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Creating a Communist Yugoslavia in the Second World War

Abstract: The Second World War involved the conflict of three different ideologies – democracy, fascism and communism – an aspect in which it was different from the Great War. This ideological triangle led to various shifts in the positions, views, and alliances of each of the warring parties. Yugoslavia with its historical legacy could not avoid being torn by similar ideological conflicts. During the Second World War a brutal and exceptionally complex war was fought on its soil. The most important question studied in this paper concerns the foremost objective of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) – to carry out a violent change of the legal order and form of government of the pre-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, Second World War, Communist Party, Josip Broz Tito, national ideology

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav idea

On 1 December 1918, following the four-year tragedy of the Great War, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia from 1929) was solemnly proclaimed. On that occasion the Crown-Prince and Regent of Serbia, Alexander Karadjordjević, said:

Accepting this announcement, I am convinced that by this act I am fulfilling my duty as ruler, for I am thereby only at last putting into effect the vision which the best sons of our blood, of all three faiths, all three names, on both sides of the Danube, Sava and Drina rivers, have begun to prepare as far back as the reigns of my grandfather, Prince Alexander I, and Prince Michael.¹

Serbia survived the defeat of 1915 and its troops became the largest contingent in the French-led forces that broke through the enemy's line on the Salonika (Macedonian) front with a decisive outcome in 1918. Serbia, a winner in the Great War, willingly transferred its sovereignty to a new state. The terms of this transfer would, however, turn out to be controversial not only among

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¹ Quoted in Branko Petranović and Momčilo Zečević, *Jugoslavija 1918–1988* (Belgrade: Rad, 1988), 136.

Croats, Slovenes and other non-Serbs, which is well known, but also among the Serbs themselves.²

Founded in 1919, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*, KPJ) had been a legally recognized political party until its involvement in subversive and terrorist activities forced the authorities to ban it in 1921. The fourth-ranking political party in the first post-war election in 1920, the KPJ continued to operate as an underground organization.³ Its activities were completely dependent on the Communist International's (Comintern) orders. For the Yugoslav communists, the Soviet Union was a political and spiritual centre; Lenin and later Stalin were not just "ingenious leaders" but they also embodied the communist idea and the "envisioned new society".

Immediately after Yugoslav unification, the Communists had some specific difficulties regarding the Yugoslav idea and the Yugoslav state itself. Between 1919 and 1941 they changed their views on Yugoslavia several times, always in step with whatever was the current policy of the Comintern. They argued that Yugoslavia was the result of an "imperialist war", a product of the anti-Soviet policy of containment and of the policy of the Greater-Serbian bourgeoisie which was driven by its imperialist goals of exploiting other ethnic groups and classes in the country.⁴

For the Yugoslav Communists, Yugoslavia was the most imperialist state which should be destroyed for two reasons: first, to protect the USSR, and second, to create new national states in its former territory. Consequently, their anti-Yugoslav stance was manifested in maintaining contacts with separatist movements in Yugoslavia and in laying down an ideological and psychological basis for the complete negation of the Yugoslav state. As a result, the Communists were declared public enemies and persecuted.

Remaining at the fringe of political life for a good part of the interwar period, the Communists were not directly engaged in the on-going political

² Marko Bulatović, "Struggling with Yugoslavism: Dilemmas of Interwar Serb Political Thought", in *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century*, eds. John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 254–268, 254.

³ The success of the Communist Party in the election for the Constituent Assembly held on 28 November 1920 greatly worried the government. On 30 December 1920, after a number of Communist-led strikes which were interpreted as a threat to national security, the government issued the *Obznana* (Proclamation), a decree banning the Communist Party, followed by the strict enforcement of the ban. A faction of the Party responded by an attempt on the life of Regent Alexander on 29 June 1921 and, on 21 July 1921, by the assassination of Milorad Drašković, the former interior minister and author of the *Obznana*. This led to even harsher legislation against the Party, the Law on the Protection of the State enacted on 2 August 1921. Parliament annulled the credentials of all fifty-eight Communist MPs.

⁴ Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Away* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2009), 54.

struggle over what the relations between the new Yugoslav state and its nations, and among the nations themselves should be. Yet, the complexity of relations between various groups and their struggle to define their own status greatly influenced the development of the Yugoslav Communists' revolutionary strategies. The growing political tensions in the country also played a part. The Communists' capacity to act as an effective political force was greatly inhibited by their inability to decide on a strategy on the national question.⁵

From 1919 until 1941, the KPJ went through a number of phases in its search for its own approach to the national question in Yugoslavia. The most important factor in its development of strategies on the national question was the strong influence of the Comintern. The Comintern's favoured strategies were not always particularly sensitive to the reality of the Yugoslav socio-political context or to the problems of socialist revolutionaries within it. Although the Comintern's officially stated main purpose was to promote world revolution, in practice it functioned more like an extended defence system for the Soviet Union in which it was expected that the highest duty of all communist parties was the defence of "the only real existing socialist society".⁶

The Communists saw the national question as potentially the main source of revolution. The concept of destroying Yugoslavia and creating new national states in its place gave rise to the Yugoslav form of Stalinism, specific in that the entire struggle of the Yugoslav Communists came down to revolving around the national question. This meant cooperation with and support to nationalistic organizations, even those from the ranks of the bourgeoisie, such as the Croat Ustasha movement and anti-Serbian terrorist organizations in Slavic Macedonia. In the area of their foreign policy, support was given to the countries which sought a revision of peace treaties or harboured territorial pretensions towards Yugoslavia (Hungary, Bulgaria, and Italy). The theory of secession and formation of national states in the territory of Yugoslavia directly relied on Stalin's "teaching" and key decisions of the Comintern.

The application of the principle of secession as envisaged by the Communists was not consistent as it was not based on the national rights of particular nations but on the territory predominantly inhabited by them even though these nations had not previously existed as separate national states and their borders were not only unknown but also difficult to mark out because of their mixed ethnic makeup. Accordingly, in the case of Croatia, the arguments used invoked the obsolete "state and historical right" dating back to the age of feudalism. This was the result of a politics based primarily on revolutionary phraseology, on the incessant repetition of revolutionary slogans about Serbian "hegemony", "oppress-

⁵ Hilde Katrine Haug, *Creating a Socialist Yugoslavia: Tito, Communist Leadership and the National Question* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 15–16.

⁶ *Ibid.* 16.

sion” and “occupation” of non-Serbian territories, a politics which ignored the situation as it objectively was and the reality of relations among the nations in Yugoslavia.⁷

The policy of the Comintern and the KPJ in regard to the Serbian issues was perceived from two aspects: first, in regard to the denial of the Serbs’ national interest, and second, in regard to internal rifts and dissent, mostly on the part of Serbian Communists. The persecution of Serbian Communists by the Comintern and the KPJ leadership was motivated primarily by the former’s social-democratic tradition and their strong conviction that the Yugoslav communist movement should develop as independently as possible.⁸

At its Fifth Congress held in 1924, the Comintern abandoned the idea of federal reorganization of Yugoslavia on account of the argument that “the western imperialists” were using Yugoslavia and the other Balkan countries as a “cordon sanitaire” on the south-eastern border of the Soviet Union. In order to break this “cordon sanitaire”, a new and radical political stand was defined in Moscow. According to it, the right to secession was acknowledged to “the oppressed nations” in the states of the enemy camp. Moreover, the Fifth Congress of the Comintern explicitly acknowledged the right of Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia to secede and create independent states. It was also emphasized that assistance should be extended to “the liberation of ethnic Albanians” in Kosovo.⁹

From then on, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was to the Yugoslav Communists a “dungeon of nations” in which the Serbian political elite allegedly oppressed the other nations and ethnic minorities. The Third Congress of the KPJ (Vienna, 1926) accepted the resolution of the Fifth Plenum of the Comintern’s Executive Committee of 1925 which had called for the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the creation of a revolutionary Balkan federation. The political platform adopted at the Fourth Congress (Dresden, 1928) stressed the absolute necessity of breaking up the common South-Slavic state and acknowledged “the right of all oppressed nations – Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians and Montenegrins – to self-determination including secession”.¹⁰

The position on the national question acquired an even sharper tone at the Fourth Conference of the KPJ (Ljubljana, December 1934). It was stressed that the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was essentially “an occupation” of Croatia, Dalmatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina by “Serbian troops”. The basic view was that “Greater-Serbian Yugoslavia” was po-

⁷ See Branislav Gligorijević, *Komintern, jugoslovensko i srpsko pitanje* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1992), 285–286.

⁸ Ibid. 288.

⁹ See Kosta Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2015), 34.

¹⁰ Ibid. 41.

tentially one of “the most dangerous hotspots in a new imperialist war in Europe”. Consequently, the main goal of the KPJ was to topple “fascist dictatorship” by an armed uprising and to establish a Soviet type of government: “There can be no talk of toppling the Greater-Serbian fascist military dictatorship without a systematic revolutionary action within the army.”¹¹

The evolution of the KPJ into a Bolshevik party entailed the acceptance of a totalitarian ideology. Communists openly denied the significance of democracy, considering it unnecessary to the revolutionary needs of society. Their leadership took steps to introduce a system of intraparty subordination, the ascendancy of a minority over the majority. The KPJ was an oligarchic party, applying repressive methods to its own members and demanding unquestioning obedience. The Stalinist syndrome in the KPJ continued to exist even after the reversal of this policy, perpetuated by the “popular front” tactic and the struggle against fascism, when the emphasis was laid on preserving the unity of the Yugoslav state.

The revolutionary war

In 1939, after a series of brutal intraparty purges in the Soviet Union when some 800 Yugoslav Communists were executed or died in concentration camps, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) became Secretary-General of the KPJ. His major task was to “purge” the Party and he did so by eliminating the most prominent leaders of the Yugoslav communist movement.¹²

The political doctrine of the KPJ was initially based on the view that “English imperialists” were warmongers provoking Germany. This doctrine was promulgated after the Soviet-Nazi agreement of 23 August 1939 which Soviet propaganda justified by the claim that the new war was entirely “imperialistic” and that England and France were responsible for its outbreak. Nothing was said about the smaller nations directly threatened by Germany. All communist parties were ordered to enter into direct confrontation with the social-democratic and democratic antifascist parties which refused to accept the Comintern’s interpretation of the on-going war. The KPJ had advocated the abolishment of the existing order of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia even before the Second World War. Its regime had been labelled “fascist” and accused of belonging to the bloc of “imperialist countries which had been provoking” a global conflict. Also, the Yugoslav Communists had always regarded the Croat Ustasas as their allies in the revolutionary struggle against the pre-war Yugoslav regime.¹³

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.* 48.

¹² See G. R. Swain, “Tito: The Formation of a Disloyal Bolshevik”, *International Review of Social History* XXXIV/2 (1989), 248–271.

¹³ Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu*, 186–187.

Following the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the KPJ loyally adhered to the Soviet policy. In this respect, it should be noted that the KPJ did not cause trouble to the Germans even after they attacked and conquered Yugoslavia, a fact which was to be conveniently left out of the Party's history after the war. Still more controversially, the Yugoslav Communists remained hesitant about rising to arms against the occupiers even after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. It was not until the stern warning from Moscow of 1 July 1941 that the order for an immediate uprising was issued by the KPJ. The armed actions in early July were directed against local Serbian authorities, especially the gendarmerie, rather than against small German garrisons. Such behaviour reflected the fact that the Yugoslav Communists embarked on a revolutionary war: their most important war aim was to establish a new social and political system.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, the Communists began their action in Serbia. Tito was a pragmatic politician and it did not take him long to realize that there was no one else he could propose "the defence of Yugoslavia" to except the Serbs (and the Slovenians) but that this would not be enough to carry out a revolution and seize power. A class war seemed to be the best solution, even more so because the Serbian Communists saw it as putting the idea of a "pure revolution" into practice without dragging the national question into it. It is in this light that the decision to start the revolutionary war in Serbia should be interpreted.

Tito himself was not too enthusiastic about the idea of Yugoslav unity. A loyal Austro-Hungarian subject in his youth, he knew hardly anything about the culture and history of the South-Slavic peoples. He had spent very little time in Yugoslavia before 1941, only a few years, not counting his years in prison. The Yugoslav state itself had only existed for a little more than two decades and, except for the Serbs, no one, including Tito, was too upset about its collapse in the April war.

It was clear to the communists that monarchical Yugoslavia would be restored in the event of Germany's defeat, which was an outcome that seemed more than certain to them after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. The revolution would never be able to be carried out unless Serbia was taken, at any cost and using all necessary means. Marxist theoreticians would later explain this line of reasoning of the KPJ leadership as follows: there could be no "national self-determination" for Croats, Montenegrins, Macedonians or Slovenians in support of a new Yugoslav community without the "firm assumption" that Serbia would also be a part of that Yugoslavia – but a communist Serbia.¹⁵

Unlike the Soviet Union, where Stalin had declared the Second Patriotic War and sought recourse to the national symbols of tsarist Russia, Tito openly

¹⁴ Ibid. 258; see also Stanley G. Payne, *Civil War in Europe, 1905–1949* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 212.

¹⁵ Janko Pleterski, *Nacije, Jugoslavija, revolucija* (Belgrade: Komunist, 1985), 386.

used the iconography of international communism. For example, he adopted the five-pointed red star as a symbol of the Partisan army and the raised fist salute. In addition to a five-pointed star, the Partisans had their respective national flags on their caps, although in Bosnia, they had the Serbian and/or the Croatian tricolour (in the shape of a triangle); in Croatia, the Croat Partisans only had the Croatian tricolour, whereas the Serb Partisans had to wear both the Serbian and the Croatian one.¹⁶

National revolutions were affirmed by the decision to raise the status of the Party's provincial military headquarters to that of the main headquarters of the respective provinces (Slovenia and Serbia had already had theirs). The Marxist elite of post-war Yugoslavia would for decades interpret this decision as expressive of equality among the Yugoslav nations because it was from that moment on that each nation could independently organize its own armed forces and fight for its own "national liberation".

As for Yugoslav symbols, there were none. The main headquarters of each republic independently managed the uprising and the Partisan warfare that followed, which was a clear indication that the liberation struggle was "federalized" from the start. At the establishment of individual main headquarters, Tito carefully delineated the area each was in charge of. Every main headquarters also functioned as a state government. The purpose of this policy was to promote a new internal organization of Yugoslavia. This was a way to bring the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to its end and define some principles of the future federalization of the country, which would exercise its sovereignty based on agreement among its federal units.

In the post-war period, this was something that the Croatian and Slovenian Communists persistently insisted on when speaking about "revolutionary achievements". Whether it could have ever been any other way or not, Partisan Yugoslavism was taking shape only gradually and partially. The primary concern of Tito and the top of the KPJ was the "class approach" and the defence of the Soviet Union, an "invincible land of the proletariat". It was only from mid-1943, when the need for obtaining international legitimacy arose, that the emphasis on Yugoslavism and Yugoslavia itself became more prominent and more consistent.

Communists started a revolution in Serbia straight away, following the Comintern's model of the "united front" of the proletariat and the "poor peasantry, enslaved agricultural workers and other servants in rural areas". The ideology of "equality in poverty" in a society dominated by egalitarian ideas and a centuries-long craving for land was a key to success. Still, this did not prevent the Communists and leftist intellectuals from strongly encouraging among the Serbs pro-Yugoslav sentiment based on the old concept of integral Yugoslavism. Quite the opposite, during the war, this was valued as part of the "freedom-

¹⁶ Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, vol. VII (Belgrade: Komunist, 1982), 139.

loving traditions” of the Serbian people. Unlike the Communists from other Yugoslav nations, the Serbian Communists encouraged their own to fight for the liberation of Yugoslavia, and the Partisans in Serbia were the only who swore the oath of enlistment as “the people’s Partisans of Yugoslavia”.¹⁷

The uprising in Serbia in the summer and autumn of 1941 did not cause serious losses to the German army (some 200 German soldiers were killed and 400 wounded). German documents reveal the brutality with which the Wehrmacht handled the Serbian rebellion. By the end of December, about 4,000 insurgents were killed in action and 35,000 civilian hostages were executed in reprisal.¹⁸

The reprisals led the Serbian royalists (Chetniks), haunted by the memory of the horrible loss of life suffered in the Great War, to conclude that the continuation of resistance would amount to a “national suicide”.¹⁹ Tito, however, was not too upset by the events. On the one hand, the people fleeing from such brutal reprisals were easily recruited into his units. On the other hand, such tragedies were tearing the fabric of normal society, creating favourable conditions for those bent on carrying out a revolution in a war-torn country.²⁰

In order to preserve the army and civilian lives, the royalists had to reduce considerably their military activity. By contrast, the Communists maintained their revolutionary optimism. At a meeting held on 7 December 1941, the top of the KPJ concluded, encouraged by the Red Army’s counteroffensive in front of Moscow, that the armed struggle against the invader had grown into “a class war between the workers and the bourgeoisie”. The conclusion was based on the literal reading of Stalin’s statement of 7 November that the war might be over “in a month, or perhaps two months, or six months, or a year”. Milovan Djilas claimed that the danger at Moscow “has largely passed”, that the situation on the Eastern front “will develop at the speed of a lightning”, and that the Germans had in fact already suffered a disaster in the Soviet Union.²¹

The Partisans pursued a clear objective throughout the chaos of the civil war: to take power and carry out a communist revolution. As early as 21 December 1941 they formed a unit specifically assigned with the task of fighting a class war (the First Proletarian Brigade commanded by the Spanish Civil War veteran Koča Popović). This means that they gave a higher priority, both

¹⁷ Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu*, 389.

¹⁸ Kosta Nikolić, *Istorija Ravnogorskog pokreta*, vol. I (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2014), 165–166.

¹⁹ Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 144.

²⁰ Heather Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans. The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941–1945* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003), 60–61.

²¹ Quoted in Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu*, 260.

in theory and in practice, to a social revolution than to a liberation war. Far from the official post-1945 narrative about the joint struggle of all Yugoslav nations against the Axis powers, the Partisans in fact were one of the instigators of and participants in the horrible civil war which was fought along ethnic and ideological lines and which claimed most of the lives lost during the war. Their main enemies became not the German and Italian or any other occupying force, but rather Mihailović's Chetniks labelled "Greater-Serbian nationalists". To justify their ruthless struggle for power, the Communists conveniently employed a discourse which presented them as fighters against "traitors".

The fundamental problem, which the Communists coped with in stages during the war, depending on the situation, was how to make the liberation war compatible with the KPJ's strategic goal – to carry out a class revolution – especially because the far left of the party leadership had never had any doubts that the main goal, in fact, was to take power and sovietise Yugoslavia.²² The central problem was how to reconcile the right to self-determination with the struggle for the restoration of Yugoslavia? According to the revolutionary primer, the country's rebirth depended on whether the "working class" would manage to destroy the pre-war regime, i.e. whether the KPJ would manage to take power. This was why in the initial phase of the revolution Tito did not present the question of Yugoslavia as a state legal goal.²³

The offer made to the Serbs was class war and defence of Yugoslavia, whereas the other nations were offered the destruction of pre-war "Serbian hegemony", which was a process that was taking shape as the defeat of the Axis powers was becoming more certain. The basic elements of the communist revolution and of the struggle for a new Yugoslavia met on one point which remained central throughout the war: the fight against the "Greater-Serbian centre" embodied in General Dragoljub Mihailović. The motive was the fact that he was not only at the head of a resistance movement which had Yugoslav pretensions – the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland – but also became, in January 1942, a member of the Yugoslav government-in-exile which was recognized as legitimate by the antifascist coalition.

This is precisely why, and why at that particular moment – in the same January of 1942, the developments in Serbia were described as decisive for the whole of Yugoslavia. The KPJ was supposed to propagate the idea that the goal of Mihailović's Chetniks was not the liberation of the country:

Their goal after the end of the war, whatever its outcome, is to preserve the system of hegemony of the Greater-Serbian reactionary elements. This is why they

²² Ivo Banac, *Sa Staljinom protiv Tita. Informbirovski rascjepi u jugoslavenskom komunističkom pokretu* (Zagreb: Globus, 1990), 87–88.

²³ Pleterski, *Nacije*, 381.

are supported by all anti-popular reactionaries who will in no time become the main enemy of the Yugoslav peoples' demands for self-determination.²⁴

Mihailović was accused of continuing to pursue the “old defeatist policy” and denounced as the main threat to the liberation struggle. The author of this report, Ivo Lola Ribar, wrote to the Slovenian Communists urging them to offer the most resolute resistance to “similar attempts of such reactionary elements” in Slovenia because the Slovenian people “deserves a future which will be different from their thorny past”. Ribar believed that a harsher attitude towards the Chetniks and an emphasis on the danger posed by the “resurrection of Greater-Serbian hegemonists” would be just as useful for the Communists’ operation in Croatia. Such policy would be a “bridge which will bring many elements over to us”.²⁵

The decision of the KPJ leadership to start the second phase of the liberation struggle (a proletarian revolution) could mean only one thing in practice – that the liberation struggle was being turned into the struggle against the “bourgeoisie” and its armed forces – the Chetniks. In order to discredit them and, ultimately, the national struggle of the Serbian people, the KPJ used the tactic of accusing them of “betrayal and collaboration”, which would be consistently applied throughout the war. Mihailović and his resistance movement became the main target of the KPJ’s strategy, enabling it to reconcile the liberation and revolutionary goals. Elements of this strategy had been defined much earlier: the Comintern-era slogan about the struggle of “oppressed nations” for national liberation was replaced with the one about the struggle against the occupiers, but it was the Serbs who were once again branded as the main bearers of fascism and a far greater danger than the external enemy. To prop up the pretence of “liberation”, the KPJ even accused the Serbs of high treason.

The KPJ’s slogans about “brotherhood and unity” and the principle of complete equality of the Yugoslav peoples are quite well known. But there had to be something substantial behind a political catchphrase, something that most Yugoslavs would gather around. The invocation of “Greater-Serbian threat” proved to be the most effective stratagem in this case, too, and was developed to its full potential in Bosnia and Croatia. It is in that light that one should look at the Communists’ insistence on a more aggressive “class approach” and a stepped-up revolution. Contrary to usually unclear interpretations of what the latter meant in practice, there is the interpretation of the KPJ’s Politburo: after the quelling of the uprising in Serbia and given the fact that the Yugoslav government-in-exile enjoyed respectable status in the eyes of the antifascist coalition, there was a pressing need to address the question of the status of the non-Serb peoples in the

²⁴ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodno-oslobodilačkom ratu naroda i narodnosti Jugoslavije*, vol. II-2 (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut JA, 1952), 159–165.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 208–214.

envisioned federation in a most aggressive way. It should be made perfectly clear to them that they would not be able to achieve their “national liberation” unless they supported the maximalist goals of the communist revolution.

Post-war Marxist theoreticians argued that in this phase the KPJ leadership had stepped up the policy of “brotherhood and unity” based on the principles of equality of nations and their self-determination in the struggle against the occupiers and their collaborators. In practice this meant that the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and partitioned and occupied Serbia were treated as equal in terms of legal and political status. Labelling the Serbian national resistance movement as “treasonous” was aimed at presenting both the Yugoslav government-in-exile and the Yugoslav king himself as traitors, which was exactly what happened at the end of the war. At a later stage Tito made use of these claims as a simple means for extorting concessions from the western Allies – the restoration of Yugoslavia was only possible in accordance with the KPJ’s model, and that was presented as the only way for the Yugoslav nations to contribute “significantly” to the Allied efforts to crush fascism.

And so the old propaganda about the “Serbian danger” went on and, in the circumstances of war, became the main reason for the social revolution (winning over a considerable number of Serbs from the western parts of Yugoslavia) and for “the national liberation struggle of oppressed peoples”, which led to their changing sides in massive numbers and joining the People’s Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački pokret*, NOP) at the final stage of the war. At the same time and on the same basis, the Serbian ethnic group was being broken up by the construction of the Montenegrin and Macedonian nations.

A federal state or a union of states?

The foundation stone of socialist Yugoslavia was laid at the Second Session of the Antifascist Council for the People’s Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko veće narodnog oslobodjenja Jugoslavije*, AVNOJ) held in Jajce, central Bosnia, on 29 and 30 November 1943. The capitulation of Italy signalled it was time to set up an “authoritative political body” which would pronounce its stance on the Yugoslav king and government-in-exile. This initiative coincided with the Red Army’s significant successes on the Eastern front and the decisions reached at the Allied Tehran Conference (from 28 November to 1 December 1943), all of which worked in the Partisans’ favour.

At the Second Session of AVNOJ, this Council was declared “the highest representative body of legislative and executive power” in future Yugoslavia. Elected on the same occasion was the National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Nacionalni komitet oslobodjenja Jugoslavije*, NKOJ) as “the highest body of people’s power” which had attributes of a provisional “people’s government”. The Yugoslav government-in-exile was stripped of its powers to act as a

lawful government, and King Peter II Karadjordjević was banned from returning to the country, but the issue of the political system was to be “settled” after the liberation of the country. The decision to found a new Yugoslavia was extremely ambiguous and non-binding:

Based on every nation's right to self-determination, including the right to secession or union with other nations, and in compliance with the true will of all nations of Yugoslavia demonstrated throughout the joint three-year-long national liberation struggle which has forged an indissoluble brotherhood of the nations of Yugoslavia. [...] Yugoslavia is being and shall be built on the federal principle which will provide for the full equality of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians and Montenegrins, i.e. the peoples of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁶

Serbia was the only federal unit of the envisaged federation which did not have its highest revolutionary authority – an antifascist council – at the Second Session of AVNOJ. The stereotypes of “Great-Serbian hegemony”, the “oppressed” nations and an “oppressing” nation were still in force. Serbian political and military officials did not raise the question of Serbia's position in the future federation or of the delineation of the federal units' borders. The Second Session of AVNOJ confirmed the process of Yugoslavia's federalization which had been underway since the beginning of the war. The internal partition entailed dividing lines between the Serbian people because a considerable part of Serbs remained outside of the Serbian federal unit. In the federal system, the KPJ was the dominant force, which essentially made the federalization of Yugoslavia a mere form: all the power was in the hands of the party leadership.

The national restructuring of the Yugoslav state (federalization) was taking place under the oppressive burden of the concept of alleged “Serbian hegemony”, an unwarranted stigma stamped on the Serbian people as a whole. Croatian representatives insisted on a confederation, claiming they could not “appear before their people” offering them the prospect of Croatia ceasing to be an independent state, as it was at the time (NDH), and demanded that its territory would have to be at least as large as the interwar Banovina of Croatia had been. This was the reason why Tito explicitly told the Croatian delegation that Croatia's role was special since “Croats and Croatia have been leaders of the fight against Greater-Serbian reactionism”.²⁷

On the other hand, the position of Serbia in the Yugoslav federation was not determined. It would be reasonable to presume that the AVNOJ session could not have been held without the qualified representatives of the largest land. A freely elected Serbian delegation would have been able to raise the ques-

²⁶ Quoted in Branko Petranović and Momčilo Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam. Ideje i stvarnost*, vol. I (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1987), 800–801.

²⁷ Quoted in Pleterski, *Nacije*, 458.

tion of Serbia's position in the new federation, as well as the question of borders, but that would have been inconvenient for Tito and the KPJ leadership. Consequently, decisions had to be reached without the presence of a qualified Serbian delegation capable of raising the Serbian question. Instead, the session was attended by a compliant delegation consisting of members of the Serbian units of the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (*Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije*, NOVJ) operating outside of Serbia, prominent Communists who unquestioningly adhered to the KPJ's principle of centralism. There simply could be no civilian or military initiative in Serbia other than those launched from the centre of the party and military leadership of communist Yugoslavia. It was Tito who imposed all political decisions regarding the position of Serbia and the Serbian people in the new state.

Changes to the country's political structure were also carried out under irregular wartime circumstances. In the name of the restoration of Yugoslavia, a "silence strategy" regarding Serb victims was employed. The policy of "national balance" drastically changed Serbia's pre-war position. AVNOJ essentially obliterated all traces of Serbia's former statehood which had been built into Yugoslavia's statehood in 1918. The appointment of the first communist government (NKOJ) and the stripping of the Yugoslav government-in-exile of its lawful powers cancelled out, in form and content, the tradition of administrative state bodies based on the Serbian political thought and experience of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The decision to ban King Peter from returning to the country meant that the dynasty which was identified with Serbian statehood since the beginning of the Serbian revolution (1804) had been eliminated.

The internal borders established at the Second Session of AVNOJ would remain unchanged after the war. It was at this session that the Croatian revolutionary assembly's decision of 20 September 1943 on the annexation to Croatia of areas formerly occupied by Italy (Istria, Rijeka, Zadar and the islands) was endorsed, despite the fact that Tito had at first criticized Croatia for usurping the sovereignty which belonged only to Yugoslavia. The same decision was adopted for Slovenia: the prior decision of the Plenum of the Slovenian Liberation Front (*Osvobodilna fronta*) was endorsed, allowing "free Slovenia in federal Yugoslavia" to incorporate the Slovenian Primorje (Coast) and all previously annexed parts of Slovenia.

At a special meeting with the Croatian delegation on 30 November, Tito emphasized the important role of Croatia in the liberation struggle, for "Croats and Croatia have been leaders of the fight against Great-Serbian reactionarism", and stated that the most important task now was the joint fight of Croats and Serbs in order to destroy internal enemies, "because they are more dangerous than the occupiers".²⁸

²⁸ Quoted in Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu*, 382.

Croatia incorporated a larger part of Istria than Italy and so became a net gainer”, although Andrija Hebrang thought the boundaries of NDH had been “fairer”.²⁹ The borders fixed for Croatia and Montenegro drew the Communist leadership into ethnic adjudication that would be openly held against them by the 1980s. Absorbing the larger part of the Istrian Peninsula from Italy made Croatia a net gainer, but condemned the 250,000 Italians living there to an effective, mostly bloodless, campaign of ethnic cleansing that began in 1945 and continued into the early 1950s.³⁰

At the same time, Tito once again rejected proposals to establish one or, perhaps, several autonomous Serbian regions in the new Croatian republic. Since the KPJ was not too popular with the Croatian people, it did not even dare think of creating separate Serbian regions.

The decisions made at the Second Session of AVNOJ would be further shaped until the very end of the war. For decades, the post-war Serbian Marxist elite struggled to prove that the Yugoslav state created in Jajce had been a unitary one, and that its (con)federalization was the result of historical events which entailed the abandonment of AVNOJ’s “fundamental principles”. But that is not true. Even before Jajce, all constituent nations except the Serbs had stated their positions on their respective statuses, thus confirming that the new Yugoslavia would be a federation of states, not a federal republic. The Slovenian historian Janko Pleterski never had any dilemmas about this and considered it “pointless juridical nitpicking”, since “if we look at AVNOJ’s decisions at Jajce, they represent, in content and form, the realization of the principle of sovereignty of the Yugoslav nations”.³¹

The whole point of the revolution was the federation which came into existence through the nations exercising their right to self-determination. The ethnic principle was built into the structure of the new federation and, consequently, all the republics (except Bosnia and Herzegovina) were national republics. This was insisted upon by Slovenia and Croatia even during the peak period of building socialism, when the idea was promoted that socialism “abolished” all differences in Yugoslavia.

All these contradictions fully re-emerged in the late 1980s, when Slovenia and Croatia insisted that they had not exercised their right to secession, because they had once voluntarily united with other Yugoslav nations and republics to form a federal Yugoslavia. The underlying political idea was that it was a permanent right which could be exercised more than once.

²⁹ Aleksa Djilas, *Osporavana zemlja* (Belgrade: Književne novine, 1990), 242.

³⁰ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History. Twice There was a Country*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 232.

³¹ Pleterski, *Nacije*, 461.

Winners and losers

In the summer of 1944 the Partisans entered Serbia breaking through the Chetniks' resistance while the Germans were focused on defending the route for their troops to withdraw from Greece. The Soviet army took part in the campaign to liberate Serbia between September and October 1944. In Serbia, where greater resistance to the Communists was expected, the new authorities were introduced under the auspices of bodies of the restored Yugoslavia. Those who had taken part in the occupation regime were dealt with brutally; in most towns people were executed without publicity. As its first priority, Tito's regime focused on the remaining domestic military forces still rallied against it. In the final stages of the war, the remnants of different enemies retreating with German troops were destroyed in the region along the Austrian border, approximately 100,000 men, many of them Serbs.

According to the party's official view, Serbia had acted hegemonically in the interwar Yugoslavia, the Serbian bourgeoisie, military, government, and monarchy had acted as the gravediggers of the interwar state and the oppressors of the other nations. Serbia thus came in for some very specific treatment after the liberation.³² The days that followed the end of the war led to one last round of vengeful bloodletting. Tito's Partisans executed at least 60,000 Serb civilians from November 1944 to June 1945. In addition, Tito's secret police (OZNA) hunted down the Chetniks in Serbia, and in July 1946 executed General Mihailović as a "traitor" and "war criminal".³³

The Republic was declared on 29 November 1945, and the constitution, modelled after the constitution of the Soviet Union, was promulgated on 31 January 1946. The Communist representatives to the bicameral Constituent Assembly voted unanimously for the abolishment of monarchy, ending the short-lived period of regency on behalf of the exiled King Peter, in whose name Tito had ruled as prime minister since March 1945. The state was named the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Its division into republics introduced during the war was legalized: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia each had its own government, assembly and constitution. Serbia had an autonomous province, Vojvodina, and an autonomous region, Kosovo and Metohija, set up on account of their ethnically mixed population. The Serbs were the most dissatisfied with the reorganization of the state along federal lines even though Serbs from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia had been the predominant force in the Partisan army which had brought about

³² Nick Miller, *Non-Conformists: Culture, Politics and Nationalism in Serbian Intellectual Circles 1944–1991* (Central European University Press, 2007), 10.

³³ See Kosta Nikolić, *Mač revolucije. OZNA u Jugoslaviji 1944–1946* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2016).

these changes.³⁴ The prevailing feeling was that the federation was detrimental to the Serbs in a number of ways, including the invention of new nations, such as the Macedonian, and the separation of the Montenegrins and their declaration as a new nation. Montenegrin ethnic distinctiveness was a communist demand since their ideology involved the establishment of a separate Montenegrin nation. Up to that point, no political force of any significance had thought of going against history and tradition and requesting the separation of Montenegrins into a different ethnic group from the Serbs.

The Montenegrin Communists had been speaking very clearly and unambiguously about the “Montenegrin nation” from the beginning of the war. It is a historical paradox that, until the very end of the war, they never once mentioned the existence of Serbs in Montenegro, and until the Second Session of AVNOJ they did not speak about the restoration of Yugoslavia, but only about creating the “Soviet republic” of Montenegro. Therefore, what followed as a logical result of Partisan Yugoslavism in Montenegro was the creation of a new nation. Since war is usually the key driving force for the building of a nation, it seems reasonable to assume that the conflict that the Partisans in Montenegro started against the Chetniks was in fact motivated by the intention to create a clear and unambiguous national identity for the population of Montenegro. The extreme violence which marked this conflict did not originate from “opposing and irreconcilable” identities, but simply served as a way to create a new Montenegrin identity or, in other words, to erase Serbian identity in Montenegro.

Later the Bosnian Muslims, who had been traditionally claimed by both Serbs and Croats, were “added to the list”. Another important source of dissatisfaction was asymmetry: Serbia was the only republic which had autonomous subdivisions. It has been observed that Dalmatia was a natural province in Croatia where Serbs lived in greater numbers and more compact groups than any of the ethnic minorities in Vojvodina. In the beginning, while there was strict centralism, the autonomous provinces were not a practical problem. However, when the republics began to transform into national states, provincial autonomy became one of the central issues.³⁵

Partisan Yugoslavism, which was the basis of communist Yugoslavia, was not a uniform historical phenomenon and cannot be considered as being the same in all parts of Yugoslavia and among all Yugoslav nations. From 1942, the Partisan army formally operated under the name of the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ), but this name only referred to Tito, his Supreme Headquarters and the forces that left Serbia (1941) and Montenegro (1942) and followed him to Bosnia. These were Partisans from Serbia and Montenegro, and partly from Sandžak. It is a striking fact that not even Tito and his Supreme

³⁴ Sima M. Ćirković, *The Serbs* (Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 274.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 275.

Headquarters ever set foot on Croatian territory. Throughout the greatest crisis the NOVJ faced in January 1943, during the German operation *Weiss*, Tito tried to get help from Croatian Partisan units, but to no avail.³⁶

An almost identical process was taking place in Slovenia, making Partisan Croatia and Slovenia the only organized states with their own army, parliament and government. It was not until 1 March 1945, when the Partisans launched an offensive towards the west of Yugoslavia, that a single Yugoslav army was created.

In Slovenia, Yugoslavism was just a framework for fighting a liberation war and achieving national goals (finally establishing Slovenian statehood and national territory). Still, it was in Croatia that Yugoslavism was the weakest, despite the fact that the Croatian position during the Second World War was extremely unfavourable due to its allegiance to the Nazi alliance.

In fact, in a meeting with Anthony Eden, British Foreign Secretary, on 15 March 1943, US President Roosevelt contended that the Croats and Serbs had virtually nothing in common, and that the concept of re-uniting them in one state was “ridiculous”. Roosevelt believed that Serbia deserved to emerge as an independent state while Croatia could exist under a “trusteeship of some sort”. Roosevelt did not oppose the continuation of Yugoslavia, but he wished for the South Slavs to determine their fate without it being dictated to them by Western powers. President Roosevelt held that Serbian desires were paramount, considering their commitment to the Allied cause.³⁷

Instrumental in the process of “saving” Croatia was Tito. He managed to move Croatia from the side of the defeated to the side of the Allies, the winning side in the Second World War. And he had created the federal state of Croatia, which provided the legal basis for Croatia’s independence in 1991. It was Tito who drew present-day Croatia’s borders which, considering “the historical circumstances and conditions under which they were drawn, could certainly not have encompassed a larger territory”, as put by the modern Croatian intellectuals who give a preference to Andrija Hebrang for ideological reasons.³⁸

This did not stop the Communists from spreading propaganda in Serbia at the end of the war that Stjepan Radić³⁹ “gave his life for Yugoslavia”; that the

³⁶ Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, vol. XVI (Belgrade: Komunist, 1984), 53.

³⁷ Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia under Ante Pavelić. America, the Ustaše and Croatian Genocide* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 111.

³⁸ Pavle Kalinić, “Andrija Hebrang i hrvatsko pitanje”, *Politička misao* 2–3 (1996), 291.

³⁹ Stjepan Radić was a Croatian politician, the founder of the Croatian People’s Peasant Party in 1905, throughout his career opposed to union with Serbia. He became an important political figure in Yugoslavia. He was shot in parliament on 20 June 1928 by the Serbian Radical MP Puniša Račić, and died several weeks later. This assassination deepened the alienation between Croats and Serbs.

Croatian uprising against the invaders began before the Serbian one; that the genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) had never happened; and, if it ever did, it was a “well-deserved punishment for Serbs” because the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had been a “dungeon” in which nations had “suffered oppression at the hands of Greater-Serbian hegemonists, and the former power holders fomented hatred among Yugoslavia’s nations”.⁴⁰

The national policy of the KPJ was formally laid down by the first Constitution of the new Yugoslavia drawn up under the direct influence of the 1936 Soviet Constitution. This Constitution expressed the “achievements” of the communist revolution in the country in constitutional law terms. In September 1945, a constitutional committee was set up within the Constituent Assembly Ministry. A number of experts sat on the committee, but all the decisions were made by Edvard Kardelj who was charged by the KPJ’s Politburo with building the country’s social and political system.⁴¹ Kardelj kept this status until the adoption of the last Yugoslav constitution in 1974.

For Kardelj, the significance of convening the Constituent Assembly lay in the fact that it would decide whether to restore the bourgeois system in Yugoslavia or preserve the “revolutionary achievements”. The new constitution was to be founded on republicanism, rejecting monarchy and defining Yugoslavia as a “people’s democratic republic”. Kardelj sought an original form of government for the future state, and he used to say in discussions that he saw Yugoslavia as a “plebeian state of the Jacobin type”. He expressly requested that the draft of the constitution emphasize that the power was in the hands of “the basic masses of people”, demanding a fusion of the executive and legislative branches of power in order to eliminate the influence of the “reactionary bloc acting through parliament”. He believed that the existence of the state sector in the country’s economy was a necessary element in maintaining the “revolutionary achievements”, as was the separation of church and state, although the freedom of conscience should not be equated with “a rigid policy of eliminating the church from people’s lives”.⁴²

The Constitution was adopted on 31 January 1946. Its distinctive feature was the importance attached to the strengthening of the executive power. The country’s official name was the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. The break with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was made complete with the declaration of the federal system and six new republics. The “one three-tribe nation” idea was abandoned; the Communists believed that the “Yugoslav nation” was in fact a Serbian one, and Macedonians and Montenegrins were granted the status of

⁴⁰ Ivan Becić, “List *Borba* u borbi za ovladavanje javnim mnjenjem u Srbiji 1944–1945”, *Istorija 20. veka 2* (2012), 95.

⁴¹ Ljubodrag Dimić, *Istorija srpske državnosti*, vol. III: *Srbija u Jugoslaviji* (Novi Sad: Platonum, 2002), 329–330.

⁴² Quoted in Petranović and Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam*, vol. II, 216–217.

nations. Competences were divided between the federal state, the member-republics, territorial self-governments and local self-governments. The fusion-of-powers model was applied at all levels of government, while the vertical system was based on the principle of so-called democratic centralism, leading to the implementation of the etatist social structure and a centralized system of government, despite it nominally being a federal one. Ideological, political and other forms of pluralism were forbidden.

Simultaneously with the federal constitution, constitutions of the republics were adopted (in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia on 31 December 1946; in Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia on 16, 17 and 18 January 1947 respectively). Each contained one identical provision – the people's right to self-determination, "including the right to secession". This in fact meant that the republics were in the position of independence which stemmed from their original rights and not from the powers delegated to them by the federal government.

The Serbian constitution guaranteed "the right of autonomy" to the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija. These rights were supposed to be confirmed by the statutes of these autonomous units. Ethnic minorities were guaranteed protection of cultural identity, freedom of language use and all other minority rights.⁴³ The Croatian constitution highlighted that the People's Republic of Croatia was constituted by Croats and Serbs and that the two were equal, but the Serbs' right to self-determination was never mentioned – this was only granted to Croats. In addition, the use of the word "Serbs" and not "the Serbian nation" suggested that Serbs belonged to the Croatian nation in the political sense.

The highest price for the realization of the idea of Partisan Yugoslavism was paid by Serbs. According to the most conservative estimates, they accounted for between 53 and 58 percent of all casualties in the Second World War in the territory of Yugoslavia. Serbs accounted for one half of those killed in Croatian territory, and 71 percent of those killed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Out of the total number of Serb casualties in the Second World War, more than 70 percent of those killed were civilians. Yet, in the restored Yugoslavia, the Serbs found themselves living in four different federal units, while Serbia itself, unlike the other republics, was in an inferior position. Vojvodina was granted autonomy on account of Hungarians and other minorities, Kosovo was granted the same because of Albanians, but the Serbs in Croatia were never granted autonomy despite having been the backbone of the Partisan army.

Communists believed that "eternal brotherhood and unity" would neutralize the devastating consequences of the brutal and multifaceted civil war (ideological, religious and ethnic), forgetting that hatred cannot be healed unless the sentiment of distrust disappears and that it takes generations for painful

⁴³ Ibid. 248–249.

memories to fade away. Every civil war in history has proved it clearly, but the Communists never admitted that there had been a civil war in Yugoslavia.⁴⁴

The communist victory had five long-term effects on Serbian post-war history: 1) the loss of the monarchy and the monarchic system of government – the national dynasty was abolished and was replaced by the government of an individual of Croat nationality; 2) the influence that the Serbian Orthodox Church had on government and society became practically non-existent – the Serbs became an atheist and godless people; 3) Serbian territory was reduced to the area preceding the Balkan Wars; 4) the structure of the Yugoslav army was radically changed – the army led by royalists had maintained the traditions established in the Serbian army before the First World War, and the defeat of this army marked the end of an era; 5) the Serbs lost the right of participating on equal terms in the politics of the new state.⁴⁵

The ensuing events came as a logical outcome of a misguided policy. Serbia was a clear loser in the new communist re-composition of Yugoslavia although only the Serbian Communists had called upon their fellow Serbs for the restoration of that country. The establishment of Serbia as a unit in the future federation had been the result of the utter inability and unwillingness of Serbian Communists to protect Serbian national interests. Contrary to Partisan mythology, Partisan Yugoslavism was a thin veil designed to cover the rampant nationalisms of Yugoslav Communists, with the noted exception of those of Serb origin, and to provide a framework for the dictatorial rule of Tito and the KPJ. As such, it had planted the seeds of the destruction of Yugoslavia in a civil war a mere decade after Tito's death.

Communist atheism and the creation of a new identity

The victory in the war enabled the communists to start building a socialist society in Yugoslavia. Their concept of a socialist society is based on unshakable ideological values and a precise political strategy. Socialism was a process in which the past and present were deconstructed in order to make room for the construction of the future. Constructed by the "enlightened vanguard", this

⁴⁴ Communists maintained that the internal strength of Yugoslavia rested on the Yugoslav nations' brotherhood and unity and on their equality "forged in the struggle against the German aggressor and against hegemonists of all shades and colours siding with the enemy during the armed struggle". They believed it to be the right solution to the national question since it followed the model of the Soviet Union, showing the entire world, "for the first time since the October Revolution, that even in our times, brotherhood and equality of nations in one country is possible" – according to *Priručnik za političke radnike NOV i POJ* (Belgrade: Propagandno odeljenje Vrhovnog štaba NOVJ, 1945), 5.

⁴⁵ Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks. War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 471.

bright future was to be built in opposition to the present and the past. Thus the forces of the past and present, “retrograde elements” and “conservative forces” are the main enemy of socialism. The stronger they are, the more brutal the violence against them must be. Violence is justified if it serves “social progress”. But even in a later phase of the revolution (once its first, brutal phase is over) the vanguard needs to be aware of the existence of the forces of old, because “the enemy never sleeps”. The revolutionary army and the secret police are instruments of this instrumentalist understanding of violence. They essentially are revolutionary institutions, whose purpose is not only to defend the country and prevent violence (as in liberal democracies) but to raise class consciousness and safeguard the revolution. The army and the secret police in socialism do not defend the state as such, since the state is a conservative institution of the past and present. They defend the revolution, the vision of the future and its supreme visionaries. In a socialist society, these institutions are ideological by definition.⁴⁶

Religiousness has been a feature of the human species ever since its emergence and, thus, religious thinking is one of basic identities in the human world. One of the oldest questions among scientists is whether religiousness is phylogenetically programmed and biologically determined or it is a form of adaptive behaviour resulting from the conditions the humans have been living in throughout their history. Religiousness has always been in contradiction with the materialistic view of the world; namely, the idea of two realms – physical and metaphysical has for a long time been present in human culture.

In this sense, communist atheism should be viewed as a secular religion. Although it sounds unacceptable to many researchers, the contention that communist atheism possesses an extensive religious potential is nevertheless full well found. It concerns the transformation of the prophecies that aspired to be scientific into objects of faith and worship. In the foundation of leftist atheism lies the idea of the historical inevitability of movement towards communism by force. Marx wrote about this as early as 1845 (*The Holy Family*). The proletariat will liberate not only itself from the difficult position but also the entire world from its “inhumanity”, he taught.

Marxism was not merely a teaching of historical or economic materialism; it was also a teaching about salvation, a “Messianic mission” of the proletariat, about a perfect society due in the future, a teaching about man’s power and the defeat of the irrational forces of nature and society. The attributes of the chosen “People of God” have been transferred to the proletariat. A logically contradictory blend of materialist, scientific-deterministic and non-moralist elements with idealistic, moralistic and religious mythmaking elements has existed

⁴⁶ Dejan Jović, “Communist Yugoslavia and Its ‘Others’”, in *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, eds. John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press), 279.

in the Marxist system. Marx created the proletariat myth and his mission was an object of faith. Marxism was not merely a science and politics but also a religion. Its power was based on this.

The nature of Marxism as a religion is best confirmed by its crucial goal – joining of the “ideal man” and God, so one might claim that communism was an atheistic version of a particular type of religious eschatology, and Marxist dialectics an atheistic form of religious laws of history.⁴⁷

Communist atheism was a type of “apophatic theology”, the next step of development that should lead to the obliteration of the theological component. This was best reflected in the rise of earthly gods in the absence of God in heaven. Violence and totalitarianism were the most significant features of this process. The energy of negation of the previous religious concept was transferred into the affirmation of a new, terrestrial hierarchy. That is how the god-type leaders appeared quite rapidly as the state forms of serving and worshipping God, which represented more than good conditions for the formation of personality cults.

The claim that religious contents exist in socialism has long been present in social theory. Most researchers have viewed communism as a substitute for religion, or as a pseudo-religion; communism does resemble religion, but its reach remains just there. Michail Ryklin argues that communism was in fact really a religion, perhaps the most important religion of the twentieth century. But how can it really be a religion without a god? It is precisely this feature that attracted so many intellectuals to communism. Having been brought up in monotheistic traditions, many of them were drawn to Russia after the 1917 October Revolution because they were fascinated by the idea of a country making something without God. They saw the revolution as an event which would solve the puzzle of history. At the heart of communism lies a paradox, which is that the renunciation of God is the founding article of faith. In their zealous belief that they had moved beyond the realm of God and faith into the realm of the scientific laws of history, the revolutionaries and their supporters prove themselves to be precisely true believers.⁴⁸

Like all religions, communism is irrational, dogmatic and based on faith, rather than on science. Like Christianity or Islam, communism had its own scriptures, the works of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. Like most other religions, it required irrational faith; the people living in communist countries had to have absolute faith in the order and its leaders; those who did not were treated as classic heretics.

⁴⁷ See Murray N. Rothbard, “Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist”, *Review of Austrian Economics* 4 (1990), 123–179.

⁴⁸ See Michail Ryklin, *Kommunismus als Religion. Die Intellektuellen und die Oktoberrevolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2008).

The system of government established in Serbia after 1944 had ambitious plans for coping with basic existential problems, presuming even to play the role of a new religion which would find a “just” solution to people’s greatest problem – poverty. The new regime proposed to “free” people of the restrictions imposed by nature and duty, and to relieve them of all suffering. The Yugoslav communists aspired not only to solve the country’s social problems but also to create a comprehensive religious teaching which would provide answers even to the questions such as the meaning of life and the purpose of history. They preached their communist morality, created their own communist science and art, and subjected every sphere of life to the economic imperative. They insisted that theirs was a unique view of life, the view that the socialist world would be a world reborn and that the new society would represent a process transcending history (or marking the beginning of a new history).

The new apostles had no mercy for the individual – the individual was not an end but merely a means for creating a proletarian “heaven.” The individual could be oppressed in every way and stripped of all rights in the name of the ultimate objectives of socialism. Nikolai Berdyaev had warned long ago: “Uniformity and some sort of abstract mediocre values shall reign.” The new socialist religion simplified all social relations to the extreme – what had existed before the revolution had been evil (capitalism). The culture of past ages was presented as resting on the economic exploitation of the working man, and history before the revolution as consisting entirely in class struggle. After the revolution the world was supposedly transformed, exploitation was wiped out and replaced by truth and eternal justice. The birth of socialism was not referred to as a simple historical fact – it was presented as something exceptional and unique, a sort of mystical transformation in the very foundations of history.

The socialist religion resolutely denied the past and a constructive mode of thinking was not highly valued; on the contrary, the dignity of the model revolutionary depended on the importance of opponents he could persecute, his strength was measured by the force of his hatred for “the evil” and not by the power of his love for what was good, except in the materialistic sense. Morality was founded on negative merits – the elimination of “the evil” that had reigned in the past. Persons were not accepted for their individual qualities independently of social circumstances. The proletarian was idealized; he was depicted as being the driving force of the future, the ultimate criterion for determining the truth. Equality among men was interpreted as meaning the uniformity of the masses. Physical labour acquired a cult-like significance: all of life values were subjected to economic production. Social status could only be acquired through direct participation in production, while the value of intellectual work and the quality of work in general became less important.

Like in the Soviet Union, the totalitarian political power in Yugoslavia was imposed through the sacralisation of the Communist Party and its lead-

er. The most important elements in this process were the level of party Manichaeism, the view of the party as the centre of “holiness” surrounded by a sinister “mass of enemies”. A new faith was developed over time, which replaced the original tendency to have things improved. Communists were unforgiving in treating their political opponents as mortal enemies. Any deviation was seen by the representatives of “new religion” as “intolerable weakness”.

Communist rulers followed the old pattern of behaviour where all new states and nations, especially those emerging from a revolution, maintain a compelling organic relationship with the nation and religion. The survival of a new state depended to a great extent also on formulating and imposing new forms of obedience or, in other words, on shaping a new religion. The establishment of new rituals, whose commemorative character was similar to Christian holiday celebrations, imposed itself as the best solution.

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