it aroused anti-communist anxieties back in Britain. It is deemed today as being 'relevant to a time when crisis and devastation are again making grassroots projects of rebuilding vital' instead of its ideological colour. See <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/11/e-p-thompson-and-the-volunteers-on-the-red-railway>. In the article in *Counterfire*, however, the author mentioned the overly positive and lack-of-critical examination of the reports by CPGB members as well as the new introduction by Slobodan Kramanić, which questioned the self-determined and socialist character of such youth projects in Yugoslavia. See <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/11/e-p-thompson-and-the-volunteers-on-the-red-railway>.

<sup>107</sup>Letter from Edward P. Thompson to Bogdan, 10 Mar. 1948, AJ, F-114-244.

<sup>108</sup>'Preface', in *The Railway*, ed. Edward Thompson (London: British-Yugoslav Association, 1948), ix.

<sup>109</sup>Steve Parsons, 'British McCarthyism and the Intellectuals', in *Labour's Promised Land: Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945–1951*, ed. J. Fyrth (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 226.

<sup>110</sup>'More Strange Bedfellows', *The Sunday Times* [London], 2 May 1948; Reports from foreign press and radio 1941–48 (Izveštaji inostrane štampe i radija), AJ, F-114-300.

<sup>111</sup>Spotted Dog Report received from Translation from French, 25 Sept. 1947. B2a/ACG, 7 Oct. 1947, TNA, KV2/4290.

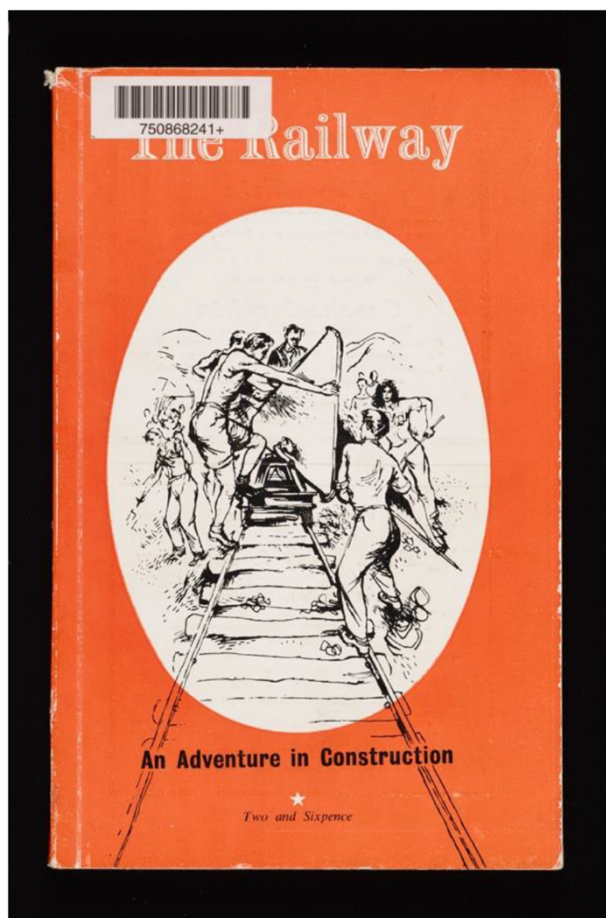


Figure 2. The front cover of *The Railway*; 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1948]', 2057 E. 10.

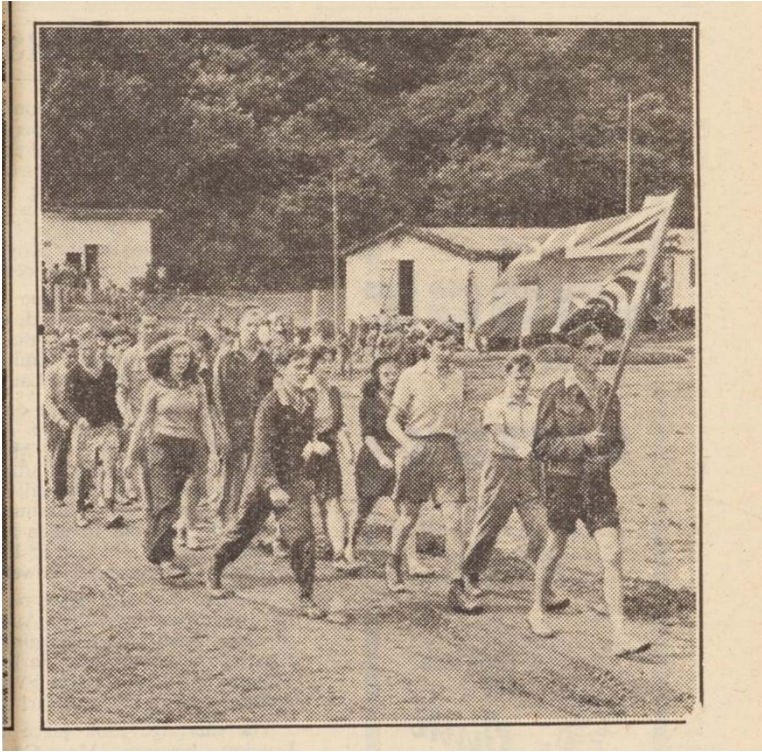
following the war.<sup>112</sup> It is not surprising that *The Railway* was suspected of the propaganda from the 'red menace'.<sup>113</sup>

However, *The Railway* neither became a landmark work in Thompson's oeuvre nor was it actively promoted by the Yugoslav state, either domestically or internationally.<sup>114</sup> The booklet faded along

<sup>112</sup>MI5 in 1948 even planned 'to erect detention camps to house potential fifth columnists in the event of a national emergency. First on the list were known members of the Communist Party of Great Britain and their suspected allies'. See Matthew Gerth, *Anti-Communism in Britain During the Early Cold War: A Very British Witch Hunt* (London: University of London Press, 2023), 2.

<sup>113</sup>In a recent study of *The Railway*, Lugarić argued that Thompson's participation in the British brigade is no doubt 'ideologically and politically biased' as he became a CPGB member during his student years at Cambridge and 'was one of the founders of the British New Left'. But the lived experience was the basis of the collection, which 'neutralises the ideology that officially supported and initiated the action [ORA]'. See Danijela Lugarić, 'The Construction of the Yugoslav Railway, the Deconstruction of "Historical Fact" and the Making of Cultural Studies: "The Railway: An Adventure in Construction" by E.P. Thompson' (Izgradnja jugoslavenske željezničke pruge, razgradnja 'povijesne činjenice' i stvaranje kulturalnih studija: 'pruga: Avantura izgradnje' E.P. Thompsona), in *The Spirit of the Railway: A Collected Volume on the Book by E.P. Thompson (Duh Pruge Zbornik Radova o Knjizi E.P. Thompsona)*, ed. Andrea Matošević and Tanja Petrović (Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga, 2020), 136–7.

<sup>114</sup>The booklet was not translated into Serbo-Croatian during socialist Yugoslavia times, but recently in 2020 it was translated by the Belgrade publisher Fabrika Knjiga as a collection of the booklet and several studies on *The Railway*.

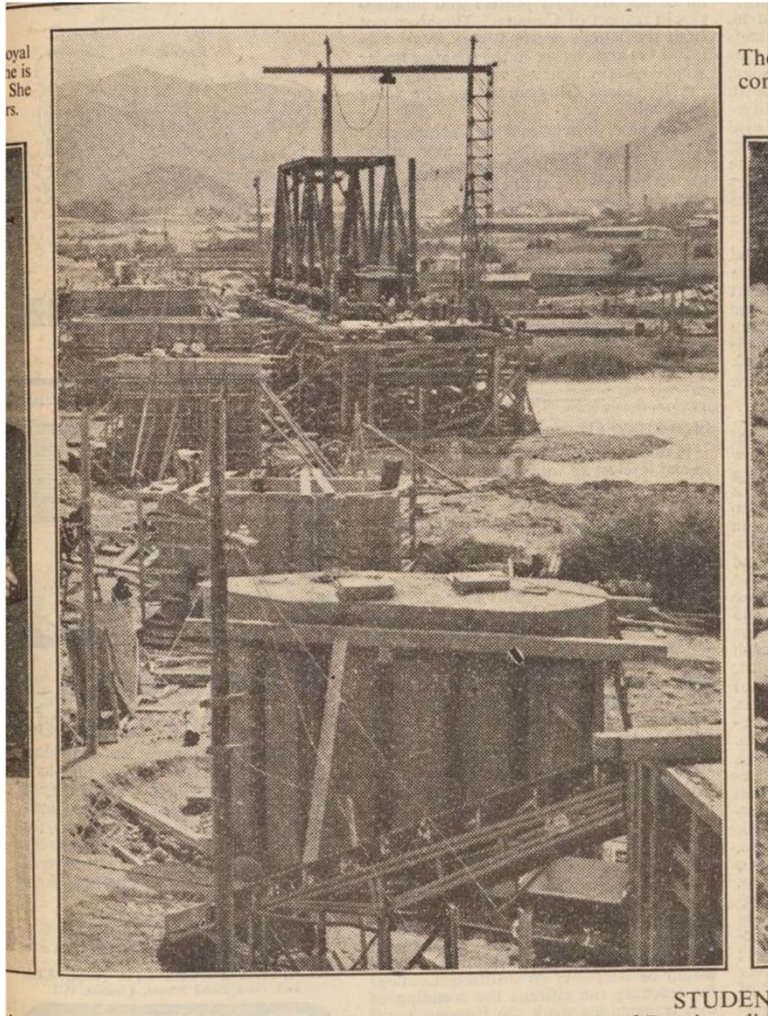


**Figure 3.** British students (of both sexes) participating in the work on the railway, on their way to attend a meeting of the foreign brigades; *The Times Weekly Edition* [London], 8 Oct. 1947, 11, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]'; N. 22,893 B. 3.

with the post-war 'labour action fever'. It remains unclear how such a representative account of the ORA fell into obscurity. One can only speculate that this may have been a consequence of the 1948 Yugoslav–Soviet split, during which the CPGB sided with the Soviet Union and the BYA distanced itself from Yugoslavia. Another possible reason is Thompson's growing disillusionment with communism, which culminated in his withdrawal from the CPGB in 1956. Nevertheless, his attitude toward the youth railway experience remained unchanged over the years.<sup>115</sup> Despite its inherently propagandistic character, *The Railway* offered a comprehensive depiction of life and work in the camp, as seen through the eyes of left-wing eyewitnesses. It also played a role – albeit a limited one – in advancing Yugoslav cultural diplomacy in Britain.

Photos from the *Times Weekly Edition* and the *Times Educational Supplement* (see Figures 3–6) captured the spirit of the youth railway construction that the Yugoslav government intended to convey: the unceasing developmental momentum of the people and the country and the international friendship with enthusiastic young Britons.

<sup>115</sup>In an interview in 1976, he confirmed it was a good experience at the Yugoslav youth railway while also mentioning his experience in Bulgaria and how he 'was convinced of the authenticity of the popular front'. See Henry Abelove and E.P. Thompson, *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 13. Historian Bryan D. Palmer confirmed this in his article that 'this [Yugoslav project] was an experience of immense importance' and 'he [Thompson] would carry the experience of this transformative revolutionary possibility with him for the rest of his life, citing it against the cynicism of Kolakowski, drawing on it in the 1980s in a call for a new "vocabulary of mutual aid and of plain duty to each other in the face of power"'. See Bryan D. Palmer, 'Homage to Edward Thompson, Part I', *Labour* 32 (1993): 40.



**Figure 4.** Building a bridge over the river Bosna; *The Times Weekly Edition* [London], 8 Oct. 1947, 11, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]', N. 22,893 B. 3.

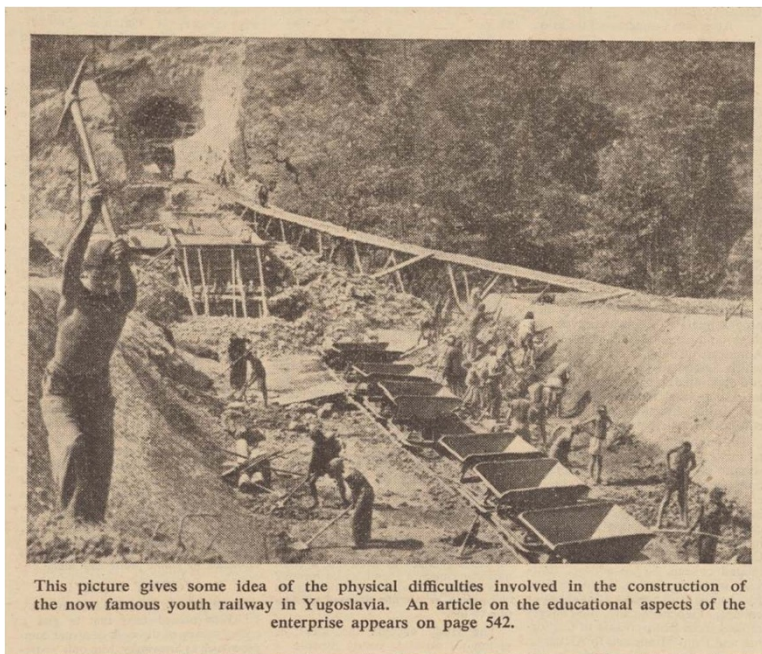
Like these photos, illustrations created by British artists complemented the narratives of the young brigadists (see [Figures 7–10](#)). These illustrations are typically charcoal sketches depicting the harsh conditions of the railway construction site with dirt-stained and patched clothing worn by the volunteers, and the simple, makeshift campsite where the youth were housed. They served as first hand depictions of the post-war youth labour actions in socialist Yugoslavia. Some British artists, including the communist painter Percy Horton and three others (Paul Hogarth,<sup>116</sup> Laurence Scarfe and Ronald Searle), visited the railway.<sup>117</sup> The major themes of the artwork typically depicted the large-scale construction site and the figures of the young brigadists from diverse working backgrounds. They later held an exhibition of their art depicting the railway and Yugoslavia at the Leicester Gallery in London

<sup>116</sup>Paul Hogarth was a communist. He was later disillusioned by the Eastern European oppression in the 1950s; *Financial Times* [London], 9 Mar. 2013, 15.

<sup>117</sup>Unlike domestic artists and cultural workers, who regularly visited the railway as part of the cultural and artistic education for Yugoslav youth, the visits of foreign artists served to promote the railway through artistic representation abroad.



**Figure 5.** Students at work in a cutting; *The Times Weekly Edition* [London], 8 Oct. 1947, 11, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]'; N. 22,893 B. 3.



**Figure 6.** The construction of the youth railway; *The Times Educational Supplement* [London], 11 Oct. 1947, 537, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]'; N. 26,011 B. 2.



**Figure 7.** Drawing of men and women at work at the tunnel mouth; *The Daily Worker* [London], 29 Oct. 1947, 4, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]', N. 24,771 A. 5.

in February 1948. There were sixty pieces exhibited, and the exhibition was opened by the Yugoslav ambassador. According to the report from the Yugoslav Embassy, the number of visitors was large, and the exhibition was very successful.<sup>118</sup>

## Conclusion

The Yugoslav government attached great importance to the Šamac–Sarajevo railway. The participation of British brigades and other foreign youth drew international attention to the ORAs. The enthusiasm of British youth stemmed from the post-war atmosphere of the Grand Alliance with the Soviet Union as well as the wish to build a new world out of the destruction of the Second World War. For leftist youth, especially CPGB members, helping to build the railway during the summer fulfilled their wish to promote international friendship and cooperation. It was also a good opportunity to travel to an interesting place. Inviting British youth, especially leftists, was a useful strategy to cultivate a friendly attitude towards Yugoslavia and its regime. The Šamac–Sarajevo railway embodied communist internationalism and became a symbol of Yugoslavia's communism and peaceful cooperation between the East and the West.

<sup>118</sup>Izveštaj o radu za mesec (Report of work for February), 4 Mar. 1948, written by Jelena Tucaković from the Information Office of the Yugoslav Embassy, DAMFARS, 1948.



**Figure 8.** Harry Baines, 'A Girl Volunteer', *The Daily Worker* [London], 29 Oct. 1947, 4, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]', N. 24,771 A. 5.

Working in Yugoslavia did increase British awareness of the country. This included both the left brigadists themselves and the general British public, who usually received information through press coverage. At this stage, conducting cultural diplomacy through youth labour actions was still exploratory. The brigadists' experience was far more complex than the ideal life pictured in Thompson's booklet, filled with contradictions and uncertainties. As historian Tea Sindbæk Andersen comments, 'their [the international brigadists] experiences in Yugoslavia did not leave an impression of a repressive dictatorship, but rather one of authentic public support for the development of a new form of socialist society'.<sup>119</sup>

Although the Yugoslav authorities sought to promote the country by integrating British brigadists into its socialist ideology through labour and political-ideological engagement, they remained dissatisfied with the loose organisation and undisciplined behaviour of the British participants. The gap between the ideal depicted by the enthusiastic brigadists and practical problems has always existed. The positive narratives of the young communists, however, were inevitably categorised as communist propaganda and viewed with suspicion by members of the British public. This was partly due to the nature of such collective physical work in a communist country during the rising Cold War. It is also worth noting that the actual contribution of the British brigades in terms of production was more

<sup>119</sup> Andersen, 'Youth Brigadiers at the Railway', 119.

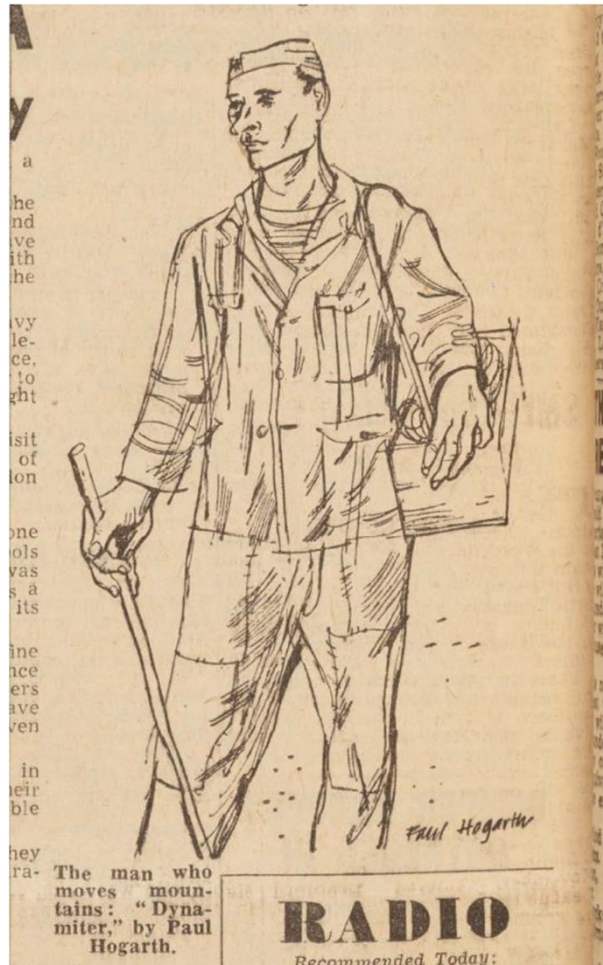


Figure 9. Paul Hogarth, 'The Man Who Moves Mountains: "Dynamiter"', *The Daily Worker* [London], 29 Oct. 1947, 4, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]', N. 24,771 A. 5.

symbolic than real, as the *Daily Worker* commented: 'the work they did mattered less than the spirit in which they came.'<sup>120</sup>

Nevertheless, British youth brigades were paid 'the highest tribute'. Together with Danish youth, they were awarded 'special diplomas for their efforts in the construction of the line and the strengthening of friendship and solidarity with the PYY and the builders of the line from other countries.'<sup>121</sup>

The majority of British young people came to work in Yugoslavia out of curiosity, driven both by a natural touristic interest and an ideological pilgrimage to see a socialist country. Most of the British brigadists were ideologically committed communists eager to contribute to peace work and help with the construction of socialism. They were enthusiastic about going to Yugoslavia and seized the opportunity of the multinational gathering to realise communist internationalism. For the Yugoslav authorities, they represented ideal messengers for promoting the country and had the potential to help establish a positive image of Yugoslavia in Britain and other countries.

<sup>120</sup>'Youth Festival', *The Daily Worker* [London], 15 Aug. 1947, 2.

<sup>121</sup>The second students' brigade and the first and second British youth work groups were the ones that had been awarded the tribute. See 'British Youth Get Highest Tribute', *The Daily Worker* [London], 29 July 1947, 3.



**Figure 10.** Ronald Searle, 'The British Brigade's Camp from across the Railway', *The Daily Worker* [London], 29 Oct. 1947, 4, 'Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford [1947]', N. 24,771 A. 5.

However, several problems persisted. The organisation of the brigades in 1947 was relatively poor due to the country's underdevelopment. Food and accommodation remained consistent challenges during the brigadists' travels amidst the country's disorder.<sup>122</sup> In addition, the educational and cultural materials and programmes were inadequate and monotonous. Certain everyday frictions also highlighted the differences in mindset between the young people from Britain and Yugoslavia, for instance, the Yugoslav delegates' repeated emphasis on 'collectivism' and 'discipline' as virtues of the socialist new man, and their dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the British brigadists' 'individualism' and 'bourgeois' attitudes.

The heyday of the Youth Labour Actions and the participation of international brigadists was from 1945 to 1952. The peak of the British youth brigades was at the Šamac–Sarajevo railway in 1947. After 1952, the ORAs almost ceased due to being deemed economically unbeneficial, until their restoration by the Communist Party in 1958. These Youth Labour Actions were 'closely related to all political, economic, social and ideological processes of the time'.

The ORAs provided a stage for Cold War politics to penetrate individual lives. Yugoslavia was seen as a special destination for building socialism, appealing to idealistic youth with its developmental momentum and the allure of a communist ideology absent in the capitalist West. To some extent, the ORAs facilitated mutual learning through lectures, discussions, trips, visits around Yugoslavia and daily camp life, even though in a seemingly propagandistic way.

At first glance, the building of youth railways may seem more like an economic and developmental issue than a cultural one. However, the construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway served as a calling card in many Yugoslav cultural events arranged with Britain: it was featured, for instance, in a painting

<sup>122</sup>The material scarcity was a constant challenge faced by the Yugoslav government. Slobodan Selinić drew on the archival documents, which gave a detailed description of the scenario: 'in the same room (the dining room) a lecture was held, two courses were held, 12 young people were cleaning peas, one brigade was having dinner, and during that time the brigades were "singing, making noise, etc." outside, so that the lecturer had to interrupt the lecture several times'. See ASCG, Fond 114, SSSOJ, Fasciklja 152. Savezna radna akcija Novi Beograd, 1948–1952, in Selinić, 'The Beginnings', 88. A similar situation was also raised by Reana Senjković, as many brigades lacked the prescribed equipment such as woollen blankets and stationeries and not enough wagons were provided for construction. There was also not enough medical staff at the site. See Reana Senjković, 'Ljudi za nju kažu "naša" pruga', in *Duh pruge – Zbornik radova o knjizi E.P.Thompson*, ed. Andrea Matošević and Tanja Petrović (Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga, 2020), , 193.

exhibition of British artists held in London in 1948; in social events organised by the British–Yugoslav Association; and in a film documentary. In addition, many cultural activities were organised for the British brigades, such as introductions to Yugoslav folklore, outings to places of interest, campfires, choirs and discussions.

Therefore, it is essential to examine these ORAs through a cultural lens and as a bottom-up practice within Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy. As Yugoslavia's first cultural diplomacy practice, the ORAs targeted British leftist youth. The Yugoslav authorities hoped that the participation of British brigadists and related cultural events could enhance their image in Britain.<sup>123</sup> However, the lack of a systematic cultural diplomacy framework and its strong propagandistic character made this goal difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, the ORAs functioned as a laboratory for Yugoslavia to develop its cultural diplomacy, gradually expanding its audience from British leftists to the general public.

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<sup>123</sup> Among cultural activities organised by Yugoslavia in Britain, the ORA and the Partisan liberation war occupied core themes and narratives. This can be seen from a series of cultural events organised by the BYA that included exhibitions, film screening and lectures. This corresponded to its domestic cultural policy, which focused on the building of socialist culture and ideology in the early post-war years. The change in Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy took place in the 1950s when the government started to give up such highly ideologically driven and propagandistic narratives and switched to more neutral cultural events such as arranging folklore ensembles and holding exhibitions on Yugoslav modern art in cultural diplomacy.