
TERRORISM AND YUGOSLAV AIR TRANSPORT 1948–1990

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ABSTRACT: *This paper summarises terrorist attacks on the means and institutions of Yugoslav air transport. These attacks include a total of six aircraft hijackings occurring between 1948 and 1981, the explosion of a bomb onboard a Yugoslav Airlines aircraft above Czechoslovakia in 1972, and several attacks on Yugoslav Airlines offices abroad. In three more cases, aircraft that had been hijacked abroad landed on Yugoslav airports. Besides these, it discusses international and Yugoslav regulations regarding criminal activities against the safety of air navigation. It is based on unpublished archival records, press, and literature.*

KEYWORDS: air transport, terrorism, Yugoslavia, Yugoslav Airlines (JAT), aircraft hijacking, bomb attack, Vesna Vulović

Definitions and Regulations

Terrorism is considered somewhat hard to define. According to Dr Vojin Dimitrijević (1932–2012), professor at Faculty of Law in Belgrade, there is no clear definition of a terrorist act, but these acts always have certain common elements. They must have a political and violent nature, strike fear at the adversary, have an impact on the wider community and be “unnatural”, i.e. they must depart from normal behaviour and social norms and laws.¹ Dr Radoslav Gaćinović (1955–2021) from the Institute for Political Studies in Belgrade offers a definition, based partly on Dimitrijević: “Terrorism is the organised use of violence (or the threat of using violence) by politically motivated perpetrators, who are determined to impose their will on the government and citizens by the means of fear, anxiety, defeatism, and panic.”² Terrorist attacks related to air transport can include aircraft hijackings, planting explosive devices onboard aircraft, at airports or at other objects related to air transport, as well as threatening to perform such acts.

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¹ Vojin Dimitrijević, *Terorizam* (Beograd: K. V. S. 2000), 97–122.

² Радослав Гаћиновић, *Тероризам* (Београд: Драслар 2005), 60.

Endangering the safety of transport was punishable according to the 1929 Criminal Code of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Article 206 of the Code stated that endangering transport by rail, tram, ship, or aircraft was punishable by a prison sentence. Article 207 stated that it was punishable by prison to endanger the lives of people in transport or to perform acts that could lead to foreseeable heavy injury or loss of life. Similar provisions were made in the 1951 Yugoslav Criminal Code. Paragraph 2 of article 271 set a punishment of at least three months or up to five years in prison for acts of putting under threat the lives of people or property of great value by endangering transport by rail, ship, or aircraft. Paragraph 3 of the same article set a punishment of up to three years in prison if such an act occurred without intention. The same qualifications were retained in later modifications of the Criminal Code.³

The increase in air transport after the Second World War led to the need to regulate the fight against terrorism and other crimes committed against the safety of air travel, as well as the punishment of crimes committed onboard aircraft on international flights. Several international conventions were adopted: the Convention on offences and certain other acts committed on board aircraft in 1963 (Tokyo Convention), the Convention for the suppression of unlawful seizure of aircraft in 1970 (Hague Convention), and the Convention for the suppression of unlawful acts against the safety of civil aviation in 1971 (Montreal Convention).⁴ Yugoslav regulation was modified to include their provisions. The 1973 modifications to the Yugoslav Criminal Code introduced the felonies of seizure of aircraft and endangering the flight of aircraft. Article 272a, paragraph 1, stated that taking control of an aircraft in flight by force, or the threat of using force, was punishable by prison. According to paragraph 2, the sentence could extend to up to 20 years in prison if aggravating circumstances existed. Article 272b, paragraph 1, set a punishment of up to ten years in prison for those who placed or carried into an aircraft explosive or similar devices or substances, destroyed or damaged navigation aids or damaged the aircraft in other ways, gave false information related to the flight of an aircraft, or endangered the safety of an aircraft in flight in any other way. Paragraph 2 of this article stated that if such an act was committed with the intention to destroy the aircraft, or cause the death of one or more persons, or if such an act led to such results, punishment could range from at least ten years in prison to the death penalty. If the mentioned acts were committed without intention, the culprit could be sentenced to a prison term. The 1976 Criminal Code (articles 240-243) contained provisions on four acts against the safety of air navigation: seizure of aircraft (punishable by at least one year in prison; in case of aggravating circumstances, punishable by at least

³ Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), Ministarstvo pravosuđa FNRJ (49), Izvod iz zakonskih propisa i pravnih pravila [...], 1948. See also: *Službeni list FNRJ/SFRJ*: br. 13, 9. mart 1951; br. 30, 29. jul 1959; br. 11, 14. mart 1962, br. 31, 1. avgust 1962; br. 15, 5. april 1965; br. 15, 5. april 1967; br. 20, 8. maj 1969.

⁴ *Savezna uprava za civilnu vazдушnu plovību: godišnji bilten 1976*, Beograd 1977, 36–37; Bogoljub Filipović, *Odnos vazduhoplovnog prava SFRJ i međunarodnog vazduhoplovnog prava* (Beograd: Savez udruženja pravnika Jugoslavije 1979), 25–29. Full texts of the conventions are available at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv1-english.pdf> (Tokyo Convention), <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv2-english.pdf> (Hague Convention), and <https://treaties.un.org/untc/Pages/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20974/volume-974-I-14118-English.pdf> (Montreal Convention), all accessed on April 4th, 2024.

five or twenty years in prison), endangering the flight of aircraft (punishments ranging from one year in prison to the death penalty, depending on the circumstances), destruction or removal of signs related to the safety of air navigation (punishable by up to three years in prison), and the misuse of telecommunication signs (punishable by three months to three years in prison).⁵

Other regulation was introduced to increase the safety of air navigation. The 1975 Order on the minimum of equipment for the control of aircraft, passengers, luggage, and cargo specified that Yugoslav airports were to obtain equipment for the detection and analysis of explosives, X-ray and stethoscopic devices, radiological, toxicological, and metal detectors, equipment for the neutralisation of explosives, blast protection and the transport of explosive devices, and the means of active and passive observation. The types and amounts of such equipment were to be specified for each airport by a commission, comprised of representatives of the Federal Secretary for Internal Affairs, Directorate General of Civil Aviation, Federal Customs Directorate, and the Association of Airports.⁶

Hijackings of Yugoslav Passenger Aircraft

In international aviation law, an aircraft hijacking can be defined as “the violent diversion of an aircraft from the direction of its international flight towards the air space of another country, or its forceful landing on the territory of another country, out of its predicted point of landing or destination airport.”⁷ The Hague Convention of 1970 states that the offence of unlawful seizure of an aircraft is perpetrated by a person who “unlawfully, by force or threat thereof, or by any other form of intimidation, seizes, or exercises control of, that aircraft, or attempts to perform any such act, or is an accomplice of a person who performs or attempts to perform any such act.”⁸ It is considered that the first aircraft hijacking was committed on February 21st, 1931, when a group of armed Peruvian rebels forced the American pilot of a postal aeroplane to take them aboard, so that they could drop leaflets on Peruvian cities.⁹ The first hijacking with at least one victim happened on February 7th, 1939 in the Soviet Union. An Aeroflot plane performing a cargo flight from Tbilisi to Baku landed at the town of Yevlakh, where an off-duty pilot boarded the plane along with his brother and a friend, claiming that they had urgent business to attend to in Baku. In reality, the three men were members of an Azerbaijani Anti-Soviet organisation looking for a way to leave the USSR. After take-off, they used the moment when the flight engineer went to check the cargo hold, and the off-duty pilot burst into the cockpit, demanding that the plane be flown to Iran. After the pilot-in-command

⁵ *Службени лист СФРЈ*, бр. 12, 24. март 1965, *Службени лист СФРЈ*, бр. 6, 8. фебруар 1973; *Службени лист СФРЈ*, бр. 44, 8. октобар 1976.

⁶ *Службени лист СФРЈ*, бр. 12, 7. март 1975.

⁷ Miodrag Trajković, *Vazduhoplovno pravo* (Beograd: Službeni list SFRJ 1981), 265.

⁸ „Закон о ратификацији Конвенције о сузбијању незаконите отмице ваздухоплова“, *Службени лист СФРЈ*, бр. 33, 30. јун 1972.

⁹ Philip Baum, *Violence in the Skies: A History of Aircraft Hijacking and Bombing* (Chichester: Summersdale 2016), 15–16.

refused to abide, he was shot from a revolver and killed. The other kidnappers subdued the flight engineer. The other pilot took control of the aircraft and landed near a village on the Iranian side of the border. The people who approached the plane noticed the dead man inside, and notified the police, who arrested all those onboard. After an investigation, the flight engineer was released and returned to the USSR along with the plane, while the kidnappers were extradited for trial.¹⁰

Before the Second World War, no attempts to hijack a passenger aircraft occurred in Yugoslavia. The first such case happened on June 3rd, 1948. A Yugoslav Airlines (Jugoslovenski aerotransport, JAT) Douglas DC-3 registered YU-ABC was flying from Belgrade to Sarajevo with an unknown number of passengers. The crew consisted of captain Romeo Adum, copilot Božidar Milekić, navigator Mihajlo Petrović, flight engineer Mihajlo Ormuž, radio-operator Dragutin Šporer and flight attendant Inge Misner. The plane took off from Belgrade at 14:27. Soon after, Šporer asked Misner to accompany him to the plane's tail section, claiming that he heard noise coming from there. He then asked Ormuž to go there as well. Upon returning, Ormuž realised that the cockpit door had been locked from the inside and went back to Misner. Šporer came out and let a passenger, Ante Paškov, enter the section of the cockpit where the radio operator and navigator sat. He then asked Petrović to demand the plane's position from air traffic control at Belgrade. When he turned around to give Šporer the information, Šporer pointed two guns at him and told him to remain silent, while Paškov tied him with a rope. After that, Šporer entered the pilots' part of the cockpit and asked Adum to go to the rear. He too was restrained in the front baggage hold, along with Petrović and Ormuž, who came back from the rear of the plane. Šporer finally sat in the captain's seat and ordered Milekić to hold the heading towards south-west, while Paškov was pointing a gun at him. Around 16:00, Šporer went to the wireless telegraph and started transmitting a message. Milekić decided to use the moment. He cut off fuel to the right engine and switched off the battery switch. He then shouted: "Fighters!", trying to fool the hijackers into thinking that fighter planes were pursuing them, and threw himself on Paškov, trying to take his guns. Šporer managed to take Paškov's guns before Milekić did and shot twice. Luckily, Milekić managed to push his hands away both times and remained uninjured but was then restrained and tied. Adum tried to free himself, Ormuž and Petrović, but didn't succeed. Šporer returned the plane to a normal regime of flight and threatened to shoot anyone who tried doing anything. The other crew members managed to convince him to let Adum land the plane at Bari, where, along with Šporer and Paškov, two other female passengers left the plane. All others onboard returned to Yugoslavia.¹¹

Yugoslav authorities opened an investigation against Šporer and Paškov on account of theft, coercion, and endangering public transport according to the 1929

¹⁰ Дмитрий Соболев, *Хроника советской гражданской авиации 1918–1941. 22* (Москва: Фонд Русские Витязи 2019), 247.

¹¹ AJ, 49-46-86, dokumentacija o zahtevu za izručenje Dragutina Šporera i Ante Paškova iz Italije, 1948–1949 (copies provided by the courtesy of Predrag Miladinović); AJ, Uprava civilnog vazduhoplovstva (620), 620-12, Rešenje o prestanku državne službe Dragutina Šporera, pov. br. 1110, 26. jun 1948. sa priloženom izjavom članova posade od 12. juna 1948; Jovo Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT* (Beograd: Lighthouse Studio 2022), 38–39.

Criminal Code. Investigators found out that Paškov had broken into an apartment in Zagreb and stole several pieces of clothes, bedclothes, and cutlery on the night between April 22nd and 23rd, 1948. His daughter had already reported to authorities that her father had been bringing home some items for a while, and that her mother was selling them on the market. Some of the stolen items were found in their home. As for Šporer, he, along with an accomplice, who was later arrested by Yugoslav authorities, had broken into the office of a trading cooperative at Zemun, where they stole 208.000 dinars. It is impossible to determine when and where Paškov and Šporer met, or how long they planned the hijacking. On July 2nd, 1948, the Yugoslav Ministry of Justice demanded the extradition of Paškov and Šporer from Italy. Only on October 22nd, 1949, did it receive information from the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the extradition request was denied by the Italians and that the hijackers were already released from custody. Their later fate is unknown.¹²

On October 17th, 1951, two JAT DC-3s were hijacked by their pilots. The first plane, flown by captain Milivoje Arsenijević and copilot Ivan Kavić, took off from Zagreb towards Belgrade. Around Slavonski Brod, it made a turn towards the Adriatic Sea, and then to the west, finally landing at Zurich. The other plane, flying from Ljubljana to Belgrade, was piloted by Milan Bjelanović (the name of the copilot has not been determined). Immediately after take-off, Bjelanović turned the plane towards Zurich. Flight engineer Mato Trajber attempted to enter the cockpit, but then heard gunshots from inside, and decided not to do so. Arsenijević was accompanied by his family, while Kavić and Bjelanović fled Yugoslavia alone. All of them demanded political asylum upon landing at Zurich. The destination was probably chosen because it was JAT's first destination in Western Europe, with services beginning in 1949, meaning that the pilots were familiar with the route and the airport. Both planes, along with the rest of the crew members and passengers, were returned to Yugoslavia.¹³

Besides these hijackings, archival records state that several members of JAT crews flying to Zurich would leave the planes after landing and demand asylum in Switzerland. There is no mention of their names, or how many such cases occurred. The Legal Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia sent a report to the Yugoslav Ministry of Justice regarding the possibility of extradition of culprits for such acts. In the case where crew members simply left their planes after a regular flight to Zurich, it was suggested that extradition should not be demanded, as no crime was committed. In the cases of Arsenijević, Kavić, and Bjelanović, the letter stated that a radio-operator had been tied, and that a gun was fired, damaging one of the planes. Therefore, the crimes of unlawful deprivation of liberty, coercion, and damaging property were indeed committed, and there was basis for extradition. However, it was also stated that Swiss courts could declare the crimes were committed due to political reasons and reject the demand for extradition, and that such a reply should be countered with a demand for a trial before a Swiss court. In the end,

¹² AJ, 49-46-86, dokumentacija o zahtevu za izručenje Dragutina Šporera i Ante Paškova iz Italije, 1948–1949; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 38–39.

¹³ Љубо Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, *Авијатика*, бр. 2–3, септембар 1994, 15; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 55–56.

none of the hijackers were extradited to Yugoslavia, nor is there any information related to whether they were tried in Switzerland, or what became of them later.¹⁴

The next hijacking occurred on June 27th, 1952. A DC-3 was flown by captain Milisav Semiz from Belgrade to Pula (there is no information about the rest of the crew). Among the passengers were president of the Presidium of the Popular Assembly of the People's Republic of Serbia and member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts Siniša Stanković, president of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts Aleksandar Belić, and writer and member of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts Ivo Andrić. During the flight, three passengers made their way into the cockpit, threatened the crew with two guns and a knife, and demanded to be flown to Forli in Italy. Realising the risk, Semiz abided and landed at Forli. Upon landing, the hijackers surrendered to Italian authorities, after which unidentified men in plain clothes entered the plane and started offering political asylum to all others onboard. They left after Semiz protested their presence and police secured the plane. After a while, the plane took off towards Yugoslavia.¹⁵

The last hijacking of a JAT airplane in this period occurred on July 9th, 1959. An Ilyushin Il-14M took off from Tivat towards Belgrade, with the flight crew consisting of captain Milisav Đurić, co-pilot Vladimir Vodopivec, flight engineer Vlado Grujić, and radio-operator Mirko Dimitrijević. There was a police officer onboard, acting as a guard. After take-off, a gunshot was heard, after which one of the passengers, a man named Obrad Čučković, burst into the cockpit. Threatening the crew with a gun, he demanded that the plane be flown to Marseille without communication with air traffic control. As the pilots flew the plane, the other crew members convinced him that communication with air traffic control was necessary, otherwise, there was a risk of the plane being shot down by fighters. Čučković changed his mind and demanded to be flown to Bari, where he indeed left the plane. All other passengers and crew members flew back to Yugoslavia, after which the plane was examined, and a bullet hole was found in the fuselage and repaired. The crew suffered serious consequences. Captain Đurić was suspended, co-pilot Vodopivec was sent to fly agricultural aircraft (he later returned to passenger aircraft), radio-operator Dimitrijević was relegated to performing his duties on the ground for four months with reduced pay, flight engineer Grujić was sent to work as a mechanic on the ground, while the police officer was put on trial. The explanation was that it was their duty to subdue the hijacker.¹⁶

Based on definitions mentioned, it can be ascertained that these hijackings represent acts of terrorism. The motivation behind them was political, as the culprits, opponents of the socialist Yugoslav regime, wanted to leave the country. They demanded asylum upon landing in the West, with Yugoslav authorities demanding

¹⁴ AJ, 49-46-86, dopis Pravnog saveta MIP FNRJ Ministarstvu pravosuđa FNRJ pov. br. 416062, 24. 10. 1951.

¹⁵ „Присилно спуштање путничког авиона ЈАТ-а у Италији“, *Политика*, 28. јун 1952, 4; Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 15; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 56.

¹⁶ Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 15; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 207–209.

their extradition, which was always rejected. Weapons were always used, and crew members were restrained in some cases. The fact that none of the hijackers belonged to a political organisation doesn't change the qualification of these acts, as terrorists can act on their own.

What was the attitude of the Yugoslav public towards these events? It is impossible to answer this question as domestic press published almost no information related to them. The only piece of news about a hijacking in this period was published on the fourth page of the Belgrade daily *Politika*, on June 28th, 1952. It simply stated that, on the previous day, three men forced the crew of a JAT plane to land in Italy, and that the plane was later returned to Yugoslavia along with the crew and the rest of the passengers. It is likely that the government didn't want the public to know of such events to reduce the possibility of new hijackings. Foreign press reported on these hijackings and emphasized that the culprits demanded asylum upon landing. However, Yugoslav citizens at home didn't have access to foreign press, meaning that the only people who likely knew of the hijackings were the friends and family members of the hijackers and their victims, or those who were informed for official reasons. Due to this, and the fact that the hijackers didn't send any kind of message to the wider public, means that striking fear was not one of their motives. These events can be considered "unnatural" for two reasons. No participant in air transport (crew members, passengers, air traffic controllers, airport workers and visitors) expects to become the victim or witness to an aircraft hijacking. Second, no matter the motivation, a hijacking represents an act which compromises the safety of air navigation and endangers human lives and material goods, breaking laws, and other regulations, as well as societal norms.¹⁷

Aircraft hijackings also happened in other socialist countries. On July 25th, 1947, three Romanian army officers seized the plane owned by the Romanian-Soviet airline TARS, flying from Bucharest to Craiova, and forced the pilot to fly to Turkey. They killed one of the crew members who tried to oppose them.¹⁸ On December 9th, 1949, another Romanian passenger plane operating a domestic flight was seized and landed at Belgrade. A police officer, acting as a guard onboard, was killed. Upon landing, Yugoslav authorities arrested four men, one of whom had escaped from prison in Romania. On February 3rd, 1950, Romanian authorities demanded extradition of the four men, who were accused of murder, complicity to murder, and illegally crossing the national border. Expecting such a request, the Yugoslav Ministry of Internal Affairs asked the Legal Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for advice on the matter. Four possibilities were discussed. The first one was to consider the act as an ordinary felony. In that case, the culprits could be extradited based on the 1933 Extradition Convention between Yugoslavia and Romania,

¹⁷ „Присилно спуштање путничког авиона ЈАТ-а у Италији“, *Политика*, 28. јун 1952, 4. Examples of reporting by foreign press (Swiss newspapers *Gazette de Lausanne* and *Journal de Genève*) on the 1951 hijackings can be found at: https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/GDL_1951_10_19/7/article/2120425/%22avion%20yougoslav%22; https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/JDG_1951_10_19/2/article/6947726/%22avion%20yougoslav%22, accessed on 8. 12. 2023.

¹⁸ Ph. Baum, *Violence in the Skies*, 23.

under the condition that they were not to be tried for illegally crossing the border. The second option was that the murder was to be considered a political crime, meaning that the culprits were not eligible for extradition. The third option was that the murder should be considered as “a felony related to a political crime”, which meant that extradition could be rejected, and that the accused should stand trial in Yugoslavia. The fourth option was that the extradition of Romanians should be related to the extradition of certain Yugoslav citizens from Romania or the release of some Yugoslavs from Romanian prisons. Yugoslav Foreign Minister Edvard Kardelj agreed with the third option, stating that the murderer should be put on trial, and the others should be released. The District Court in Belgrade rejected the extradition request on April 26th, 1950, stating that the accused were already being tried in Belgrade. This decision was upheld by the Supreme Court of Yugoslavia on May 4th, 1950.¹⁹

Reacting to the Yugoslav rejection, the Romanian embassy in Belgrade submitted a protest to the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 31st, 1950. It stated that the culprits were already sentenced before a Romanian court, meaning that a trial in Yugoslavia was unacceptable, and that Yugoslavia “broke the principles of international law” and “sided with murderers”, again asking for their extradition. The Yugoslav reply stated that the rejection was made in accordance with the 1933 Convention on Extradition and the Yugoslav Criminal Code, and that the claim that principles of international law were broken was unfounded due to the universal application of criminal law. The accused were already standing trial in Belgrade at the time of the first extradition request, which made no mention of a trial in Romania, they were sentenced by the District Court in Belgrade on May 5th, 1950, to prison terms ranging from three to fifteen years in prison with hard labour and they were already serving their sentences. There is no information regarding their later fate.²⁰

The most extreme example of aircraft hijacking in order to leave the Eastern Bloc happened on March 24th, 1950, when three aircraft of the Czechoslovak national airline ČSA were seized by some of their crew members and members of their families and flown to West Germany. The aircraft, taking off from Brno, Ostrava, and Bratislava towards Prague, carried a total of 85 people, 26 of whom participated in the plot. The hijackers were ČSA aviators who were considered politically unreliable by communist authorities, and were forbidden from flying on international routes, or to fly aircraft carrying members of their families. Due to this, they meticulously planned who would board which plane. In two cases, other crew members had to be subdued, while the entire crew of the plane taking off from Bratislava was part of the plot. Upon landing at Erding in West Germany, a total of 27 people demanded political asylum, an American diplomat flying as a passenger was immediately released, while 57 people returned to Czechoslovakia. The subdued crew

¹⁹ AJ, 49-46-86, zabeležka Pravnog saveta MIP FNRJ, 30. 1. 1950; isto, dopis MIP FNRJ Ministarstvu pravosuđa FNRJ, pov. br. 43062, 25. 2. 1950; isto, naredba Okružnog suda za grad Beograd, Kr-34/50, 17. 3. 1950, isto, rešenje Vrhovnog suda FNRJ, Kr. 105/50, 4. 5. 1950; isto, dopis Ministarstva pravosuđa FNRJ Ministarstvu pravosuđa NR Rumunije, 29. 5. 1950; Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 16.

²⁰ AJ, 49-46-86, dopis MIP FNRJ Ministarstvu pravosuđa FNRJ, 4. 12. 1950; isto, dopis Ministarstva pravosuđa FNRJ MIP FNRJ, 15. 12. 1950.

members were fired from ČSA for not sufficiently resisting the hijackers. The passengers who returned to the country, on the other hand, were celebrated as heroes, with a book and a film being produced about the event.²¹

There was also a case of a hijack in order to flee to Eastern Europe. On September 12th, 1948, eight Greek communists hijacked a plane belonging to the national airline TAE flying from Athens to Thessaloniki, demanding to be flown to Yugoslavia. The crew attempted to fool them and land in Greece, but to no avail. Following the course of the Vardar, the plane landed on an abandoned airfield 60 kilometres south-east of Skopje, where the hijackers disembarked. After the crew reported to Greece via radio and calculated the amount of fuel left, the plane took off towards Thessaloniki. It landed four and a half hours behind schedule and with eight passengers less than the original number.²²

After more than two decades, the final hijacking of a Yugoslav passenger plane occurred on September 26th, 1981. A JAT Boeing 727 was supposed to fly from Titograd via Dubrovnik to Belgrade, with the crew consisting of captain Ljubomir Zekavica, co-pilot Mirko Pinter, flight engineer Zoran Klencojević, and four flight attendants, Stevan Tadić, Zorica Petrović, Marina Andrejić, and Radica Ljumović-Đurđević. Two other JAT pilots were in the cockpit: Gojko Vujanović, who wasn't on duty at the time, and Dragan Jovanović, who was training to become a pilot on the B-727. The plane took off from Titograd with 75 passengers and picked up another 26 at Dubrovnik. Among them were the team of FC Budućnost from Titograd, actors Marko Nikolić, Mihailo Janketić, and Žarko Laušević, singer Biljana Petrović, and retired Yugoslav Army generals Božo Lazarević and Milan Šijan. At 22:45, shortly after take-off from Dubrovnik, captain Zekavica notified air traffic control that the plane had been hijacked. Three armed men, Borivoje Jelić, Marko Križić, and Milan Prpić, forced their way into the cockpit, threw Vujanović out, dragged Perović inside, forced the passengers into the rear part of the plane, and ordered Zekavica to fly towards Italy. They then stood in front of the cockpit door. Italian authorities didn't allow the plane to fly into their airspace, so they diverted towards Athens where they landed low on fuel, despite being forbidden to do so by Greek authorities at first. After refuelling, the plane took off towards Tel Aviv, but Israel didn't allow the plane inside its airspace and fighters were scrambled to escort the plane away. It finally landed at Larnaca on Cyprus at 4:40 the next day. After a while, the passengers and crew simulated a fire, and then used the rear passenger stairs and emergency exits to leave the plane. Realising what happened, the hijackers surrendered to Cypriot police, after which they were extradited to Yugoslavia, where they were sentenced to prison terms. The verdict stated that the act was motivated by "desire of adventure". There were attempts to connect Jelić with Serbian émigré organisations, but he denied such allegations, claiming that he wanted to inform the world of the position of prison inmates in Yugoslavia. Other perpetrators were Croats, making cooperation with a Serb nationalist unlikely. All the hijackers were at some point in their lives convicted to prison terms in Yugoslavia, and abroad,

²¹ Ph. Baum, *Violence in the Skies*, 28–31.

²² Graham M. Simmons, *Olympic Airways: A History* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books 2019), 49, 52.

and some of the sentences included seizure of passports. Therefore, the most likely motivation for this act was a feeling of revolt towards the Yugoslav state. Unlike previous ones, this hijacking was covered by Yugoslav media for several days.²³

After the series of hijacking occurring in the 1950's Yugoslavia represented a safe country compared with others, apart from the 1981 affair. According to data from the Flight Safety Foundation, hijackings throughout the world were rare until the late 1960's. Then, in a span of just five years from 1968 to 1972, a total of 360 such events were registered. The hijacking of the JAT plane in 1981 was one of thirty that happened that year. On average, there were around 33 aircraft hijackings every year from 1968 to 1990 in the world. Their motives varied. Some were attempts to extort money. In other cases, citizens of Eastern Bloc countries, especially Poland and the western parts of the Soviet Union, wanted to reach the West. There were also cases of people hijacking planes to fly from the United States to Cuba. Finally, many hijackings were related to the Palestinian struggle against Israel.²⁴

Explosion of JAT Flight JU367 above Czechoslovakia in 1972

The first confirmed case of a bomb being planted inside a passenger plane happened on October 10th, 1933, when a United Airlines plane flying from Cleveland to Chicago exploded in flight. Although it was determined that a nitro-glycerine-based bomb was hidden in a suitcase in the baggage compartment, the culprit was never found. Just like hijackings, bombing attacks became much more frequent in the second half of the 20th century. Their motives were also varied. Some terrorists carried bombs with themselves, threatening to activate them if the crew didn't abide to their demands. Some bombings were assassinations of high-ranking politicians or attempts of such acts. Finally, some attacks were simply performed with the desire to cause as many deaths and as great destruction as possible. In all such cases, the perpetrators wanted to strike great fear into the general public and the authorities. The number of bombings decreased due to increased safety measures.²⁵

The only bombing attack on a Yugoslav passenger plane, as well as probably the most famous accident in the history of Yugoslav aviation, occurred on January 26th, 1972. A JAT McDonnell-Douglas DC-9-32 bearing the registration YU-AHT was on flight JU367 from Stockholm via Copenhagen and Zagreb to Belgrade. The plane took off from Stockholm at 13:13 and landed at Copenhagen at 14:30, where the crew was changed as planned. The plane took off at 15:20 towards Zagreb. The

²³ „Drama sa srećnim ishodom“, *Jugoslovenski aerotransport*, 5. oktobar 1981, 3; Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 15; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 196–197. Više u: Марко Којић, *Отмица ЈАТ-овог авиона '81. Прилог проучавању терористичке делатности против Југославије*, дипломски рад, Универзитет у Београду, Филозофски факултет, 2020. See the editions of *Borba* and *Politika* from 27. 9. to 30. 9. 1981.

²⁴ <https://aviation-safety.net/statistics/period/stats.php>, accessed on 8. 12. 2023; Bogoljub Filipović, *Odnos vazduhoplovnog prava SFRJ i međunarodnog vazduhoplovnog prava*, passim; Ph. Baum, *Violence in the Skies*, passim; R. G. Grant, *Flight: The Complete History of Aviation* (London: Dorling Kindersley 2017), 408–410; Дмитрий Соболев, *Хроника советской гражданской авиации 1961–1991. 22* (Москва: Фонд Русские Витязи 2021), passim.

²⁵ Ph. Baum, *Violence in the Skies*, passim; R. G. Grant, *Flight*, ibid.

flight was uneventful until 16:01, when an explosion occurred near the town of Srbská Kamenice in Czechoslovakia, close to the border with East Germany, at an altitude of 33.000 feet (10.050 metres). The plane didn't disintegrate immediately. Instead, the blast severed the connection between the control surfaces and the commands in the cockpit, rendering the plane uncontrollable. Unaware of this, the pilots, having survived the blast, attempted to regain control of the plane until the very end. After entering a steep dive, the plane disintegrated into three major parts: the nose and the front part of the fuselage, the centre part of the fuselage with the wings, and the tail section. A total of 27 people were killed, 22 passengers and five crew members (captain Ludvik Razdrih, co-pilot Ratko Mihić, flight attendants Dragan Dimitrijević and Slobodanka Gavranović, and mechanic Branko Obradović). The sole survivor was flight attendant Vesna Vulović, who survived for several reasons. Since the plane didn't disintegrate immediately, the influence of sudden decompression on her organism was reduced. She was sitting in the jump seat in the tail section, which remained relatively intact. Thus, the horizontal stabilizer acted as a wing, slowing down the tail as it fell in a spiral and landing in deep snow, which softened the impact. Vulović was found by a forester, who took her to the hospital. She recovered and continued working for JAT, although no longer as a flight attendant. She is known as the person who survived the fall from the greatest altitude ever without a parachute.²⁶

Since the accident happened in Czechoslovakia, local authorities had the duty of investigating it and preparing a report. For this reason, the 1972 edition of the Special Bulletin on accidents in civil aviation, published yearly by the Yugoslav Directorate General of Civil Aviation, only contains the number of victims of this accident, and the information that the probable cause of the accident was sabotage.²⁷

The day after the accident, Yugoslav observers led by Milovan Đokanović, director of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, joined the Czechoslovak commission conducting the investigation. On January 28th, the Yugoslav embassy in Prague informed the Federal Secretariat of Foreign Affairs: "According to preliminary data they have reached, our experts believe that the explosion did not occur due to an outside force (a projectile or similar). It is only needed to determine whether the explosion happened due to organized planting (sabotage – diversion) or due to a malfunction". On January 31st, the Secretariat was informed that the explosion had definitively happened inside of the plane, and that all that remains is to determine whether it was due to a bomb or malfunctioning equipment.²⁸

Yugoslav press reported about the accident in detail- Belgrade dailies *Borba* and *Politika* published news of the accident on January 27th, along with information on the victims and Vesna Vulović. On January 28th, *Politika* cited Swedish and Dan-

²⁶ The complete report on the accident in Czech language is available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20160304035830/http://www.nacr.cz/Z-files/znasichfondu_II_1.pdf; https://web.archive.org/web/20151123102117/http://www.nacr.cz/Z-files/znasichfondu_II_2.pdf, accessed on 8. 12. 2023; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 142.

²⁷ *Specijalni bilten: udesi u civilnom vazduhoplovstvu 1972*, br. 17, 1973, 5.

²⁸ Diplomatski arhiv Ministarstva spoljnih poslova Srbije (DAMSP), fond Politička arhiva (PA), god. 1972, Čehoslovačka, fascikla 25, pov. br. 43732, telegram Ambasade SFRJ u Pragu SSIP, 28. 1. 1972; isto, pov. br. 43844, telegram Ambasade SFRJ u Pragu SSIP, 31. 1. 1972.

ish press, who claimed that it was very possible that the plane was destroyed by a bomb planted by Ustasha émigrés. The next day, *Politika* published the statement of Colonel Jovan Popović of the Yugoslav People's Army, one of the country's leading experts on explosives and an observer to the investigation. His conclusion was that the explosion originated in the front baggage hold. Safety measures regarding flights to Yugoslavia were increased in Sweden and Denmark. Coincidentally (or not?), a bomb exploded on an international train from Zagreb to Vienna on the same day the JAT plane exploded, wounding six people.²⁹

Swedish police opened their own investigation. The Yugoslav embassy in Stockholm at first reported that the police were checking every lead and piece of information, including those coming from the media, with great diligence, also questioning "some members of hostile emigration". By late February 1972, the tone of the reports changed, stating that there was no progress with the Swedish investigation, and that the police had become too careful trying not to break any laws, almost seeming uninterested in the case. The Federal Secretariat for Foreign Affairs considered such remarks unfounded, as there was excellent cooperation with Swedish police in the case of the murder of Vladimir Rolović, Yugoslav ambassador to Sweden. The Secretariat considered that too great importance was placed on an unchecked ticket sold to a Yugoslav citizen who didn't board the plane. JAT informed them that his baggage couldn't have been loaded onto the plane without his ticket being checked first. By late February 1972, Swedish police reopened its previously closed investigation and started looking for the person who bought the unchecked ticket issued to a man named Stevan Petrović. No one has ever been brought to trial for this terrorist act.³⁰

The final report of the Czechoslovak accident investigation commission stated that the plane was in good condition; the crew was qualified and healthy enough to perform its duty; the weight and balance of the plane were within limitations; the plane didn't catch fire even after it hit the ground; air traffic control and weather conditions had no role in the accident; there was no evidence of a force coming from outside of the plane that could have caused the accident; there were other civilian aircraft in the vicinity, but they were all properly separated from each other and the crashed plane. The cause of the explosion was a bomb connected to a clock mechanism, hidden inside a suitcase placed in the front baggage hold, which led to the loss of control as described previously. Zlatko Vereš, Yugoslav aviation safety inspector and participant in several aviation accident investigations, also states that the accident was indirectly caused by a lack of proper safety measures related to loading luggage onto aircraft. There are claims that the plane was shot down by the Czechoslovak Army by a missile fired from the ground or by a fighter jet, as well as several possible reasons. The first one is that the Yugoslav plane came too close to the

²⁹ „Дело терориста?“, *Политика*, 28. 1. 1972, 9; „Вероватни узрок: експлозија у предњем пртљажнику“, *Политика*, 29. 1. 1972, 5. See also the editions of *Politika* and *Borba* from 27. to 31. 1. 1972.

³⁰ DAMSP, PA, god. 1972, Čehoslovačka, f. 25, pov. br. 48400, informacija Uprave za Zapadnu Evropu SSIP-a, 2. 3. 1972; isto, pov. br. 48995, telegram Ambasade SFRJ u Stokholmu SSIP, 7. 3. 1972.

aircraft carrying Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The second one is that there was a misunderstanding between East German and Czechoslovak air traffic control, leading to the army not being informed about the arrival of the Yugoslav plane. The third alleged reason is that the JAT plane flew into the zone of a military exercise. According to all these theories, the official version was a cover-up and the Ustasha émigrés were convenient scapegoats. It is also alleged that the plane was at a much lower altitude at the time of the explosion. However, no one has ever demanded an official reopening of the 1972 investigation. Besides this, a shoot-down by the Czechoslovak Army would require many people to be involved in the event (radar operators, missile operators or fighter pilots, signals and communication troops, their commanders), and someone would have probably spoken about his role in the event by now.³¹

Other Attacks against JAT

JAT was the victim of several other attacks. On January 13th, 1975, the infamous international terrorist Carlos the Jackal, along with an accomplice, attempted to strike an Israeli passenger jet on the ground at Orly airport in Paris, using a rocket launcher. Both projectiles missed their target. One of them hit a JAT DC-9 registered as YU-AHP, wounding Ramo Tahirović, a flight attendant, as well as a police officer and an airport worker. Tahirović recovered from his injuries, and the plane was repaired in Paris. It flew back to Belgrade on March 5th and was returned to regular use on March 19th, after additional small repairs and painting. Ustasha emigration also planted bombs in JAT offices around the world five times (Stuttgart 1975, Melbourne 1977, Paris 1978, New York 1982, Bruxelles 1990). In 1981, JAT representative in Toronto Petar Dobrić was heavily wounded in a knife attack. There were also at least two cases of false information about bombs being planted on JAT aircraft flying international services. However, as publicist Jovo Simišić notes, there were probably even more such cases that the public was never informed about. Apart from the Paris attack, which was accidental, the others represented a strike by the Ustasha emigration against a symbol of Yugoslavia throughout the world. They damaged JAT property and could injure or kill loyal Yugoslav citizens. They also had the objective of discouraging travellers and tourists from flying to Yugoslavia, but the number of passengers transported by JAT (around 2.000.000 per year during the 1970's) and the number of Western tourists visiting Yugoslavia show that they failed in their intention.³²

³¹ https://web.archive.org/web/20160304035830/http://www.nacr.cz/Z-files/znasichfondu_II_1.pdf, accessed on 8. 12. 2023; https://web.archive.org/web/20151123102117/http://www.nacr.cz/Z-files/znasichfondu_II_2.pdf, accessed on 8. 12. 2023; Zlatko Vereš, *Kad motori utihnu* (Beograd: More 2007), 105–107; Srđan Cvetković, „Terorizam i jugoslovenska politička emigracija“, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 2 (2014), 185–186; Ph. Baum, *Violence in the Skies*, 93–97; Петар Драгишић, *Ко је пуцао у Југославију? Југословенска политичка емиграција на Западу 1968–1980* (Београд: Институт за новију историју Србије 2019), 198; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 142.

³² „Avion DC-9 JU AHP uključen u saobraćaj“, *Jugoslovenski aerotransport*, br. 55, mart 1975, 2; Ph. Baum, *Violence in the Skies*, 114; П. Драгишић, *Ко је пуцао у Југославију?*, 120–124, 127; J. Simišić, *Bio jedan JAT*, 169–170.

Hijackings Related to Yugoslavia Occurring Outside its Territory

Along with terrorist attacks against Yugoslav passenger aircraft, several hijackings were related to the country in different ways. In two such cases, hijacked foreign aircraft landed at Yugoslav airports. In 1970, an Algerian passenger plane was seized on a domestic flight, with the culprits demanding to be flown to Albania via Italy. Since Albanian authorities prohibited the plane from landing there, it flew into Yugoslavia and landed at Dubrovnik, where the hijackers were arrested and sentenced to prison terms. On October 29th, 1972, sympathizers of the Palestinian organisation Black September took control of a Lufthansa Boeing 727 flying from Damascus to Frankfurt. They demanded the release of three participants in the kidnapping and murder of Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games held that year in Munich from West German prisons. The plane landed at Nicosia (Cyprus) and continued its flight towards Munich, since the West German authorities decided to free the three men. The hijackers realised that the plane would get to Munich before their comrades would be released, so they forced the crew to circle over Zagreb until they were brought there. The plane landed at Zagreb almost running out of fuel. The freed prisoners were brought to Zagreb, from where the plane flew on to Tripoli, where the hostages were finally released.³³

Three hijackings occurring in other countries are politically related to Yugoslavia, as they were committed by Anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist émigrés. On September 15th, 1972, three Croats hijacked a plane belonging to the Scandinavian company SAS, flying from Goteborg to Stockholm. They demanded the release of a total of seven men, guilty of holding hostages at the Yugoslav consulate at Goteborg and the murder of the Yugoslav ambassador to Sweden Vladimir Rolović, from Swedish prisons. Swedish authorities accepted their demands, released the prisoners, and sent them to Spain on the hijacked plane. Yugoslav authorities were notified that Sweden demanded the extradition of the hijackers from Spain, but that the demand was rejected. As noted by historian Petar Dragišić, the Ustasha emigration accomplished its goal of obtaining the release of the prisoners, but it also showed that it was capable of committing serious acts of terrorism.³⁴

Another group of Croats, led by Zvonko Bušić and his American-born wife Julienne, members of an Ustasha organisation, hijacked a plane belonging to the American company TWA on September 10th, 1976. They demanded that the press publish two documents, “Proclamation to the American People”, and “Declaration of Independence”. The plane originally took off from New York to Chicago but was forced to land at Montreal. There, it was refuelled, after which it flew to Paris via Newfoundland and Iceland. American authorities agreed to

³³ Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 16; Ph. Vaum, *Violence in the Skies*, 76–77, 103–105.

³⁴ Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 16; П. Драгишић, *Ко је пуцао у Југославију?*, 108–109, 125–127.

publish the texts, after which the hijackers surrendered to French police. They believed that their goal was accomplished, and that the American public would be notified of the alleged injustices done to Croats in socialist Yugoslavia. However, the documents were to be retrieved from a bag in baggage locker at a New York metro station. The bag also contained a bomb, which was meant to convince the police that there was also a bomb on the plane (in reality, there wasn't). During the defusing, the bomb exploded killing one police officer and injuring another one. Because of this, Bušić was sentenced to life in prison upon his return to the United States but was released from prison in 2008 and deported to Croatia. He committed suicide in 2013.³⁵

One hijacking was committed by the Serbian emigration. On June 20th, 1979, Nikola Kavaja, member of a Serb anti-communist organization based in the United States and a former pilot of the Yugoslav Air Force, seized a Boeing 727 owned by American Airlines on a flight from New York to Chicago, demanding that a fellow member be released from prison. He released all the passengers and part of the crew at Chicago. He then returned to New York, boarded another plane, and flew to Ireland. His alleged intention was to strike the building of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in Belgrade with the plane, but the press also stated that he wanted to fly to South Africa. Kavaja surrendered to Irish police and was extradited to the United States, where he was given a prison sentence.³⁶

* * *

Terrorist attacks against air transport mostly encompass aircraft hijackings and planting explosives onboard aircraft. Yugoslav air transport, i.e. the country's national airline, Yugoslav Airlines, was the victim of a total of seven such attacks: six hijackings and a bombing. Of the six hijackings, five occurred between 1948 and 1959, with the sixth one happening in 1981. In three of them, crew members were among the perpetrators. The only case of a bomb being planted on a Yugoslav passenger plane occurred in 1972, when a JAT passenger jet exploded in the skies of Czechoslovakia. The only survivor was flight attendant Vesna Vulović. Investigators concluded that a bomb exploded in a suitcase in the forward baggage hold, and that it was planted by Ustasha emigration, but no one was ever brought to court for this act. There are theories that the plane was shot down by the Czechoslovak army, but these were never confirmed, nor was the investigation into the crash ever reopened. Besides these, there were several bombing attacks on JAT offices throughout the world. All bombing attacks were committed by the extreme Croatian emigration. The reasons for these acts were political. Hijackings were committed by people opposed to the socialist system in Yugoslavia, and they demanded asylum upon landing on their destination. The bombings represented

³⁵ Љ. Пејановић, „Отмице ваздухоплова на простору бивше Југославије“, 16; Ph. Ваум, *Violence in the Skies*, 124–129; П. Драгишић, *Ко је пуцао у Југославију?*, 127.

³⁶ П. Драгишић, *Ко је пуцао у Југославију?*, 128.

an attack on a symbol of Yugoslavia abroad. However, Yugoslav air transport suffered fewer terrorist attacks on average, and could be considered safe compared to the rest of the world at the time.

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TERRORISM AND YUGOSLAV AIR TRANSPORT 1948-1990

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Summary

According to one definition, terrorism represents organised violence or the threat of using violence by politically motivated perpetrators, with the aim of imposing their will on citizens and authorities by spreading fear, panic, and defeatism. In air transport, it is mostly associated with aircraft hijackings and planting bombs in aircraft. Terrorist acts against Yugoslav air transport, namely the country's principal air carrier, Yugoslav Airlines (JAT), have occurred in several instances. A total of four hijackings occurred between 1948 and 1952, with two later occurrences, one each in 1959 and 1981. All the hijackers wanted to leave the country as they were political enemies of the regime. In three of the cases, namely the hijackings of 1948 and 1951, some of the crew members were among the perpetrators. The hijacking of 1981 represents one of the rare cases in which the hostages managed to free themselves by simulating a fire onboard the aircraft after it landed at Cyprus. The most famous case of a terrorist attack on Yugoslav air transport is the 1972 bombing of a JAT passenger airplane, which exploded over Czechoslovakia. A stewardess, Vesna Vulović, miraculously survived the fall from an altitude of 33000 feet. The final report on the accident stated that a bomb had been planted in the luggage, and Croatian Ustasha émigrés have been named as the perpetrators, although no one has ever been tried for this attack. There are theories that the plane was actually shot down by the Czechoslovak army, but these remain unproven, nor has the official investigation been reopened ever since. Between 1975 and 1990, a total of six attacks on JAT agencies throughout Europe and North America were committed by Ustasha émigrés: five bombings and a non-fatal stabbing of an employee. Three hijackings throughout the world (one in Sweden in 1972 and two in the United States, one each 1976 and 1979) were committed by opponents of the Socialist regime in Yugoslavia. In two other cases, hijacked aircraft from other countries landed on Yugoslav airports. It must be noted that, in comparison to other parts of the world, Yugoslav air transport was the aim of much less terrorist activity.

KEYWORDS: air transport, terrorism, Yugoslavia, Yugoslav Airlines (JAT), aircraft hijacking, bomb attack, Vesna Vulović

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