

Aleš Gabrič

Cominform Supporters in Slovenia

The Yugoslav authorities characterised the people who supposedly agreed with the Cominform Resolution or simply criticised the policy of the Yugoslav leadership during the dispute with the Soviet Union as Cominform supporters (so-called “ibeovci” or “informbirojevci” in Slovenian). They were retaliated against in two ways. The State Security Administration (UDB,UDV) could impose administrative penalties: it had the authority to arrest individuals by means of a legal act and assign them to community service for the period of up to two years. The second group consisted of people sentenced at court proceedings before regular civil and military courts.¹

This paper is mostly based on the archive material of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia, which is why the numbers of those sentenced are not complete. The number of those who were expelled from the ranks of the Communist Party does not exactly correspond to the number of those imprisoned. Furthermore, the statistics only seldom take into account those arrested by the Yugoslav Army Countereintelligence Service (KOS) and sentenced at military courts. With regard to Slovenians, Ivo Banac wrote as long as four decades ago that “they were not particularly susceptible to Cominform ideas.”² In Slovenia, open support for the Cominform Resolution was expressed exceedingly rarely, unlike in certain other parts of Yugoslavia.³

The first penalties – expulsions from political organisations – were announced immediately after certain individual members of the Communist Party of Slovenia expressed their opinion about the Cominform Resolution, but their number was very limited. For example, on the list of those excluded from the Party organisations in Ljubljana were 17 names – of these fifteen intellectuals, a single student, and only one worker.⁴ The

1 More on reactions of Yugoslavia to the conflict see: Banac, *Sa Staljinom*; Pirjevec, *Tito, Stalin in Zahod*; Radonjić, *Izgubljena orientacija*; Radonjić, *Sukob KPJ s Kominformom*; Previšić, *Povijest informbiroovskog logora*.

2 Banac, *Sa Staljinom*, p. 150.

3 More on “informbirojevci” in Slovenia see: Jezernik, *Non cogito ergo sum*; Gabrič, *Informbirojevstvo na Slovenskem*.

4 SI ZAL, LJU 684, box 4, 61, Rekapitulacija izključitev v letu 1948.

main reason for the relatively modest number of those punished because of the Cominform dispute in 1948 lay in the attempts of the Yugoslav authorities to assuage the rift between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. After they had strengthened their repressive apparatus, the Yugoslav authorities started to persecute those who agreed with the Cominform Resolution and celebrated the successes of the Soviet Union, but not before it had become clear that the split between the two states was final.

In Slovenia, mass arrests of Cominform supporters began after the session of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia on 13 January 1949. The members of the Political Bureau believed that the purges among the members of the political organisations should not be supervised by any Central Committee commission, but should instead be carried out by the Party cells in the field. According to Ivan Maček, exceptions could only be allowed “where the danger of outvoting is notable”.⁵ Already the aforementioned Political Bureau session indicates that Cominform supporters were mostly cultural workers, which is why the authorities saw these people as the most dangerous.

Regarding the first stage of this most extensive action against Cominform supporters, on 16th April 1949 Boris Kraigher, the Slovenian Minister of the Interior, reported that almost three quarters (72%) of all Cominform supporters registered to that date came from the ranks of the intelligentsia, state employees, liberal professions, and expropriated strata. He focused on the situation at the University of Ljubljana somewhat more closely. He evaluated the demands for an appropriate legal procedure against the accused as a weakness because “discussions that anti-state activities should (...) be proven are still being tolerated. (...) However, this is not essential for the struggle to ensure the strength of the Party organisation. What is indeed essential is that this organisation keeps fighting against the emergence of opportunism and lack of trust in the people’s forces, and this is the struggle that the Party should cleanse itself in, regardless of whether it simultaneously involves open anti-state activities organised by the enemies of socialism or not.”⁶

Due to the predominance of cultural workers among the Cominform supporters, the Slovenian Writers’ Association in particular was under scrutiny and teachers were a relatively numerous group as well. Another prominent group that could qualify among the intelligentsia stemmed from the ranks of students and pupils. Most of them studied at the technical and medical faculties as well as at the so-called Classical Gymnasium (grammar school) in Ljubljana. Because of their support for the Cominform Resolution, a considerable number of students and pupils were expelled from the Party and the People’s Youth of Slovenia organisation, while some of them were also expelled from school. The reasons for the expulsions most often involved reactionary standpoints and

5 *Zapisniki politbiroja CK KPS/ZKS 1945/1954*, p. 128.

6 SI AS 1589, IK, box 1, Zapisnik II. Plenarnega zasedanja CK KPS, 15.–16. 4. 1949., B. Kraigher, p. 6.

agreement with the Cominform Resolution. Apart from these two groups, many Party members expelled also hailed from the ranks of the workers, while peasants punished for their support for the Cominform Resolution were few and far between.

The following table includes all of those expelled from the ranks of the Communist Party of Slovenia (CPS) because of the Cominform dispute until the end of 1949, broken down by the time of their expulsion:⁷

| Period | Expelled from CPS |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Third quarter 1948 | 54 |
| Fourth quarter 1948 | 24 |
| First quarter 1949 | 69 |
| Second quarter 1949 | 101 |
| Third quarter 1949 | 59 |
| Fourth quarter 1949 | 9 |
| | 316 |

The time of the most numerous expulsions from the ranks of the Communist Party of Slovenia in the first and second quarter of 1949 was simultaneously the period when the arrests were most numerous. Judging from the materials reviewed, this period can be specified even more precisely (from, approximately, the middle of February until the end of May 1949). In the subsequent years, the penal measures arising from the Cominform dispute were less common than in 1948 and 1949. In March 1950, Boris Kraigher evaluated the power of the opponents of the regime in Slovenia as follows: "Nowadays both reactions – the Western and the Cominform one – lack any organisation. In fact, the Cominform supporters have not been organised at all, in spite of a number of attempts at their coordination from the espionage centres in Budapest, the headquarters near Lake Balaton, Gorizia, and even more frequently from Trieste, home to the followers of Vittorio Vidali."⁸

Most of those who had been arrested were released from prison in 1953 and 1954. However, this did not mean that they could resume normal lives: only after they had been released did they learn about the difficulties that their families had experienced during their imprisonment. Soon it also became clear that their release from prison (labour camp) did not also imply that they could decide about their own future freely. It was hard for them to find employment, and because these were often intellectuals, whatever work they could find was often incompatible with their education. It was even difficult for them to find housing. Meanwhile, students who returned from prisons had a hard time resuming their studies at faculties. After their release they could only study at a university

⁷ Gabrič, *Informbirojevstvo na Slovenskem*, p. 167.

⁸ *Zapiski politbiroja CK KPS/ZKS 1945/1954*, p. 199.

under certain conditions. For example, the Ministry of Science and Culture of the Republic of Slovenia allowed a former prisoner to re-enrol in the University with the following explanation: “In this regard the Commission took into account the statements from the applicant’s complaint, especially his regret and his promise that in the future he would correct his attitude to our reality and youth organisation as well as strive to participate in the ranks of our socialist intelligentsia as an active and positive member.”⁹

In March 1954, the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia put together a list of Slovenian Cominform supporters. It included 2,275 people, who “either proclaimed their opinion publicly, secretly, or were on the fence.”¹⁰

| Year | Arrested | Omitted from investigation | Administrative penalties | Court sentences | Members of CPY | CPY non-members |
|------|----------|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1948 | 102 | 31 | 40 | 31 | 50 | 52 |
| 1949 | 265 | 61 | 180 | 24 | 248 | 17 |
| 1950 | 46 | 16 | 12 | 18 | 27 | 19 |
| 1951 | 123 | 63 | 19 | 41 | 76 | 47 |
| 1952 | 161 | 64 | 62 | 35 | 75 | 86 |
| 1953 | 34 | 5 | 21 | 8 | 28 | 6 |
| | 731 | 240 | 334 | 157 | 504 | 227 |

Of these, 731 people had been subject to judicial proceedings, i.e. approximately every third suspect. Most of these (240) had been omitted from the investigation and not sentenced at courts or sent to community service. The majority of those who had in fact been punished, however, had received “administrative penalties” – meaning that their penalties had been imposed by the executive authority. Not nearly as many people had been sentenced by the judicial branch of power.

9 SI AS 232, K 32/1–50.

10 SI AS 1589, IK, box 8, Priloge k seji IK CK ZKS, 13. 7. 1958, Statistični pregled IB.

The Social Structure of the Arrested

| Year | Workers | Peasants | State employees | Students | Intellectuals | Others |
|------|---------|----------|-----------------|----------|---------------|--------|
| 1948 | 29 | 10 | 19 | 1 | 23 | 11 |
| 1949 | 79 | 7 | 104 | 45 | 25 | 5 |
| 1950 | 16 | - | 24 | 1 | 5 | - |
| 1951 | 38 | 15 | 50 | 9 | 10 | 1 |
| 1952 | 56 | 7 | 37 | 19 | 7 | 35 |
| 1953 | 20 | - | 10 | 3 | - | 1 |
| | 238 | 48 | 244 | 78 | 70 | 53 |

If we take a look at the social structure of the 731 people who were in fact arrested, the intellectuals are clearly in the majority, as they are included in various groups – state employees, students, and intellectuals – and they represent more than a half of those imprisoned. About a third of the arrested were workers, but this number also includes workers from elsewhere who were arrested in Slovenia (for example, in 1952 a large group of Albanians who returned from Czechoslovakia). Other groups – peasants, artisans, the unemployed, etc. – are even more negligible.

In 1957 and 1958, the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia often discussed people who had been identified as political opponents a few years earlier, pondering how to reintegrate them into normal life. This included more than 2,200 Cominform supporters. They were divided into several categories: those who “simply criticise out of habit (no more than others) and are not dangerous”; those “who despair, claiming that it is senseless to go into politics”; and those Cominform supporters “who are still hostile towards us today”. Soon it was established that it did not make any sense at all to count approximately half of these people among political enemies because of their support for the Cominform. This information by itself indicates how quickly people could be accused of anti-state activities and included in the list of people dangerous to the state without any evidence whatsoever. This procedure resulted in the initial list being reduced to merely 50 people or so, who were still deemed hostile towards the state in 1958 due to their support for the Cominform.¹¹

Disputes within the Communist Party were nothing unusual, as the struggles between the fractions had already dragged on throughout the long years of the Party’s illegal activities. In 1948, the communists who had been important in the Party organisation before 1937, the year when Josip Broz Tito assumed leadership, became suspicious in the eyes of the Slovenian authorities. Some of the long-time members of the Party felt neglected after the war, as they were, presumably, not sufficiently rewarded for their efforts in the illegal Communist movement. The Slovenian government became particularly suspicious of two leading Communists of the older generation – Lovro Kuhar and

11 SI AS 1589, III, box 78, Informacija o informbirojevcih v Sloveniji, 3. 10. 1958.

Dragotin Gustinčič. During the 1930s, Kuhar – Tito’s sometime close associate – was among the leading Communists abroad. The disagreements between them apparently escalated, and when Kuhar returned to his homeland before the war, no important positions awaited him in the Party structure.¹² He spent most of the war in the prisons and camps of the occupiers. After the war, he instead focused on his literary work as a renowned writer under the pseudonym Prežihov Voranc. The unconfirmed information that Tito shook hands with all the deputies who attended the reception after the adoption of the Constitution, but avoided shaking hands with Kuhar, suggested that Kuhar did not enjoy the trust of his former associate. Dragotin Gustinčič returned home after decades of working abroad, mostly in Moscow. He expected to be appropriately rewarded for all the years of his work in the Party and the Comintern. The government, however, did not offer him any important political position. When Kuhar and Gustinčič met in Ljubljana after the war, they also discussed the sorts of tasks that they had been entrusted with. They both realised that the leading politicians avoided meeting with them, but were unable to identify the reasons for this. Therefore, according to Gustinčič, “we came to the conclusion that this was an agenda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia, aimed not only against the two of us, but also against all of the older communists in Slovenia.”¹³

Dragotin Gustinčič is an example of a person whose categorisation as a supporter of the Cominform Resolution was very questionable. He was a person whom the leading Slovenian communists identified as the leading Cominform supporter in Slovenia. He was among the founders of the CPY in 1920 and he spent a decade as a member of its leadership. He was in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and then he returned to the Soviet Union, where he remained until as late as 1945. After the war, such individuals were rewarded with important cultural or scientific positions by the authorities who, in turn, expected their political loyalty. They were not supposed to exert any influence whatsoever on the political arena. Dragotin Gustinčič was appointed as the first dean of the newly-established Faculty of Economics at the University of Ljubljana. He was thus supposed to implement the kind of education for the new type of economic development planners. But Gustinčič was disappointed with his own political impotence in the new state: as a former leading communist he was insulted by the fact that he had been pushed to the sidelines and convinced that he should be assigned to one of the more important positions in the state leadership.¹⁴

Since the leading politicians refused to respond to Gustinčič’s requests for meetings and discussions, he decided to head into the political arena regardless. As he was not foreseen for any political function at all, he considered the option of standing

12 Barič, *Politični vzpon in zaton*, pp. 88–102.

13 Dolenc, *Med kulturo in politiko*, p. 235.

14 Gabrič, *Od somišljenika do nasprotnika*, pp. 119–123.

independently for the Yugoslav Constituent Assembly elections on 11 November 1945. At the meeting with Vinko Möderndorfer and Lovro Kuhar, Gustinčič proposed that they should all stand as candidates in the elections, and he also considered a number of people who could be invited to participate. The idea was to propose to Tito, the leader of the People's Front list, to "include Gustinčič's candidates as co-candidates on his list". Möderndorfer had misgivings and claimed that such an action could result in an "external appearance of a split", which could damage the expected victory in the elections "in the foreign political as well as in the internal political sense." When Lovro Kuhar stated his own opinion and mentioned that he had already been appointed as a candidate on Tito's list, "Gustinčič lost his main argument for the endorsement of the old communists', as Kuhar was one of those as well."¹⁵ Kuhar and Möderndorfer warned their colleague that his solo action – the case "when Gustinčič wanted to draw up an opposition list" – could be deemed as a "destructive" act, as this would go against the leadership of the Communist Party and the candidate list of the People's Front for the Yugoslav Constituent Assembly elections.¹⁶

Gustinčič brought up a similar idea on the occasion of the Slovenian Constituent Assembly elections in the autumn of 1946. During the first post-war years, the internal administration allocated its resources for the monitoring of the regime's opponents to the so-called gangs and politicians of other political persuasions. For this reason, they did not pay much attention to the disgruntled individuals in their own ranks. They did not come across Gustinčič's idea of presenting parallel candidates in the elections, which had never resulted in a more serious action until the investigation of Gustinčič and his associates. The investigation, however, was indirectly encouraged by Gustinčič himself, who had not only criticised the new authorities in the closed circles of his closest associates, but also detailed his criticism in writing and sent it to the leading Slovenian communists. Initially, he called upon the leading Slovenian politicians to discuss these outstanding issues. The lack of any response, however, only deepened his conviction that the policies were not heading in the right direction.

In January 1946, he thus sent letters to some of the leading Slovenian communists, Boris Kidrič, Edvard Kardelj and Miha Marinko, in which he expressed the most severe criticism of communist authorities written by a communist ideologue. Gustinčič wrote the letters on the basis of narrow-minded doctrinal foundations that had even less to do with the actual circumstances than in the case of the leading communists. In May 1947, he addressed his most comprehensive letter, more than 20 pages long, to the leading Party ideologue Edvard Kardelj. Gustinčič severely criticised the authorities and the Communist Party.¹⁷

¹⁵ SI AS 1931, MF XII-003, 4665.

¹⁶ SI AS 1931, MF XII-003, 4688, 4590–4591.

¹⁷ Gabrič, *Od somišljenika do nasprotnika*, pp. 123–127.

In his letters, Gustinčič criticised the distancing of the Communist Party from the theoretical principles of Marxist and Leninist thinkers. He resented the leadership for pushing older communists away from the mechanisms of power, although they had proven themselves even before Tito had assumed the leadership of the Party. He reproached Kardelj as follows: “Judging from your behaviour, the history of the workers’ movement began around 1937 or perhaps even later.” It was clear from his writing that Gustinčič was offended because he had supposedly not been appropriately rewarded for all the years he had dedicated to the Party. He also criticised the fact that Partisans were given priority over communist experts during the appointment of the management personnel, since professional competence should have been the decisive criterion and claimed that this was the reason why the productivity of the nationalised factories had diminished. He did not agree with the principles of organising cooperatives, as he, quoting Lenin constantly, believed that the Yugoslav model deviated too much from the ideas of Soviet theorists. Wrong decisions regarding the development of industry allegedly deterred the proletariat, which should have represented the core of the communist movement. While listing these mistakes and many others, Gustinčič wondered how it was possible that, after all the analyses by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, such errors were possible in Slovenia at all. Furthermore, he disapproved of the national policy at the disputed border area in the Trieste region, as it supposedly over-emphasised the national principles instead of the class-related and revolutionary ones. In Gustinčič’s opinion, the CPY was still overly lenient towards its associates in the Liberation Front, while it failed to implement the Party politics in the entire political space consistently.¹⁸

The leadership of the CPY was not ready for this sort of criticism in 1947. The investigation took place at two levels. Gustinčič was summoned to Belgrade in August 1947 and questioned before a Party commission (instead of being immediately interrogated by the UDB, UDV). The State Security simultaneously started investigating Gustinčič’s associates.¹⁹ Thus the investigation had apparently started at least half a year before the dispute between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union took place. In April 1948, Dragotin Gustinčič and some of his collaborators were arrested because some of the criticism contained in Gustinčič’s letters resembled the reproaches on account of the CPY stated later in the letters from the Cominform.

Ultimately, we can only ask ourselves the following: how could someone be taken as a supporter of the Cominform Resolution when he had been interrogated by the Party Commission more than half a year before the Resolution in question was even published, and when they had already been in prison with a severely restricted access to the media for several months before the Resolution?

18 SI AS 1931, t.e. 445, OD Dragotin Gustinčič, pp. 301–333.

19 SI AS 1931, t.e. 445, OD Dragotin Gustinčič, pp. 369–370.

The report on the close associate of Gustinčič, the aforementioned Vinko Möderndorfer, amply attests to the absurdity of such accusations. Also, in April 1949, when the arrests of the Cominform supporters were at their height, the city committee of the Communist Party in Celje reported about his case: "The reason for the arrest is unknown to us. We suspect that it is related to the process against Bitenc and co-defendants."²⁰ But Möderndorfer had nothing whatsoever to do with Mirko Bitenc, who was sentenced to death in 1948 as an organiser of anti-Partisan armed units during the war and as a post-war spy.

In the aforementioned report of March 1950, the Slovenian Minister of the Interior Boris Kraigher highlighted that everything worth mentioning with regard to the organisation of the Cominform supporters had originated from foreign Cominform organisations. Even when he mentioned some of the smaller Cominform groups in Slovenia in passing, he was not upset about them and did not see them as a relevant political problem.²¹ In the police files, however, the assessments of who might be a dangerous Cominform supporter remained the same. For this reason, Dragotin Gustinčič ended up on the list of dangerous Cominform supporters drawn up in 1958 and was imprisoned for a while once again. He was yet again identified as a dangerous organiser of an otherwise small political group of Cominform supporters. One of the individuals who were imprisoned once again in 1958, but who was subsequently released as the charges against him were dropped, wrote in his memoirs that in this case the charges brought up by the police were also not based on reality. This was Janez Jezeršek "Sokol", who, at that point, made acquaintance with Dragotin Gustinčič in prison and got to know him. He stated that Gustinčič was allegedly "the leader of a group that I knew nothing about, yet I belonged to it according to the police and was also supposed to be sentenced because of it."²²

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AS 1931 – Republiški sekretariat za notranje zadeve 1945–1989.

SI ZAL – Zgodovinski arhiv Ljubljana

LJU 684 – Mestni komite Zveze komunistov Slovenije Ljubljana 1945–1954.

20 Gabrič, *Od somišljenika do nasprotnika*, p. 132.

21 *Zapisniki politbiroja CK KPS/ZKS 1945–1954*, p. 199.

22 Jezeršek, *Medaljoni našega časa*, p. 83.

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Summary

Aleš Gabrič

Cominform Supporters in Slovenia

The following contribution describes the persecution of actual and imaginary supporters of the Cominform Resolution in Slovenia. In the scientific literature, Slovenia has already been depicted as the part of Yugoslavia where, unlike in certain other parts of Yugoslavia, people agreeing with the Cominform Resolution were relatively few and far between. Furthermore, Cominform Supporters in Slovenia were merely individuals or smaller groups, and therefore they did not represent any larger organised groups or political factors that could seriously challenge the authority of the ruling elite. Nevertheless, the authorities designated many critics of the regime from their own ranks as “Cominform Supporters”, and these were most frequently from the ranks of the intellectuals. The contribution describes the difference between Slovenia and the rest of Yugoslavia with regard to the persecution of the alleged Stalin's sympathisers; points out the difference in

the percentage of the people arrested and their social structure; as well as defines the period when the arrests were most frequent. Special attention is paid to certain cases that deviated significantly from the average. The example of the group gathered around Dragotin Gustinčič is outlined, as this conflict reveals the unsolved disputes between the authorities and the older generation of communists, who felt left out and neglected after Tito had taken over the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. It is precisely the case of Gustinčič that indicates how a long-term conflict between an individual and the authorities could lead to people who were already imprisoned at that time and had nothing whatsoever to do with the Cominform Resolution being subsequently designated as Cominform supporters as well. Dragotin Gustinčič's letters, addressed to the leading Slovenian communists in the first years after the war, can be deemed as the most severe critique of the communist regime, written from the extremely leftist viewpoints of the communist intellectuals. The analysis of these letters reveals certain similarities with the criticism that would be voiced by the Cominform Resolution only months later.