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Challenging the Cominform: Tito - Stalin Split 70 Years Later

There is nothing as important and as defiant in the history of Tito's (or republican) Yugoslavia than the split between Tito and Stalin in the summer of 1948. Tito was one of the first to defy Stalin – and he got away with it. Yugoslavia was regarded as the most reliable Soviet ally until 1948, so the shock was quite substantial. Tito was not against the Soviets, but he was not a Muscovite. The victory of his partisan movement in the Second World War and the civil war in Yugoslavia made him important. He had proved himself as a good organizer and was very careful when selecting his closest associates.

The possibility of having an independent communist state outside the Soviet orbit was unthinkable at the time. After 1945, Soviet Russia was not only a recognized super-power, a victorious country, a country with a huge military might, it also followed a specific realpolitik. Unlike the still revolutionary Tito, Stalin was aware that the revolution, as well as the ideology of Leninism, should be used to propel the interests of the Soviet Union, as well as the block they were leading, but not in the way which would jeopardize its core – Russia proper.¹ In his Secret Speech in 1956, Khrushchev claimed that Stalin had declared, “I will shake my little finger, and there will be no more Tito.”² A possibility to have an independent communist regime, free from Moscow's tutelage, appeared impossible to most people in the West. Tito seemed to be Stalin's favorite communist son³, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was the best organized and ideologically purest after the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). Belgrade, after all, was the headquarters of the Cominform, Communist Information Bureau (Informburo). However, there were a few diplomats and politicians who understood the opportunity the breach between the two leaders would bring. The West seized this opportunity to drive a wedge between Yugoslavia and the East, changing the nature of the Cold War.

1 Zubok/Pleshakov, *Kremlin's Cold War*, pp. 13-15; 54-55.

2 *Tajni referat N.S. Hruščova*, p. 70; Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p. 33.

3 Roberts, *Molotov*, p. 117.

In June 1948, the Cominform denounced Tito for various “heresies” and this “ex-communication” was followed by extensive propaganda campaigns from Moscow and the capitals of its Soviet satellites. Then a commercial boycott followed, becoming total in the summer of 1949. The main causes of the Split were Yugoslav actions in the Balkans: Yugoslavia’s involvement in the Greek Civil War, its federation project with Bulgaria and its influence in Albania, as well some others, like the existence of the Yugoslav Army and civil bureaucracy of Yugoslavia, which had been created not by the emissaries from Moscow but by the Yugoslav Communists themselves during the national and civil war and were therefore considered unreliable by Moscow. This was also why the regime survived: the army officers and the civil bureaucrats were loyal to Tito, not to Moscow.⁴

Before the summer of 1948, Tito was generally despised by the West. He was giving the West a hard time, pushing and antagonizing them far more vehemently than Stalin.⁵ “I was mad at you for some time,” Winston Churchill said to Tito in London in 1953, during his first official visit to a Western country. The visit took place while the Kremlin was preparing to bury Stalin.⁶ Tito had survived a Stalinist purge for the second time, showing that there were limits to the Soviet control of East Europe. Therefore, Tito, who may have been a “son-of-a-bitch”, became “our son-of-a-bitch”, to use the words of Dean Acheson, who was appointed American Secretary of State in 1949. After the Information Bureau of the Communist Parties had condemned Yugoslavia and Titoism as “heresy” at its second meeting in Bucharest, the Yugoslav path changed dramatically. The lives of millions of people suddenly changed. For many, the change was not very positive, but for the majority it was probably a step in the right direction. Six months after the Cominform Resolution, Soviet methods became evident, but they were not strong enough to weaken or disarm the core of the Party. It became clear that Belgrade was strong and solid.

“...the political world was staggered by a break in the ‘unbreakable’ Communist monolith,” Bernard Newman wrote in 1952.⁷ How was it possible that no one of any importance predicted such a radical shift? Why were informed observers, diplomats and analysts, who had warned their governments of the possible break, not heard? What does this tell us about diplomacy, hierarchy or experts in general?

The Yugoslav break away from Soviet domination (although this domination was to a large extent voluntary or even invited) was a clear sign that in 1948 Yugoslavia was not a mere pawn of the Soviet Union. The effects of the break had enormous implications on all Yugoslavs, those living in Montenegro or Belgrade, those who returned to Yugoslavia from Australia, but also all Yugoslavs living abroad. Most importantly, all East

4 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Volume 23, p. 920.

5 Jakovina, *Američki komunistički saveznik*, pp. 56-74, 164-174.

6 Mandić, *Tito u dijalogu*, p. 657.

7 Newman, *Tito's Yugoslavia*, p.13.

Europeans, all members and supporters of the communist ideology and the whole world scene were colored by the most important event since the victory over Japan, as American diplomats reported.⁸ “Would it be possible to emulate Tito’s example?” was another question. It was tempting to search for a Tito in China, Korea, possibly Vietnam, but those hopes were never exceptionally strong. These three Asian countries were fighting alone, and their struggle against foreign invasions overlapped with the world conflict, but an “Asian Tito” was not destined to appear in the near future. The communist monolith seemed rather solid over there.⁹ However, already in the early 1950s Burma, which was very close to Yugoslavia politically, was compared to it, and even nicknamed Asian Yugoslavia. Milovan Djilas, one of the top Yugoslav politicians, wrote that it was because of the originality of the two countries.¹⁰ Asians were poor but the people in South East Europe were just marginally better off. What was essential was something never before seen, those original sentences and ideas produced by a small regime of one of the poorest, most marginal countries of Europe.

The summer of 1948 is probably one of the most understudied periods of the crisis caused by Stalin’s decision which shocked the Yugoslavs. What was going on in the Yugoslav establishment? What was Tito’s first reaction that night in Zagreb when the Resolution was announced? What was going through the minds of the top Yugoslav politicians when the first problems between Belgrade and Moscow became real, visible? After it was all revealed, everything was turned into the basis for a new, different system Yugoslavia was trying to build. How the change was received by the diaspora is one thing, but the reaction of the leaders, politicians and elites of the previous regime deserves a study. To what extent were those who were not on the Tito’s side in favor or even supportive of his split with the Soviets might be an interesting topic for research.

For the Yugoslavs, an independent position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union created a feeling of exceptionalism. Never too modest, often even megalomaniac, the propaganda whose objective was to boost the spirits of the party members, but also of all those who were afraid of the strong, victorious Red Army, created overly proud and all too stubborn citizens. One of the ways of defending the regime was through strengthening the Yugoslav exceptionalism vis-à-vis the Soviet model and the Soviet dominated countries. Strong national sentiments or nationalism, if you wish, helped Yugoslavia in 1948, Tito explained on several occasions. The only important thing was not to cross the line into “chauvinism”, since there is a huge difference between “national sentiments and chauvinism”, Tito stated.¹¹

8 Jakovina, *Američki komunistički saveznik*, p. 243.

9 Gaddis, *The Cold War*, pp. 37-38.

10 Djilas, *Istočno nebo*, p. 537.

11 Tito, *Govori i članci*, Iz razgovora sa urednikom engleskog časopisa “Kvin”, Belgrade, September 18, 1962. *Naprijed*, Zagreb.

Therefore, the accusation of nationalism in Yugoslavia, which was always on the table in Moscow, actually fed Yugoslav nationalisms. The Macedonians fought fiercely for their identity in the southernmost Yugoslav republic.¹²

Unlike the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which lasted from 23 October to 10 November, or the Prague Spring from 5 January to 21 August 1968, the Yugoslav experiment lasted from the summer of 1948 to the end of Yugoslavia or the end of the Cold War. Special institutes have been created to study the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring and their international relevance, but the year 1948 in Yugoslavia was relatively ignored for various reasons. Partially, this has been because Yugoslavia ceased to exist, never having a chance to reflect, analyze and reinterpret that part of its history in a meaningful way. Yugoslav historiography de facto never existed. Rather, it was a combination or aggregation of historiographies of the individual republics. During the socialist period, historians did not even deal with events from the Titoist period, leaving the whole period to specialized institutes which researched the “history of the workers movement” or to political scientists. “Pure” historiography, with a few notable exceptions, was concentrated in the West until the end of the Cold War.

Ever since 1948, or 1955 and 1956, when the relations between Moscow and Belgrade improved, the split and the different approaches towards socialism the two countries had, had remained important, it had always been present. For example, during Tito’s last visit to Brezhnev, the two leaders stated that “another is the question of looking back into the past.” “History,” Brezhnev stated, “should not be forgotten, but also not constantly reheated.” “Yugoslav constant reminders of the past were never intended to criticize the Soviet Union; on the contrary, we were full of praise for everything the CPSU did after the twentieth congress.” Still, as Stane Dolanc stated in 1979, official party documents that were published in Moscow still condemned the Yugoslav League of Communists.¹³ Brezhnev then lost it and became rude after such an open criticism. Not since 1956 had the conversation about the troubled history between the two countries been so open. However, after 1948, especially after the Soviet Canossa, as the Yugoslav and western historians often called Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to Belgrade in 1955, no Yugoslav-Soviet meeting, agreement or statement concluded without the invocation of the two agreements: the Belgrade and the Moscow Declarations. The former normalized the state and the latter party relations. Who were those in Yugoslavia who were in favor of better relations with Moscow, and who leaned more towards the Titoist

12 Koliševski, *Makedonsko pitanje*, pp. 264, 273.

13 BL (BL stands for the private archival collection of former minister Budimir Lončar, Zagreb), Kabinet Predsednika Republike, Služba za spoljnopolitička pitanja. Str.pov.br.22/7, Beograd, 23.maj 1979, Državna tajna; Stenografske beleške sa razgovora predsednika Republike i predsednika SKJ Josipa Broza Tita i generalnog sekretara CK KPSS i predsednika Prezidijuma Vrhovnog Sovjeta SSSR Leonida Iljiča Brežnjeva, održanih 17. i 18. maja 1979. godine u Kremlju – Moskva; Mandić, *Tito*, pp. 632–633.

position is definitely something historiography should touch on in the next phase of research of the Tito-Stalin split.

Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia in 1988 was rather overdue and once delayed. Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister, proposed the signing of a new declaration on relations between USSR and Yugoslavia in 1987. "We have accepted it, but we have also made it clear that the new document does not mean that the Moscow and Belgrade declarations were overdue; they have permanent importance, their historical importance should be underlined in the new document, document which has permanent value..." "Everybody should be aware of the historical importance that the documents from 1955 and 1956 had for international relations and relations between socialist countries," said the secretary for foreign relations to the delegates of the Yugoslav Parliament.¹⁴ Therefore, it was only at the time of Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia that the Soviet Union finally distanced itself from the legacy of 1948. They finally erased the segment on Yugoslavia from their Party manifesto of the CPSU. Finally, Perestroika helped the Soviets reach "our views from the 1960s." This was stated during the meeting with the then new (and last) federal secretary for foreign relations, Budimir Lončar. For four decades the Soviets had a problem of digesting the Yugoslavs. "In 1948 we reached a certain point which became a factor that Yugoslavia has not been able to abandon ever since."¹⁵ After the summer of 1948, it had been essential for the success of Yugoslavia that it remained anti-Cominformist.

The end of the Cold War and the end of Yugoslavia did not bring much, or even enough, research on this or many related phenomena in the history of Yugoslavia. In Slovenia and Serbia, there were several scholarly conferences on various aspects of the Tito-Stalin split.¹⁶ Since its independence, only one has taken place in Croatia, that organized by the veterans of the Second World War and the Josip Broz Tito Society. Croatian political circles criticized everything connected with former Yugoslavia. Most studies on the Tito-Stalin split addressed the international consequences of the event. However, since the 1980s, internal changes within the CPY and the relationship towards the real and alleged associates of Stalin have increasingly been dealt with, first in art, film and literature, and then in historiography as well. The Goli Otok camp and its 13,000 inmates are becoming central research topics. Croatian political circles have

14 BL, Izlaganje Raifa Dizdarevića, Saveznog sekretara, na zajedničkoj sednici odbora Saveznog veća Skupštine SFRJ za spoljnu politiku i odbora Veća republika i pokrajina za ekonomske odnose sa inostranstvom, koja je održana 9. jula 1987. godine; Dizdarević, *Sudbosni podvig Jugoslavije*, pp. 213-216, 218-224.

15 BL, SSIP, Kabinet saveznog sekretara, Str.pov.br.47243, Stenografske beleške sa sastanka Kolegijuma saveznog sekretara, održanog 15. februara 1988. godine; BL, SSIP, F7, Zvanična poseta Generalnog sekretara CK KPSS Mihaila Gorbačova Jugoslaviji, 14-18. mart 1988; Str.pov.br.413284, 7.4.1988, Izveštaj o poseti generalnog sekretara CK KPSS Mihaila Gorbačova Jugoslaviji, od 14. do 18.3.1988. godine.

16 For example: *Jugoslavija v Hladni vojni/ Yugoslavia in the Cold War*, Ljubljana 2004 (Institut za novejšo zgodovino, Ljubljana and University of Toronto) or *Jugoslavija u Hladnom ratu*, Beograd 2010 (Institut za noviju istoriju).

criticized everything connected with the former Yugoslavia. They have been reluctant to speak about the positive consequences of the split because Tito would probably end up being better than Stalin, or, alternately, it would be hard to praise Stalin and not Tito. How can you condemn Tito for the Goli Otok camp – which was definitely one of the most gruesome camps of the Titoist era – when the majority of those imprisoned there were not Croats, so Croatian authorities have never been interested in preserving the place, making it a place of remembrance. Montenegrins, who made up only 2.73% of the Yugoslav population, made up almost 21.13% of all imprisoned Cominformists.¹⁷ Slovenes and Croats were the least represented.

The goal of the Zagreb conference “The Tito–Stalin Split: 70 Years Later”, Zagreb–Goli Otok, 28–30 June 2018, as well as of the papers presented, was to show not only the new interpretations and takes on the subject, but to present the Yugoslav 1948 as a global event, one that touched lives of so many people around the world. It had a very significant impact not only on politics¹⁸, international relations¹⁹, prisoners²⁰, army cooperation and army relations²¹, ideology²², but also cultural life and production, especially in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union²³.

Most of the papers presented at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, which co-organized the whole event with colleagues from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, are published in this volume. A few papers were presented but the authors did not contribute the text (those were: Mark Kramer, Peter Ruggenthaler, Ondřej Vojtěchovský, Klaus Buchenau, Andreii Edemskii, Boris Stamenić, and Marie-Janine Calic). Also, one paper on China was not presented, but the text is here. We hope this volume will be an important contribution to the continuous dialogue that should be not only regional, but global. It should also be ongoing, since there is hardly an event in the history of the Cold War whose consequences were as important and as global as this one’s.

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17 Radonjić, *Socijalizam u Crnoj Gori*, pp. 332–336.

18 Goldstein, *Tito*, pp. 463–465; Jakovina, *Komunistički saveznik*.

19 Ristović, *Građanski rat u Grčkoj*.

20 Previšić, *Povijest Golog otoka*.

21 Životić, *Vojne suprotnosti*.

22 Unkovski-Korica, *Power in Tito’s Yugoslavia*.

23 Vindakijević Peruško, *Od Oktobra*.

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