

## CHAPTER 9

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Stefan Gužvica

### **Role Models and Renegades: Tito's Team as a Political Infrastructure and the Roots of the Soviet-Yugoslav Split 1938–1948**

This article will examine the theoretical and practical continuities of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) from Tito's struggle to become general secretary in 1938 until the Tito-Stalin Split in 1948. I argue that the overarching political strategy of Tito and his closest associates, which remained fundamentally unchanged throughout this period, was a major, if not the primary, cause of the breakdown in Soviet-Yugoslav relations. While the distinctions seemed comparatively minor in the late 1930s, the war and revolution in Yugoslavia exacerbated them.

In order to argue this point, I will examine the Politburo of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (which I call, borrowing from Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Tito's Team") as a political infrastructure,<sup>1</sup> and do so through the perspective of historical institutionalism and path dependence. In other words, I will show that the political choices made at the establishment of Tito's leadership team from 1938 until 1940 produced the consistency of policy which eventually led the Yugoslavs into a conflict with Stalin.<sup>2</sup> Tito's Team consisted largely of members of the Politburo, as the supreme governing body of communist parties. While originally a party organ, the Politburo became transformed, through the contingencies of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, into the highest decision-making body of the first socialist state.<sup>3</sup> This practice was subsequently transferred onto other communist parties inspired by the Bolshevik model. Consequently, power within the Politburo became highly personalized, and its members, often picked by the general secretary himself, were a close-knit group bound by mutual personal loyalties. Under Stalin, this personalization went even further and led to a further

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Edvin Pezo, "Infrastructures of Political and Institutional Power in Yugoslavia: Organizing Communist Rule and the Organizational-Political Secretariat, 1940-1964/66", in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Greener, "The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies", *Politics* 25:1 (2005), 62–72.

<sup>3</sup> Lara Douds, *Inside Lenin's Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the Early Soviet State* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 169. Douds' book traces how the exigencies of the Civil War resulted in a gradual but extremely significant move of political power from the Sovnarkom, as a non-party body, to the Politburo, a party organ. Cf. Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York: Random House, 2009), 59.

informalization of the decision-making process.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it makes more sense to speak of a “Team” than of the Politburo, even though the two largely overlapped in the Yugoslav case. The immense power that members of the Team wielded, as well as its personalization, warrant it being considered a human infrastructure, as they held authority over, and enjoyed loyalty from, their party subordinates. Human infrastructure is defined as “the pattern of relationships of people, through various networks and social arrangements”.<sup>5</sup> In this particular case, they were bound by a very particular set of ideas and practices, namely, the day-to-day running of a communist party through war and revolution, making their work a “material manifestation of societal networks”.<sup>6</sup> The experience of joint struggle in wartime reinforced their power and mutual loyalty, whilst engendering distrust towards the meddling of the Soviet leadership in Yugoslav affairs, therefore resulting in the strengthening of the Team’s cohesion. This development warrants the examination of Tito’s Team as a very specific form of human infrastructure, namely political infrastructure, an institutionalized relationship of personal power and mutual loyalty, with a common set of goals.

Starting from this premise, I claim that Tito’s Team was placed on the left of the international communist movement, meaning that they had a tendency to pursue a more revolutionary course in a given situation. While this was what the Comintern leadership wanted until 1941, troubles began once it became evident that Tito’s Team had no intention of changing the course in line with the frequent policy U-turns of the International and the Soviet Union. In his article on path dependence in politics, Ian Greener posits that, in order to make such an argument, one “must be able to demonstrate that a number of viable alternatives existed for the development of the policy in question”, and then present “contingent events” which represented a major factor in establishing a certain institutionalized path dependence.<sup>7</sup> While an exploration of the aforementioned viable alternatives would extend my article far beyond the confines set by this volume, I have already done so in my book, *Before Tito: The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge (1936–1940)*.<sup>8</sup> As such, this article is a development of the preliminary arguments I made in the book’s conclusion, as well as a reworking of Geoffrey Swain’s hypothesis of the “disloyal Bolshevik”,

<sup>4</sup> Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Gloria Mark, Ban Al-Ani, Bryan Semaan, “Repairing Human Infrastructure in a War Zone”, in J. Landgren, U. Nulden, B. van de Walle (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 6th International ISCRAM Conference, for Crisis Response and Management: Boundary Spanning Initiatives and New Perspectives, Gothenburg, Sweden, 10-13 May 2009 AM, 2009*. (Gothenburg: International Conference on Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management (ISCRAM), 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Dirk van Laak, “Infrastructures”, *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 20.05.2021; [https://doupedia.de/zg/Laak\\_infrastructures\\_v1\\_en\\_2021](https://doupedia.de/zg/Laak_infrastructures_v1_en_2021).

<sup>7</sup> Greener, “The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies”, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Stefan Gužvica, *Before Tito: The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge, 1936–1940* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2020), 207–216. I have recently made similar arguments in a more condensed form in Stefan Gužvica and Ivica Mladenović. “L’antifascisme et les fronts populaires de Yougoslavie. Le chemin vers le pouvoir, 1935–1945”, *Mouvements* 104 (Winter 2020), 56–66.

which has had a profound influence on me.<sup>9</sup> However, I will, following Greener, analyze crucial contingent events during the late 1930s, and argue that they show a certain institutionalization of the KPJ's contemporary ideological and political decisions, which was essentially the making of a political infrastructure. Finally, the article will present the development of the KPJ's policy within Greener's remaining stage in the analysis of path dependence: it will examine the period of World War II and the early Cold War as a "period of reproduction" in which those political ideas articulated in 1938–1940 came to guide the party's policy.<sup>10</sup>

### Historiography: Whiggish Titoism and Quintessential Stalinism

Official Yugoslav historiography tended to emphasize distinctions between the Yugoslav and Soviet communism before 1948, arguing for a sort of a Yugoslav *Sonderweg*.<sup>11</sup> This tendency was replicated in sympathetic accounts on the "Western" side of the Cold War debate.<sup>12</sup> I call this historiographical approach "Whiggish Titoism", a teleological view which presumes inherent democratic impulses in Yugoslav communism.<sup>13</sup> On the other side, revisionist accounts have attempted to present Tito and his leadership as the quintessential Stalinists. These authors emphasize that from 1944 until 1948, Yugoslavs were Stalin's best pupils. After the Third International was dissolved, they became the role models in the Cominform, and essentially served as the organization's whip when other parties needed to be brought into line.<sup>14</sup> Ivo Banac, although agreeing

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Swain, "Tito: The Formation of a Disloyal Bolshevik", *International Review of Social History* 34 (1989). Another influence was certainly Branko Petranović's classic history of Yugoslavia. Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918–1988, knjiga druga: Narodnooslobodilački rat i revolucija* (Beograd: Nolit, 1988). Moreover, as I was working on this chapter, another monograph was published which makes broadly the same argument about Tito's policy: this is Alfred J. Rieber's *Storms Over the Balkans during the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). Professor Rieber was my MA thesis supervisor and we have discussed these topics at length, so this work and his book are interspersed with our mutual influences.

<sup>10</sup> Greener, "The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies", 68.

<sup>11</sup> An exemplary piece in this regard is Vladimir Dedijer, *Izgnubljena bitka J. V. Staljina* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> A paradigmatic work in this regard is Phyllis Auty, *Tito* (London: Penguin, 1974). Swain makes a similar argument in "The Formation of a Disloyal Bolshevik", and, while my work was influenced by him, I do believe his theory about Tito's dissension from Stalinism requires some caveats. Namely, Swain overestimates the distinction between Lenin and Stalin that Tito made in 1940. Tito's statement was in fact a standard assessment of "Marxism-Leninism", and not an indication of perceived differences in the practices of Lenin and Stalin, as Swain argues. Cf. Swain, "Tito", 262.

<sup>13</sup> The term, of course, comes from the classic by Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Kensington: University of New South Wales Library, 1981). It denotes a linear and teleological progression of history presuming a preordained sequence of events culminating in the heroic present.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: The Penguin Press, 2005), 140–145. Zdenko Radelić, "The Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Abolition of the Multi-

with the allegedly innate Stalinism of the Yugoslav communists, was among the first to note that what the Yugoslavs misread as an endorsement by Stalin was in fact support coming from the “leftist faction” in the Soviet leadership gathered around Andrei Zhdanov, which did not necessarily reflect Stalin’s views.<sup>15</sup>

What I want to do in this article is to synthesize these two conflicting analyses. My aim is to show that the Yugoslav communists were both role models and renegades, and this becomes most evident through an examination of the ideological continuity of Tito’s Team. The roots of the Soviet-Yugoslav split were already discernible in Communist Party policy in the late 1930s. However, the distinctions were relatively minor, as was the KPJ. As the party grew in importance, so did the significance of the differences between the KPJ and the All-Union Communist Party, to the point that Tito’s Yugoslavia had become a major liability for the emergent Soviet Bloc. While Tito had no major disagreements with Stalin in terms of constructing a socialist system, he differed greatly on tactical questions concerning the revolutionary struggle in Yugoslavia and the relationship towards the capitalist world.

This article follows in the footsteps of Geoffrey Swain, Bernhard Bayerlein, and Alfred J. Rieber, all of whom noticed and wrote extensively about the differences between Stalin and Tito. However, while they date these differences at the earliest to 1941 and the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, this article purports to show that the distinction in their views began as early as 1938.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, I will pay special attention to the formation of Tito’s Team and the policies which I believe already showed a tendency for the KPJ to pursue a more offensive Popular Front policy, one aimed at using it as a means of winning political power and revolutionizing Yugoslavia.

### Tito’s Team as Infrastructure

As already mentioned, my idea of Tito’s Team is very much inspired by Sheila Fitzpatrick’s concept of Stalin’s Team. Much like Stalin, Tito preferred an informal collective leadership united by personal loyalty to him.<sup>17</sup> The major

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party System: The Case of Croatia”, in Gorana Ognjenović, Jasna Jozelić (Eds.), *Revolutionary Totalitarianism, Pragmatic Socialism, Transition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 14–17; Mark Kramer, “Stalin, the Split with Yugoslavia, and Soviet–East European Efforts to Reassert Control, 1948–53”, in Svetozar Rajak et al. (Eds.), *The Balkans in the Cold War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 24–28.

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Swain, “The Cominform: Tito’s International?” *The Historical Journal* 35:3 (1992), 642–652; Бернхард Байерляйн, “Предатель – ты, Сталин!” *Коминтерн и коммунистические партии в начале Второй мировой войны (1929–1941): утраченная солидарность левых сил* (Moscow: Российская политическая энциклопедия (РОССПЭН), Фонд “Президентский центр Б. Н. Ельцина”, 2011), 406–412; Rieber, *Storms Over the Balkans*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1f.; Gužvica, *Before Tito*, 206, 214–216.

difference in our approaches is that, while Fitzpatrick examined interpersonal relations and reign over a state,<sup>18</sup> I am looking exclusively into the ideological continuities of the leadership team. While a more in-depth analysis of Tito's Team and its changes over forty years is certainly needed, it transcends the boundaries of this article.

Instead, I suggest an examination of Tito's Team as a political infrastructure – a set of individuals acting together within a largely institutionalized framework, bound by a common political ideology and vision. The Team was assembled between 1938 and 1941, and was, at this stage, only reshuffled in cases of death during the antifascist and revolutionary war. It was slightly more formal than Stalin's Team, with the majority of Team members sitting permanently on the Politburo of the KPJ. The exceptions were Moša Pijade and Andrija Hebrang, who perhaps lost their spots in the party's highest organ for being too exposed to the police, having left prison in 1939 and 1941, respectively. The Team was also more geographically dispersed beginning in 1941, which was a consequence of the need to organize uprisings across a vast and highly variegated country.

Tito's Team was composed of Politburo members Milovan Đilas, Edvard Kardelj, Rade Končar, Franc Leskošek, Ivan Milutinović, and Aleksandar Ranković. Upon release from prison, Pijade became one of its members, and so did Hebrang, an old friend of Tito's from "anti-factional" struggles in Zagreb in the 1920s. The final two members of Tito's Team were two firebrands from the communist youth (SKOJ), the organization's secretary, Ivo Lola Ribar, and his predecessor, Boris Kidrič. With the exception of Pijade, they were all younger than Tito and had spent less time than him in the movement. While several had lived abroad, Tito also had the most extensive experience of living in the Soviet Union and working for the Comintern (Kardelj and Leskošek had also spent some time in Moscow, but not nearly as much as Tito).

What they all had in common, however, was their "leftism": everyone on Tito's Team had been a part of the left wing of the communist movement, meaning they shared a higher degree of revolutionary radicalism and skepticism of non-communist parties, including those on the political left. The party left originally developed in the wake of the ban on the KPJ in December 1920, originally as an intra-party opposition which opposed the leadership's passivity in the face of state repression. In the united front era, the party left argued for organization of an illegal structure, preparations for a renewed revolutionary upheaval, and a united front with the agrarian instead of reformist workers' parties. On the national question, their minimal program was the federalization of a future socialist Yugoslavia, and they hoped for its ultimate replacement with a Balkan Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. The party left held the reins from 1923 until 1926 and again from 1928 until 1932.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> On the emergence of factional struggles, see Miroslav Nikolić, *Komunistička partija Jugoslavije od Obznane do osnivanja NRPJ* (Beograd: Rad, 1979). On the history of factional struggles, see Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito*, 45–116; and Slavoljub Cvetković, *Idejne borbe u KPJ*

As most of the leaders of the “historical” left faction had been either politically marginalized or killed by the time of Tito’s ascent in 1939, the living link with the left faction of the 1920s was Moša Pijade, who was one of its most prominent representatives until his arrest in 1925. Tito and Hebrang were the second closest – the former a veteran of the Russian Civil War and the latter a founding member of the KPJ, they were “anti-factionalists” in the 1920s, but their views on revolution, the unions, illegality, and the national question effectively put them on the party left. Their revolt against factionalism at the 8<sup>th</sup> Zagreb Party Conference in 1928 was the beginning of the period of a renewed domination of the left, coinciding with the Comintern’s own similar political turn.<sup>20</sup>

The year 1928 also saw the accession of two young Slovenes into the KPJ: Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič. Aged eighteen and sixteen, both were regular guests at a tavern in Ljubljana where the innkeeper’s son was recruiting young prospective Marxists. While Kardelj was of working-class origin, Kidrič was the son of a prominent Slovene literary critic.<sup>21</sup> Their formative years in the party would be marked by the victory of the “ultra-left” line of 1928. The “ultra-left” rejected all collaboration with the reformists and called for a dissolution of Yugoslavia in order to replace it with a socialist Balkan Federation. They harbored a profound distrust of both reformist workers’ and bourgeois organizations.

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1919–1928 (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1985). Several works have dealt specifically with the national question in light of factional struggles. The most important ones are, in Serbo-Croatian, Desanka Pešić, *Jugoslavenski komunisti i nacionalno pitanje* (Beograd: Izdavačka radna organizacija “Rad”, 1983), Latinka Perović, *Od centralizma do federalizma: KPJ u nacionalnom pitanju* (Zagreb: Globus, 1984); Gordana Vlajčić, *Jugoslavenska revolucija i nacionalno pitanje 1919–1927* (Zagreb: Globus, 1987). In English, excellent summaries can be found in Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 128–145 and Hilde Katrine Haug, *Creating A Socialist Yugoslavia: Tito, The Communist Leadership and the National Question* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 17–57.

<sup>20</sup> Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito*, 59. While Broz in the 1920s focused mostly on trade union matters and grassroots organizing, a police report from the arrest of him and his comrades in 1927 shows us the kind of literature they had been reading. This includes Bukharin and Preobrazhensky’s *ABC of Communism*, Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, supplemented by Karl Radek’s “The Development of Socialism from Science to Action”. Then, a compendium of Comintern resolutions on the KPJ, and brochures from Pavle Pavlović, a prominent leftist, and Filip Filipović, an anti-factionalist. From the leader of the party right, Sima Marković, he only read the rather uncontroversial brochure “The Currency Question” (Valutno pitanje), and not his more famous but contentious works on the national question. Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 2, Ed. Pero Damjanović (Beograd: Komunist, 1981), 217. It is also noteworthy that, following the victory of the “anti-factionalists” in February 1928, Broz’s Zagreb union branch invited Pavle Pavlović as a May Day speaker, rather than any of the anti-factional figures. *Ibid.* 256.

<sup>21</sup> Carole Rogel, “The Education of a Slovene Marxist: Edvard Kardelj 1924–1934”, *Slovene Studies* 11:1–2 (1989), 177–178. Significantly, the group also included Boris Zihel and Aleš Bebler, also future prominent Slovene communists. The youngsters read, like Broz at the same time, the *ABC of Communism*, as well as *Das Kapital*, and the works of prominent Zagreb-based communist intellectuals closely affiliated with the party left, Miroslav Krleža and August Cesarec. John K. Cox, “Edvard Kardelj: A Political Biography”, PhD Diss., (Indiana University, 1996), 29.

An intellectual history of young Kardelj shows his full adherence to the ultra-left line in the early 1930s: like many communists, he wrongly believed the Nazi victory in Germany was a sign of capitalism's weakness, and that a communist revolution would follow within months.<sup>22</sup> More importantly for the purposes of this study, Kardelj began developing his view of the national question, which posited that the Slovene bourgeoisie was too weak to ever play a historically progressive role.<sup>23</sup> Once the Comintern introduced collaboration with the antifascist bourgeoisie as its policy in the Popular Front era, Kardelj (and, as I will show later, Tito) would maintain their skepticism towards the supposedly progressive role of the national bourgeoisie in peripheral countries.

In 1932, Kardelj and Kidrič were the ones to rebuild the Slovene party organization in the wake of its destruction by the 1929 Dictatorship.<sup>24</sup> Their organizational skills would be acknowledged by the then-leader of the KPJ, Milan Gorkić, who would elevate them in the party ranks: in 1935, Kidrič became the secretary of SKOJ, and in 1937, Kardelj became a member of the Central Committee of the newly-founded Communist Party of Slovenia. He would also attend Politburo meetings under Gorkić, although he would not become a Politburo member until Tito took over as general secretary.<sup>25</sup> Although Tito, Kardelj, and Kidrič would rise to prominent positions under Gorkić, Kidrič would eventually clash with him, attacking him for what he saw as a "rightist" deviation from the Popular Front policy.<sup>26</sup> Namely, Kidrič objected to the fact that Gorkić sought to accommodate bourgeois parties and follow their leadership rather than assert communist dominance in the Popular Front. After Gorkić's arrest, this view would bring Kidrič closer to Tito, who began to develop a similar critique of Gorkić in 1937.<sup>27</sup> For their part, Tito and Kardelj already became inseparable friends and comrades between 1934 and 1936, when they studied together in Moscow at the International Lenin School.<sup>28</sup>

After the arrest of Gorkić under false charges of espionage during the Great Purge, Tito assembled new members of his Team also from the opposite end of Yugoslavia: two young Montenegrin radicals, Milovan Đilas and Ivan Milutinović, who were to become the newest members. The older of the two, Milutinović, had been a communist since 1923, and was profoundly influenced by his uncle, Vukašin Marković, one of the early leftists in the KPJ.<sup>29</sup> Đilas joined the party a decade later but followed the same radical path. By late 1933, the two would meet in the Sremska Mitrovica prison. There, they were both known as

<sup>22</sup> Carole Rogel, "The Education of a Slovene Marxist", 180.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 181f.

<sup>24</sup> Ervin Dolenc, *Med kulturo in politiko: kulturnopolitična razhajanja v Sloveniji med svetovnimi vojnami* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2010), 226.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. AJ-790/1, 1937/164, "Zapisnik sjednice 28.VI.1937".

<sup>26</sup> Dolenc, *Med kulturo in politiko*, 238.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Swain, *Tito: A Biography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 17–20; Gužvica, *Before Tito*, 56–64, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Cox, "Edvard Kardelj", 36.

<sup>29</sup> Lazo Marković, *Ivan Milutinović Milutin* (Titograd: Grafički zavod, 1970), 30.

“the Wahhabis”, members of an ultra-left group gathered around Petko Miletić. Their uncompromising stance on class struggle went as far as claiming that, in case of a Nazi attack on France, the French soldiers should shoot their own generals in order to turn the Franco-German war into a civil war.<sup>30</sup> However, upon their release from prison, they both switched sides and supported Tito in his factional struggle against Miletić. Some of their older reasoning, however, would remain present in their subsequent policies. Milovan Đilas says that Aleksandar Ranković, another member of Tito’s Team, sympathized with and admired Miletić, but “saw the flaws in the prison line”.<sup>31</sup>

Leskošek, the final and the least-known member of Tito’s Team, was distinguished, according to Đilas, by his hatred of social democrats and the clergy.<sup>32</sup> One of the older members of the team, Leskošek was born in 1897 and became a member of the KPJ in 1926, at the age of almost thirty. Before that, he had been a social democrat. This perhaps explains the disregard for him in the narratives of the pre-World War Two communist movement, as well as his own overcompensating zeal. In any case, this made him a perfect fit for the new Politburo getting ready for an uncompromising clash with reformists and the bourgeoisie. Of Tito’s Team, only Lola Ribar was a man of the Popular Front in the true sense of the word, and he too insisted on communist leadership in the Popular Front, expressing doubts about the earnestness of bourgeois antifascism.<sup>33</sup> The final member of the Politburo, and its final addition, was Rade Končar. The story of his ascent is, more than anyone else’s, a story that explains the essence of the Politburo’s vision of the Popular Front, a vision they would maintain throughout the 1940s.

### The Popular Front on Communist Terms

When the KPJ Politburo was formally constituted at the Fifth Land Conference in October 1940, Končar would be, aside from Tito, its only member from Croatia. The only other members of the Team from Croatia, and the only ethnic Croats aside from Tito, were Hebrang and Ribar. Although Tito was personally very close to Končar, he was not his first pick for the position of the general secretary of the Communist Party of Croatia (KPH). When Tito came to a forest near Zagreb for the founding congress of the KPH on August 1, 1937 (Gorkić had still been the party leader at the time), the congress elected Đuro Špoljarić, a tailor and a trade union organizer, as the first secretary. The KPH Politburo further included Josip Kraš, Andrija Žaja, and Drago Petrović.<sup>34</sup> Over the course of 1938 and 1939, all four men would come into conflict with Tito. The conflict,

<sup>30</sup> On the Wahhabis, see Gužvica, *Before Tito*, 135–146.

<sup>31</sup> Milovan Đilas, *Memoir of a Revolutionary* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 276.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 283.

<sup>33</sup> Jozo Petričević, *Lolo* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986), 115. For an overview of Ribar’s political beliefs, see pages 103–124 in this book.

<sup>34</sup> Ivan Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske 1937–1945*, Vol. 1 (Zagreb: Globus, 1981), 74, 111.



ostensibly revolving around the Croatian national question, in fact came down to the very essence of Tito's Popular Front strategy.

Tito's first "left deviation" was his decision in the spring of 1938 to propose to Wilhelm Pieck a military coup in Yugoslavia.<sup>35</sup> Fortunately for him, this was a time immediately after the arrest of Gorkić, and the Comintern still held onto the policy of ignoring the letters sent by new contenders for the party leadership. As the Comintern deliberated behind closed doors, several things played to Tito's advantage. He was the person in charge of organizing the founding congresses of both the communist parties of Croatia and Slovenia the year before (in the latter case, the party secretary was Leskošek).<sup>36</sup> This was something that Gorkić had been dragging his feet with since 1935.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, during the course of 1938, Tito and his comrades in Yugoslavia achieved what the communists had been unsuccessfully attempting for almost twenty years: trade union unity, but under communist guidance. In April 1938, seven communists were elected to the fifteen-member Central Committee of the United Workers' Trade Union Federation of Yugoslavia, and the communists and social democrats agreed to joint actions and even collaboration with "non-class" unions, such as those controlled by the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Tito started moving the party apparatus, which had been located abroad since the establishment of the 1929 Dictatorship, back into Yugoslavia. All of these facts brought him the attention of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), which summoned him to Moscow in the summer of 1938, giving him a clear advantage over his rivals. While he was in Moscow that fall, two important things happened: one was a fundamental rethinking of the Popular Front strategy in the Comintern, the other a serious party crisis in Croatia.

Since April 1938, when Franco's troops cut its territory into two, the Spanish Republic had been gradually collapsing. By September, the Popular Front government in France was dead, as the communists were the only major force in the country opposing the Munich Agreement. The slow death of the Popular Front meant a collapse of Stalin's entire strategy of collective security.<sup>39</sup> A reorganization was in order. At the same time, the December elections were approaching in Yugoslavia, and the Croatian communists began to wonder if there was a

<sup>35</sup> Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4, Ed. Pero Damjanović (Beograd: Komunist, 1981), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 3, Ed. Pero Damjanović (Beograd: Komunist, 1981), 58–62; Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History (Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории, RGASPI), 495-20-647, "Состояние и работа партии и ее руководства", January 28, 1938, 12–13. The author of this report, Kamilo Horvatin, was the only Yugoslav communist in Moscow who had the attention of the Comintern at the time. However, he considered Tito "Gorkić's man" and did not know that Tito was gradually breaking with certain Gorkić-era policies. For their relationship, and Horvatin's own bid for power, see Stefan Gužvica, "Kamilo Horvatin: Zaboravljeni kandidat za generalnog sekretara Komunističke partije Jugoslavije", *Historijski zbornik* 72/1 (2019), 139–164.

<sup>38</sup> Swain, *Tito*, 23; Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4, 55.

<sup>39</sup> The best source on the topic is still Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

complementarity between the positions of Slovakia in the recently partitioned Czechoslovakia and Croatia within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Tito in Moscow had the opportunity to cautiously push a new approach, while his Team in Yugoslavia, still in the process of formation, would be put to the test for the first time.

Already in his preparatory letters to Georgi Dimitrov, written from Paris in August, Tito emphasized that support for the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia should not be conditioned by the solution of the Croatian national question. The threat of fascism had made this secondary, even though the Croatian movement, because of its base in the peasant masses, was “the strongest and the most significant democratic factor among all the bourgeois groups”.<sup>40</sup> In his article for *Rundschau*, the Comintern newspaper, Tito still used phrases from the “ultra-left” period, describing the regime as a “poorly concealed military-fascist dictatorship” under the “hegemony of Greater Serbian monopolistic capital”.<sup>41</sup>

When Tito spoke before the ECCI on September 17, 1938, he was even more open about his distrust of the bourgeois parties. His report began with a critique of the vacillation of opposition leaders, showing profound skepticism of their potential to make even minor social changes.<sup>42</sup> However, this was not a complete rejection of bourgeois parties: he simultaneously called for cooperation with them, drawing great pride from the fact that, in Slovenia, even members of pro-government parties participated in the antifascist front, and insisting that communists should cooperate even with the pro-government trade unions. The point was simply to assume a leading role in the antifascist coalition rather than to merely follow the dictates of the non-communists.<sup>43</sup> An army coup would have certainly been too much for the Comintern’s sensibilities, but the Popular Front that Tito was suggesting was still very different from the ones in Spain and France: in Yugoslavia, the communists would not be a mere appendage to a bourgeois government; they would try to establish a leading role in the anti-fascist coalition. As disillusionment with the Popular Front grew, Tito brought forth a badly-needed and constructive rethinking of the policy.

Meanwhile, in Zagreb, the Croatian members of Tito’s Team (Kraš, Žaja, Špoljarić) met with Miroslav Krleža, Yugoslavia’s most famous Marxist writer and a founding member of the KPJ who had since left the party. In line with Tito’s instructions on the Popular Front, the Croatian team was supposed to place communists operating through the legal Party of the Working People (SRN) on the opposition’s electoral list, in order for the communists to see how well their candidates would perform. However, the KPH leadership, in consultation with Krleža, independently decided not to do so, and to instruct the communists to vote for the opposition candidates from the HSS.<sup>44</sup> The rest of the team, however,

<sup>40</sup> Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4, 66. The elaboration of the situation in Croatia is on pages 63 and 65–67.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 70f.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 110.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 89, 113–117.

<sup>44</sup> Velimir Visković, “Krlježina uloga u sukobu na ljevici, I. nastavak”, *Republika* 55:3–4 (1999), 62; Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4, 289; Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske*, Vol. 1, 225.

understood the mistake even without Tito, who was still in Moscow: in mid-November, Ribar sent him a letter expressing outrage over the behavior of the KPH leadership. However, both Ribar and Đilas, in a later memoir, acknowledged the error was at least in part due to a lack of oversight on their behalf.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, this points to an early institutionalization of Tito's vision of a revolutionary Popular Front, which the communists would maintain throughout the 1940s. Tito quickly condemned the Central Committee of the KPH.

Thence came Rade Končar. At the time, he was a member of the party's city committee in Zagreb. Although he had spent the period between August 1938 and November 1939 serving in the army, Končar remained deeply involved in party affairs. He even managed to secretly attend a Central Committee meeting in Slovenia in June 1939 after being granted a leave of absence. This was one of the meetings at which Tito and his Team condemned the actions of the KPH.<sup>46</sup> At the end of the year, following his release from the army, Končar became a member of the KPH Politburo.<sup>47</sup> The reason for this was his full support for Tito's line: Končar also thought there was to be no accommodation to the HSS except on the communists' own terms. He showed his radicalism by calling for the expulsion of Kraš and others.<sup>48</sup> While Tito would not go so far (he always preferred compromises to harsh administrative punishments), he certainly appreciated the fieriness of the twenty-eight-year-old factory worker. In October 1940, he would become the latest addition to Tito's Politburo.

The resolution of the conflict within the KPH showed Tito's preferred way of dealing with disputes both internally and externally. While there could be compromises with regard to disagreements within the party, there was no room for compromise with the bourgeois parties. If anyone was to compromise, it would be the non-communists, under communist leadership. This attitude would be applied to the Popular Front during World War Two and the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia. Moreover, it would apply to antifascism as well: more than anyone, the Yugoslavs took seriously the explanation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as a mere temporary accommodation, as Stalin's buying of time before the inevitable war against fascism. Končar would repeat this in discussions with doubtful comrades, insisting that the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact "cannot and will not affect our present line of the defense of the country".<sup>49</sup> The actions of the KPJ from the fall of 1939 would reflect this attitude, to the point of causing the first serious headaches for Moscow. These contingent events proved the institutionalization of a certain party line which would establish a clear path dependence of Tito's Team and place them on a collision course with Moscow.

<sup>45</sup> AJ, 790/1 Kl, 1938/34, Ilija, "Za Ota (bez broja)", November 1938; Đilas, *Memoir of a Revolutionary*, 281–282.

<sup>46</sup> Ivan Očak, Jovo Popović, *Končar – sekretar Partije* (Zagreb: Alfa, 1976), 229–243.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 244.

<sup>48</sup> Đilas, *Memoir of a Revolutionary*, 282.

<sup>49</sup> Očak, Popović, *Končar*, 247f.

## From Imperialist War to Revolutionary War

For Tito's Team, the struggle against fascism was never too far removed from the struggle against imperialism. This was both the orthodox Leninist view of fascism which saw in it merely a more extreme form of already existing capitalist social relations, and the line of the Comintern's "ultra-left" Third Period from 1928 until 1935. However, in 1935, when the Popular Front policy was introduced, the Comintern attempted to play down anti-imperialism in attempts to broker a defensive alliance with the British and the French against Nazi Germany.<sup>50</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to say that a rapprochement with the British and the French never sat too well with the Yugoslav communists. The failure of the French Popular Front and the willingness of the British ruling class to accommodate, and be sympathetic to, Nazi territorial expansionism, only pushed them further in their belief that the line separating Hitler and Chamberlain or Daladier was far thinner than the boundaries between Hitler and Stalin or Stalin and Roosevelt. In this, they were similar to communists and fellow travelers from non-European colonies, most significantly Tito's future ally, Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, once the Comintern made another political U-turn following Stalin's non-aggression pact with Germany, the Yugoslav communists did not have trouble condemning the war as imperialist. However, where the Comintern and the Soviet leadership preferred to single out British imperialism as the primary culprit, the Yugoslavs made clear their willingness to fight German Nazism.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, they saw capitalism as the root cause of both fascism and imperialism. Therefore, where the struggle against the two took place, it had to be inextricably linked with anti-capitalism. In the words of Tito's confidant on the eve of the war, Nikola Petrović, the Yugoslav ruling class was "capitulationist", necessitating the leading role of the KPJ in the incoming triple war.<sup>53</sup> By his own account, when he was in Moscow, such an attitude of the Yugoslavs was positively received by Wilhelm Pieck and Dmitry Manuilsky, while it met resistance from Palmiro Togliatti, who disapproved of Tito's handling of the Croatian question.<sup>54</sup> This is corroborated by the proceedings of the ECCI meeting at which Petrović spoke. However, the questions from Tito that Petrović passed on to the Comintern are rather indicative of his maximalist revolutionary program: among

<sup>50</sup> Kasper Braskén, "'Whether black or white – united in the fight!' Connecting the resistance against colonialism, racism, and fascism in the European metropolises, 1926–1936", *Twentieth Century Communism* 18 (2020), 128; John M. Cammett, "Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920–1935", *Science & Society* 31:2 (1967), 157f.

<sup>51</sup> Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>52</sup> On the Comintern's attacks on British imperialism and ignoring German Nazism, see Байерляйн, "Предатель – ты, Сталин!", 48f.

<sup>53</sup> AJ, Memoirs' Collection (516 MG), 2951, "Sećanja Petrović Nikole za period 1935–1941. g.", January 21, 1966, 10f.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 45–53.

other things, he asked for the Comintern's permission to organize armed groups of communists to combat police in demonstrations, and to raise the slogan of overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a "popular government"; both requests were denied.<sup>55</sup>

The Comintern intelligence center in Zagreb set up by Tito's friend, Josip Kopinič, further strengthened the KPJ's belief in the coming antifascist revolutionary war. Kopinič had been receiving intelligence information on the imminent Nazi invasion of the USSR.<sup>56</sup> Stalin infamously ignored these facts, considering them an attempt by the British to draw him into the war. As a consequence, the KPJ began arming and preparing for an uprising in the spring of 1941, in clear contradiction of orders from Moscow.<sup>57</sup> The Axis invasion of Yugoslavia only further intensified the leftist leanings of Tito's Team. Tito's May Day proclamation in 1941 opened with an explicit statement that there is no difference among imperialists, whether they call themselves national-socialists, fascists, or "democrats" (the scare quotes were Tito's).<sup>58</sup> Just a few days earlier, he stated that "now all measures must be taken to seize power so that the bourgeoisie never again seize it, so that the uprising against the invaders develops in such a way that it does not turn into a bourgeois revolution, but that the working masses directly come to power".<sup>59</sup> When the Popular Front partisan organization was founded in Slovenia on April 26, 1941, under the guidance of Kidrič, it bore the name "Anti-Imperialist Front".<sup>60</sup> It would eventually be named merely "The Liberation Front", to accommodate Popular Front Policy, but Tito's Team members were clearly interested in a revolutionary course from the outset.

The very swiftness in the organization of the anti-fascist uprising, with units going into the forest already on June 22, 1941, and the Politburo already meeting in Belgrade on July 4 to proclaim the beginning of the uprising, show the earnestness of the belief that the Soviet Union was just buying time with Hitler, and questions the narratives of the supposed communist passivity in the first two months of the occupation.<sup>61</sup> However, the move from the anti-imperialist revolutionary line to the anti-fascist conciliatory line was arduous and never final.

<sup>55</sup> К. М. Андерсон, А. О. Чубарьян (Eds.), *Коминтерн и Вторая мировая война*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Памятники исторической мысли, 1994), 429–433.

<sup>56</sup> Vjenceslav Cenčić, *Enigma Kopinič*, Vol. 1 (Beograd: Rad, 1983), 139–140. One of the reasons why this did not cause an uproar in the Comintern at the time could be the fact that the Soviet leadership also made clear their disapproval of Nazi aggression on Yugoslavia, and took a firmer stance against Hitler already in the run-up to the invasion. Rieber, *Storms Over the Balkans*, 163.

<sup>57</sup> Байерляйн, "Предатель – ты, Сталин!", 358.

<sup>58</sup> Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 7, Ed. Pero Damjanović (Beograd: Komunist, 1982), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Байерляйн, "Предатель – ты, Сталин!", 412.

<sup>60</sup> Janko Prunk, "Historiografski elementi v delu Borisa Kidriča", *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja XVIII–XIX* (1978–1979), 65.

<sup>61</sup> For a recent account of supposed communist passivity, see Matko Globačnik, *Vrijeme ideoloških kolebanja. Komunistička partija Jugoslavije u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj od Travanjskog rata do napada nacističke Njemačke na Sovjetski Savez* (Zagreb: Plejada, Centar za komparativnohistorijske i interkulturene studije, 2019).

On the one hand, the communists never seriously considered putting themselves under the command of the pro-government monarchist chetniks. On the other, it is questionable whether the chetniks' own fierce anti-communism would have allowed for such collaboration to take place.

Several factors enabled the partisans to bend the rules towards an intensification of class struggle. Although, in liberated territories, they were supposed to reinstate the pre-April 1941 administrations, many of the government officials often remained in place after the Nazi occupation, becoming collaborationists. The refusal to (re)instate the monarchist authorities and police officers was one of the main points of contention between Tito and Draža Mihailović.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the logic of warfare enabled the communists to justify economic planning and control by claiming it was merely a necessity for the war effort. Consequently, they could freeze rents, fix prices, control redistribution, provide welfare for the poor, and even seize the factories and establish workers' control if needed.<sup>63</sup>

Although the communists made sure not to use loaded terms such as "soviet", "revolutionary" or even "committee" and made earnest efforts to include the non-communists and anti-fascists in the new organs, they made it clear that these organs, while not revolutionary, would not be mere replicas of the *Ancien Régime* either.<sup>64</sup> The Peoples' Liberation Committees ("committee" here being a translation of the Serbo-Croatian *odbor* rather than the synonymous but much more Jacobin-sounding *komitet*) were explicitly hailed as new organs of government rather than a continuation of the pre-1941 institutions.<sup>65</sup> These plans extended beyond establishing modest local authorities. Already in late August, in what was only his third telegram to the Comintern since the uprising broke out, Tito already suggested establishing a Yugoslav-wide "National Committee of Liberation".<sup>66</sup> In a letter to Končar, he outlined it further, speaking of the necessity for this committee to include the "democratic currents of Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia", in particular the HSS.<sup>67</sup> By Tito's own account, he folded his plans after the USSR re-established diplomatic relations with the Yugoslav Government in Exile in September. Moreover, the Soviets would insist that the partisans put themselves under the command of Mihailović's chetniks, and refuse to send them arms. Only Dimitrov was

<sup>62</sup> Dušan Živković, *Postanak i razvitak narodne vlasti u Jugoslaviji 1941–1942* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1969), 160.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 60–74, 165–200.

<sup>64</sup> They were usually communist-dominated, although the Valjevo county was an extreme case, with only ten communists out of 300 councillors in the People's Liberation Committees. *Ibid.* 171.

<sup>65</sup> "Narodno-oslobodilački odbori moraju postati istinski privremeni nosioc narodne vlasti", *Borba*, 19.10.1941, 3f. For an example of their day-to-day functioning, see Slobodan Ristanović, "Stvaranje i funkcionisanje prvog sreskog Narodnooslobodilačkog odbora u Srbiji 1941. godine" *Zbornik Istorijskog muzeja Srbije* 17–18 (1981), 203–210.

<sup>66</sup> AJ, Telegrams CC KPJ – Communist International (791 CK KPJ – KI), Valter, "Za Dedu", August 23, 1941.

<sup>67</sup> Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 7, 81f.

sympathetic to Tito's claims of chetnik collaboration, while the Soviet leadership itself was uninterested in these pleas.<sup>68</sup>

In late 1941 and early 1942, following the collapse of the partisan-held Republic of Užice and the escalation of the civil war with the chetniks, the communists began engaging in the infamous "leftist deviations". These were incidents of class warfare and revolutionary terror perpetrated by the Yugoslav partisans in late 1941 and 1942. Coupled with anti-British and anti-American (in other words, anti-imperialist) sentiment, they were ordered by key members of Tito's Team, Milovan Đilas and Ivan Milutinović, notably also the two major former allies of Petko Miletić's "ultra-left" from the mid-1930s who had made their way into Tito's leadership.<sup>69</sup> While these should be seen as a consequence of the frustration with the collapse of the Republic of Užice and the partisan defeat in Serbia, they can also be identified as the beginning of early misgivings regarding the correctness of Soviet policy towards Yugoslavia. Moscow's refusal to acknowledge Tito's information on chetnik collaboration must have infuriated the KPJ Politburo. Even more painful, as documented by the partisans themselves, was the attribution of their victories to the chetniks in the Allied press, including the Soviet press.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, it was through Soviet intervention that Tito put a stop to "leftist deviations", although the responsible members of his Team got no more than a slap on the wrist. The Comintern showed visible frustration with the decisions of the partisan leadership, perhaps best illustrated by Dimitrov's tirade against naming the partisan shock units "proletarian brigades", which he called a "gaffe" that, in his words, "pours water to the mill of the enemies of the people".<sup>71</sup> All these events served to heighten the frustration of the tight-knit Politburo, increasingly bound together by the joint experience of armed struggle. While the war strengthened mutual loyalties, it also bred the feeling that the Soviet leadership did not have a solid grasp of the conditions on the ground and should therefore not be accepted as the supreme authority on Yugoslav affairs.

Throughout 1942 and 1943, the revolutionary strategy continued. In February 1942, in the Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro, the communists

<sup>68</sup> Байерляйн, "Предатель – ты, Сталин!", 537–538; Ivo Vanac (Ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933–1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 205–206. For Tito's report to Dimitrov on relations with Mihailović, see K. M. Андерсон, А. О. Чубарьян (Eds.), *Коминтерн и Вторая мировая война*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Памятники исторической мысли, 1997), 182f.

<sup>69</sup> On "leftist errors", see Branko Petranović, "O levim skretanjima KPJ krajem 1941. i u prvoj polovini 1942. godine", *Zbornik za istoriju Matice srpske* 4 (1971), 39–81; and Veselin Pavličević, "Lijeve greške" Milovana Đilasa ili partijski silogizam (Podgorica: HKS, 2012)

<sup>70</sup> Stalin had misgivings about the chetniks as early as 1942, but he kept this information from the Yugoslavs – in hindsight, unnecessarily antagonizing them. Rieber, *Storms Over the Balkans*, 182–183. Cf. Vlado Strugar, *Rat i revolucija naroda Jugoslavije, 1941–1945* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1962), 81; Jože Pirjevec, *Tito i drugovi, I deo* (Beograd: Laguna, 2013), 157–158; Nikos Marantzidis, *Under Stalin's Shadow: A Global History of Greek Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), 134. I am grateful to professor Marantzidis for providing me with a digital copy of the book even before its release.

<sup>71</sup> Андерсон, Чубарьян (Eds.), *Коминтерн и Вторая мировая война*, Vol. 2, 248.

organized a pro-partisan national assembly, which recognized the leading role of the partisans in the anti-fascist movement.<sup>72</sup> As the assembly included clergymen and former officers of the Yugoslav army, it is usually not considered a part of the “leftist deviations”. However, I believe this is wrong, as the very decision to convoke the assembly was directly related to the overarching strategy of seeking regime change in Yugoslavia in the long term, something that Moscow did not quite approve of. At the end of March, Tito informed Dimitrov of his intention to publicly confront the monarchist government in exile in London if they would not distance themselves from the collaborationism of the chetniks.<sup>73</sup> By late 1942, Tito would finally succeed in his attempts to establish a parallel assembly, the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). By 1943, Tito’s new government would find support from the Allies, albeit from an unlikely place: it was the United Kingdom, rather than the USSR, that first threw its weight behind Tito. While Stalin remained cautious, the British, who had deciphered the Enigma Code, received daily information on chetnik collaboration with the Nazis, prompting them to give up on the royalists.<sup>74</sup> Although this did not improve the Team’s opinion of the British, it certainly led to a growing frustration with the USSR, as the imperialist camp was the first to recognize their struggle, rather than the workers’ state that they invested their hopes in.

On November 29, 1945, two years to the day after AVNOJ had met in Jajce to declare a Democratic Federal Yugoslavia, the Constitutional Assembly of Yugoslavia declared it to be a republic. Tito’s Team took power so swiftly and in such a well-organized manner that Western observers in the early Cold War thought it part of a (hypothetical) Soviet masterplan for the establishment of domination over Eastern Europe.<sup>75</sup> While no such plan existed among the Soviet leadership, Yugoslav communists certainly did have in mind a seizure of power from very early on, and certainly much earlier than their mentors in Moscow would have liked. In 1949, Moša Pijade, the most senior member of Tito’s Team, retroactively explained this strategy. Granted, he was doing so in response to Stalin’s accusations of “revisionism” and “nationalism”, but the polemical and politicized nature of his article does not make it less of a valuable source. Pijade’s apologetics reveal what was certainly a contemporary understanding of the war in Tito’s inner circle, and not just a retroactive justification from 1945 or 1948.

The old state apparatus attached itself to the occupiers, so the struggle against the occupation had to attach itself to the struggle against the old state apparatus. The reformist slogan of democratizing the country from the interwar period was transformed into a revolutionary slogan of struggling to destroy the

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<sup>72</sup> Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 9, Ed. Pero Damjanović (Beograd: Komunist, 1981), 125.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 131.

<sup>74</sup> Pirjevec, *Tito i drugovi, I deo*, 216–224, 238–241; John Cripps, “Mihailovic or Tito? How the Codebreakers Helped Churchill Choose”, in Michael Smith, Ralph Erskine (Eds.), *Action This Day: Bletchley Park from the Breaking of the Enigma Code to the Birth of the Modern Computer* (London: Bantam, 2001), 237–263.

<sup>75</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 254, 258f.



old state apparatus and creating a new, people's government. (...) This was the greatest deed of our Party. It bravely took upon itself a struggle on two fronts – against fascist conquerors and domestic traitors, the treacherous bourgeoisie and its state apparatus. But as the treacherous bourgeoisie and its apparatus identified themselves with the occupiers and their violent system, the double front turned into a single one: a front against occupiers and their mercenary servants. Thus, the national liberation struggle was underpinned by a popular revolution, with the two coming together and the latter taking place during the former.<sup>76</sup>

Pijade's piece captures well the genuine belief of the double revolution, as well as the profound skepticism towards the representatives of the pre-war government that the Soviets wanted the KPJ to support. Despite the fact that, by late 1942, the Central Committee managed to ensure Comintern support for the establishment of AVNOJ, Dimitrov was categorical: it should not be considered a proto-government, nor should it be counterposed to the government in London.<sup>77</sup> Over the following two years, Tito would do just that, but in a cautious and gradual manner, which involved securing support from the British. However, in the international sphere, the Yugoslav communists made even bigger leaps away from the goals of Soviet foreign policy. It would ultimately be these leaps that led to the final break between Tito and Stalin.

### From Cold War to World War Three

“It was a conflict of a country whose sails were no longer carried by the revolutionary wind and a young revolution full of enthusiasm”, Pijade stated picturesquely in another of his subsequent justifications for the Tito-Stalin split.<sup>78</sup> The major issue was that the Yugoslavs did not want to confine this wind of change to their country alone, something Pijade would have certainly noted is also a sign of a “young revolution”. The Yugoslavs had, in the very least, Balkan-wide intentions from the very beginning. They certainly took the analysis of imperialism seriously, even if Stalin himself would have preferred cooperation with the capitalist powers in the postwar division of the world.<sup>79</sup>

In June 1922, the then thirty-two-year-old Pijade visited Sofia on an important party assignment. He was there as one of the Yugoslav delegates to the Fourth Balkan Communist Conference. At the time, the KPJ, together with the Bulgarian, Romanian, and Greek communists, was part of the Balkan Communist Federation (BCF), an umbrella organization of communist parties in the peninsula, whose professed ultimate goal was the establishment of a Balkan Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.<sup>80</sup> A quarter of a century later, Pijade would become

<sup>76</sup> Moša Pijade, *Izabrani spisi*, Vol. 1,4 (Beograd: Institut za izučavanje radničkog pokreta, 1966), 502f.

<sup>77</sup> Андерсон, Чубаръян (Eds.), *Коминтерн и Вторая мировая война*, Vol. 2, 267.

<sup>78</sup> Vladimir Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita, Treći tom* (Beograd: Rad, 1984), 207.

<sup>79</sup> Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 225–249.

<sup>80</sup> “Resolutions of the Balkan Communist Conference, Sofia, January 1920”, in Leften Stavros Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation: A History of the Movement Toward Balkan Unity in Modern*

a part of the team working on establishing a unified Balkan state, together with Georgi Dimitrov and Vasil Kolarov, the duo which led the organization throughout most of the 1920s. By the time of the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, Dimitrov had suggested to Stalin a joint Yugoslav-Bulgarian South Slavic federation.<sup>81</sup> On the western end of the peninsula, the Yugoslavs played a determining role in the establishment of the Communist Party of Albania. In the south, the Greek and Yugoslav partisans established ties in 1942, and held three important meetings in 1943. By the middle of the year, the Yugoslavs, Greeks, and Albanians had established a central military command of the Balkans, “a military embryo of a future confederation”.<sup>82</sup> The Yugoslav liaison was Svetozar Vukmanović – Tempo, not a part of Tito’s inner circle, but a member of the Central Committee and an important confidant for illegal work since before the war. The Team’s revolutionary radicalism would find its fullest expression in the uncompromising internationalism at the end of the war.

The Bulgarians were conspicuously absent from the plans for a Balkan-wide military headquarters, and the plan was eventually scrapped by Tito, at Dimitrov’s insistence.<sup>83</sup> While the Bulgarians, always closely following their Soviet counterparts, remained skeptical, the Greeks saw the KPJ and the Yugoslav partisans as a model to be emulated.<sup>84</sup> Once the Yugoslavs came to power, they continued in their revolutionary radicalism in foreign affairs. Trieste was the first crisis, as Tito began to demand full control over the city and the surrounding area, at the expense of the Italians and the dismay of Stalin. Despite serious reservations, Stalin decided to support Tito’s demands before their Western allies, but the relations began to sour. The souring was a three-way process, not merely the externally evident conflict between capitalism and socialism.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps the most serious aspect of the crisis remains largely forgotten today. In August 1946, Yugoslavia forcibly downed one US plane and shot down another. As the two sides accused each other, the Americans sent an ultimatum, threatening Yugoslavia with war if their demands to conduct an investigation on Yugoslav soil were not met. The incident was one of the early clashes that could have ignited World War Three.<sup>86</sup> Tito’s Team fortunately backed down, but

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*Times* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964), 303–306. Little has been written on Pijade’s participation at the conference, but a brief summary can be found in Gordana Vlačić, *Jugoslavenska revolucija i nacionalno pitanje 1919–1927* (Zagreb: Globus, 1987), 90–92.

<sup>81</sup> Tchavdar Marinov, Alexander Vezekov, “Communism and Nationalism in the Balkans: Marriage of Convenience or Mutual Attraction?”, in Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova (Eds.), *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, Vol. 2: *Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 469–555, 541f. Similar plans were endorsed by Kolarov in 1943. Rieber, *Storms Over the Balkans*, 122.

<sup>82</sup> Marantzidis, *Under Stalin’s Shadow*, 124–126.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 134f.

<sup>85</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 24f.; Rieber, *Storms Over the Balkans*, 177.

<sup>86</sup> Surprisingly, there has been little to no research of the incident. An exception is an unpublished master’s thesis which is over fifty years old: Dorothy Elizabeth Wooldridge, “Yugoslav-United

demonstrated a continuing hostility towards the capitalist world, making it clear that this would not change as they transformed from revolutionaries into rulers. Consequently, the Yugoslavs were becoming a serious liability for Stalin: while he persistently tried to dissuade the Americans and the British, claiming a rogue communist was acting independently of Soviet plans, few were convinced. On the one hand, Tito was seen as Stalin's most loyal disciple, establishing what would become, in the eyes of many Western diplomats, a blueprint for a communist takeover of power. On the other, the perception of communism as a monolith strengthened the belief that Stalin and Tito were purposefully playing a double game. The fact that Stalin himself clearly preferred to keep his options open certainly did not reassure other members of the uneasy postwar alliance.<sup>87</sup>

Yet the conflicts on Yugoslavia's western border could be seen even as a matter of nationalist provocation, not revolutionary expansion: after all, there was not an attempt to introduce communism to Italy. In Greece, however, Tito and the KPJ began doing exactly that. As the situation there escalated into a civil war, Tito's Politburo made a decision to support the Greeks despite contrary instructions from Stalin. The decision was guided by not just revolutionary radicalism, but also the traditions of Balkan federalism, which the communists had already tried to put into practice during the war. By 1947, as the former allies were pitted against each other, Stalin changed his policy towards a more active support of Greek communists. However, he still found Tito's enthusiasm for the Greek struggle excessive. The newly-formed Communist Information Bureau, or the Cominform, intentionally excluded the Communist Party of Greece despite Yugoslav wishes.<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, it was the entanglement in the Greek struggle and the Team's desire for a unified Balkan state that seriously eroded Yugoslav-Soviet relations. It was not only excessive zeal for a revolution in Greece, but active work towards a union with Albania and Bulgaria that had made Stalin displeased.<sup>89</sup> Georgi Dimitrov made matters worse, when, in January 1948, he made a bombastic statement to the press regarding a future establishment of the Balkan Socialist Federation, and emphasizing several times over that it would include Greece as well.<sup>90</sup> After all, Dimitrov had been, alongside Kolarov, one of the crucial leaders of the BCF in the 1920s. Unlike the KPJ, the Bulgarian communists even had a clear institutional, not merely ideological, continuity, with the proposals of Balkan

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States Relations, 1946–1947, Stemming from the Shooting of U. S. Planes Over Yugoslavia, August 9 and 19, 1946", MA Thesis, (Rice University, 1971).

<sup>87</sup> Wooldridge, "Yugoslav-United States Relations, 1946-1947", 15f.

<sup>88</sup> Marantzidis, *Under Stalin's Shadow*, 166–173.

<sup>89</sup> Rinna Elina Kullaa, "Origins of the Tito-Stalin Split within the Wider Set of Yugoslav-Soviet Relations (1941–1948)", in Vojislav G. Pavlović (Ed.), *The Balkans in the Cold War. Balkan Federations, Cominform, Yugoslav-Soviet Conflict* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2011), 88f., 93f.; Marantzidis, *Under Stalin's Shadow*, 165f. The most detailed study of attempts to forge a Balkan Federation and its ultimate failure is Branko Petranović, *Balkanska federacija 1943–1948* (Beograd: Zaslona, 1991).

<sup>90</sup> Marietta Stankova, *Georgi Dimitrov: A Biography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 211.

federalism in the 1920s, albeit these institutions were personalized as power was concentrated in the hands of two men. However, Dimitrov was no Bulgarian Tito, and his unwavering loyalty to Stalin meant that, as soon as he realized they were going too far, his relations with the Yugoslavs began to grow colder, despite his ambivalence and hopes that he might reconcile the KPJ and the Soviets.<sup>91</sup> Following the Cominform Resolution, Dimitrov sided firmly with Stalin, and stood by this position until his death one year later, despite Yugoslav propaganda claims that, had he lived, he would have stood by Tito against Moscow's dictates.<sup>92</sup>

Even on the issue of Balkan federalism, the Yugoslavs did not consider themselves as actively going against Soviet wishes and interests, and not just because of a continuity with earlier Marxist designs. The confusion was further accentuated by the fact that the KPJ enjoyed the support of Andrei Zhdanov, which they wrongly believed automatically translated into an endorsement by Stalin.<sup>93</sup> Zhdanov enthusiastically and famously proclaimed the struggle between "two camps", and went as far as claiming the civil war in Greece was part of this struggle.<sup>94</sup> The Yugoslavs, naturally, welcomed such proclamations with ardor. However, Zhdanov was swiftly removed from power in June 1948, and died in August, after being misdiagnosed by Kremlin doctors, with suspicions of foul play continuing to this day.<sup>95</sup> Stalin, on the other hand, feared not only a rival communist power the size of the entire Balkan Peninsula, but also the possibility of provoking American or British intervention in the region, which he already thought could come in the case of a Yugoslav annexation of Albania.<sup>96</sup>

Once the accusations began pouring in, Stalin had no doubts that Tito's Team as a whole, and not only Tito, was responsible. During an in-person meeting in February 1948, Stalin said to Kardelj that his approach to the Greek situation was Kantian, and not Marxist-Leninist.<sup>97</sup> Stalin's infamous First Letter, sent a month later, singled out Kidrič, Ranković, Đilas, and Vukmanović – Tempo as "dubious Marxists".<sup>98</sup> Notably, the first three were already involved with various strains of "ultra-leftism" within the party, either as supporters of Miletić or critics of the Popular Frontist ex-general secretary, Milan Gorkić.<sup>99</sup> Tempo, on the other hand, was not a member of the team, but was a crucial actor in the attempts to broker a Balkan Federation, a project that Stalin clearly wasn't fond of. The

<sup>91</sup>Ibid. 213.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid. 227–237.

<sup>93</sup>Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito*, 25–27.

<sup>94</sup>Marantzidis, *Under Stalin's Shadow*, 172.

<sup>95</sup>Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 103f.

<sup>96</sup>Marantzidis, *Under Stalin's Shadow*, 174; Rieber, *Storms Over the Balkans*, 207–217, 222f., 248f.

<sup>97</sup>Stalin's precise wording was that Kardelj thought in terms of "the categorical imperative" rather than of "the balance of forces". Ibid. 249.

<sup>98</sup>"Pismo CK SKP (b) Titu i ostalim članovima CK Komunističke partije Jugoslavije, 27. marta 1948.", in Branko Petranović, Momčilo Zečević (Eds.), *Jugoslavija 1918–1988: Tematska zbirka dokumenata* (Beograd: Rad, 1988), 908.

<sup>99</sup>This is not an original insight, and it was first pointed out in Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito*, 116.

singling out of these four figures shows that, for Stalin, “dubious Marxism” was associated with the party left, something that had been a dominant trait of his actions since at least the early 1930s: the left's association with ideas of world revolution (and by extension, potentially Trotskyism) always worried him more than the reformist veering of the party to the right. Tito's Team, by and large on the left of the international communist movement, thus always represented a threat, and, once in power, increasingly frustrated Stalin until the point when he decided to excommunicate the KPJ.

### Conclusion

The story of the Soviet-Yugoslav split should not be reduced to the KPJ Politburo nor to its ideological views. Plenty of other structural factors have precedence. The most significant ones are the relative material independence and organizational autonomy established by the KPJ in the late 1930s, and the experience of mass partisan struggle and liberation in World War Two, which was accomplished largely without Soviet assistance.<sup>100</sup> This calls for further research on top-down and bottom-up networks of loyalty built in the partisan struggles, and how they affected the relatively high level of party cohesion in the face of Stalin's threat in 1948. More significantly for the purposes of this work, an examination of the actions of the Yugoslav leadership, first as a party Politburo and then as rulers of a country, betrays a certain political tendency that was a significant contributing factor to the Tito-Stalin split. The leadership's prewar biographies shed light on their formative experiences, all of which placed them on the left of the international communist movement. Their actions already in the late 1930s and the early 1940s show a tendency towards revolutionary radicalism reaching far beyond the comfort zone of their Soviet allies and mentors. By 1941, Tito's Team was a well-established political infrastructure, with a clear blueprint for a war which would be not only antifascist, but also revolutionary. Therefore, the institution they built was resistant to changing the course they had already set, even with strong external pressure.

As the war progressed, Tito's Team went back and forth with its plans, yet always pushing for a “smashing” of the old state machine, as Marx and Engels put it in their writings on the Paris Commune, and Lenin in his *State and Revolution*.<sup>101</sup> Notably, Pijade used the same phrase in his own theoretical apologia of the partisan movement.<sup>102</sup> The partisans sometimes made concessions and took

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<sup>100</sup> I briefly explored this in Gužvica, *Before Tito*, 188–189, although I believe the whole question calls for more in-depth research, especially on the issues of financial autonomy before 1941, as the cohesive role of the partisan experience has already been researched far more.

<sup>101</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 73–94.

<sup>102</sup> Pijade, *Izabrani spisi, Tom I, Knjiga 4*, 503. Pijade speaks of “smashing” the “bureaucratic-military machine” in a direct reference to Marx's letter to Ludwig Kugelmann from April 1871. Karl Marx, Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, April 12, 1871, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 44 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 131.

steps back, as in 1942, when Stalin and Dimitrov clearly told them that the policy of class struggle in the Montenegrin and Herzegovinian countryside had gone too far. However, Tito's Team kept pushing for an alternative government instead of subjecting themselves to the royalist one in London. In this, they played a clever and patient game, which paid off by late 1943 and early 1944, prompting the British and then the Soviets to recognize them. By the time they had effectively established a socialist Yugoslavia, they had become dizzy with success, to borrow Stalin's phrase from the collectivization period. They began pursuing an aggressive foreign policy, which at times put the world on the verge of another war, and faced Stalin with the prospect of a rival major socialist power in the Balkan peninsula. That this was a matter of clear continuity of policy clearly did not escape Stalin, as Tito's Team had, at that point, been causing him headaches since at least April 1941.

The story of Tito's Team provides us with several significant historiographical lessons. More specific ones, pertaining to the history of the communist movement, include a call to rethink the *Popular Fronts* in the plural, not as a single homogenous and monolithic policy applied from Spain in 1936 to Czechoslovakia in 1948, but as a set of general guidelines which had its more revolutionary and more reformist applications. These applications depended on the structural constraints of the actors, their own ideological formation, Soviet foreign policy goals in the given moment, as well as individual and collective statesmanship. Tito's strategy represents a radical revolutionary vision of the Popular Front, but it should not be taken as a universal model no more than the timid Popular Frontism of the Spanish communists during the civil war.

This radical revolutionary vision, however, shows an antifascism which, although based on class collaboration of antifascist forces, presumed the leading role of the Communist Party, thus also implying, already from its beginnings, a revolutionary conception. Such an approach went against the instructions from Moscow on more than one occasion. When the divergences in policy came about, Stalin and Dimitrov reacted harshly. While Tito's Team would occasionally back down, their resentment grew. Their mutual bond was strengthened through war, but their frustration with the Soviets only increased. The feeling that Bolshevik leadership did not have a solid grasp of the situation on the ground encouraged the Team to take increasingly independent steps and pay less heed to instructions coming from their former mentors. At the same time, they did not feel they were overstepping any major boundaries – rather, they acted within what they thought was permissible in the framework of Marxism-Leninism, the ideology shared between them and Stalin.

More broadly, the experience of Tito's Team from 1938 until 1948 shows us interesting methodological pathways for examining potentially predetermined outcomes of certain processes based on the early formation of political institutions. The Team, as well as the Politburo which formed most of it, can be observed as a political infrastructure, an institutionalized relationship of power and mutual loyalty, which shared a set of ideological goals and took on a life of its own

despite significant external pressures to toe the Moscow line. The response to contingent events in the decade after 1938 shows a certain rootedness of the tendency to adopt more revolutionary responses in a given situation, as demanded by Greener's model of institutionalized path dependence. The period of reproduction in World War II and the early Cold War era shows a continuation of the KPJ's determination to apply revolutionary radicalism. This is all the more significant as it took place during the time which was supposed to represent the most significant abandonment of revolutionary politics and practices by the Communist International to which the KPJ was effectively subject. Indeed, the only significant ameliorations of revolutionary policies came following interventions from Moscow. Nonetheless, a path of intensifying class struggle, first internally and then in the realm of foreign affairs, was a hallmark of the KPJ's policy until 1948. It would only change following fierce external pressure that manifested in the complete economic isolation of Yugoslavia from other socialist countries.

Granted, this brief inquiry into the policy of Tito's Team opens many questions as it tries to give an overarching image of the KPJ's policy in the first decade of Tito's tenure as general secretary. Issues of material dependence on or independence from the Comintern, the day-to-day functioning of the People's Liberation Committees, and the justification of communist claims regarding the overlap between the monarchist and collaborationist government apparatuses, all of these require further research. Moreover, the stories of many members of Tito's Team could further strengthen or refute the argument. What about the political activity of Franc Leskošek, the most under-researched member of the team, in Slovenia during the war? How did the KPH policy change following the death of Končar, on its way to Hebrang's vision of the Popular Front in Croatia, which ultimately turned out to be so different from Tito's? In fact, a more in-depth study of the team, akin to what Fitzpatrick has done with Stalin, would be an invaluable contribution to Yugoslav historiography, especially given that no political biographies of Pijade, Kardelj, or Kidrič have been published to date. Nonetheless, an examination of the political infrastructure that was Tito's Team offers new insights into the continuities that span across the dividing line of World War Two – a period which is usually taken for granted as a moment of radical discontinuity.

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