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RETROSPECTIVE LESSONS AND GENERATIONAL GAPS: THE IMPACT OF YUGOSLAV COMMUNIST ÉMIGRÉS IN INTERWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA ON THE POSTWAR YUGOSLAV STATE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the activity of Yugoslav communist émigrés in Czechoslovakia between 1928 and 1938. Prague was a major center of communist activity and most prominent members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had spent a significant amount of time there in the interwar period. By looking at their political actions at the time and their subsequent reflections on it, the author argues that a qualitative difference exists between the subsequent political development of those who became communists during the so-called “Third Period” of the Comintern (1928–1934), and those who were radicalized during the Popular Front era (1934–1939). The Generation of the Third Period was more conservative and more loyal to Stalinism, whereas the Generation of the Popular Front led the reform process in socialist Yugoslavia after the war.

Keywords: Communist Party of Yugoslavia, League of Communists of Yugoslavia, student movement, Popular Front, Third Period, communism, Czechoslovakia, The Czechoslovak First Republic

LEZIONI RETROSPETTIVE E DIVARI GENERAZIONALI: I COMUNISTI JUGOSLAVI EMIGRATI IN CECOSLOVACCHIA TRA LE DUE GUERRE MONDIALI E IL LORO IMPATTO SULLA JUGOSLAVIA DEL DOPOGUERRA

SINTESI

Il contributo presenta l'attività dei comunisti emigrati jugoslavi in Cecoslovacchia tra il 1928 e il 1938. Praga era un importante centro di attività comuniste e i maggiori esponenti del Partito Comunista jugoslavo vi trascorsero un considerevole lasso di tempo nel periodo tra le due guerre. Esaminando le loro azioni politiche del tempo e le loro successive riflessioni su di esse, l'autore sostiene che ci sia una differenza qualitativa tra il conseguente sviluppo politico di coloro che aderirono al comunismo durante il cosiddetto “Terzo Periodo” del Comintern (1928–1934) e quello degli emigrati che

furono radicalizzati nel periodo del Fronte Popolare (1934–1939). La Generazione del Terzo Periodo era più conservativa e più fedele allo stalinismo, mentre la Generazione del Fronte Popolare assunse la guida nel processo di riforme nella Jugoslavia socialista dopo la guerra.

Parole chiave: Partito Comunista jugoslavo, Lega dei Comunisti di Jugoslavia, movimento studentesco, Fronte Popolare, Terzo Periodo, comunismo, Cecoslovacchia, Prima Repubblica Cecoslovacca

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1934, a young Yugoslav medicine student by the name of Gojko Nikoliš visited Prague as part of a two-month student exchange. This event was a tradition in the interwar period, strengthening ties between Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. It was meant both to connect the youth of the two states and to educate them in the spirit of Slavic unity and loyalty to their countries. What neither of the states was counting on was that the youth would use such exchanges to connect with politically subversive individuals and organizations. Yet, this was precisely what Nikoliš did. At his own request, an acquaintance connected him with the Yugoslav Marxist students in Prague.

Almost half a century later, his recollections of the trip were extremely atypical for a young communist militant who had just experienced a bourgeois democracy for the first time:

Seeing people argue openly and in broad daylight, in apartments or cafes on Wenceslas Square, in favor of those political views which could get one imprisoned in Yugoslavia was an exciting novelty for me. I had the impression that our people in Prague have much to gain from the time spent there. This city of such a high culture and democratic traditions which we lacked in Yugoslavia (yet nonetheless derided as 'bourgeois') had left a clear mark in the psyche of our Party comrades (Nikoliš, 1981, 89–90).

Nikoliš is reminiscing half a century later, long after the split with Stalin and the ideological opening of Yugoslav society. However, this memoir becomes even more interesting when contrasted with contemporary memories of another Prague-based Yugoslav communist, Vlajko Begović, who had left Czechoslovakia in 1933 due to police persecution. Begović, who had been a member of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije – SKOJ) since 1927, was not enchanted by bourgeois democracy, neither in the 1930s nor later on in life. He spoke of “*elastic*



Fig. 1: Yugoslav communists from Prague in Spain in 1937. Standing: Mirko Kovačević, Ratko Pavlović Čičko, Lazar Udovički, Mirko Knežević, Jože Breskvar i Ilija Engel. Sitting: Slavko Čolić, Veljko Vlahović, Lazar Latinović i Branko Krsmanović (Wikimedia Commons).

politics” and “*utilizing Czechoslovak bourgeois democracy*” (Begović, 1976, 584). There is no elaborate monologue about the political freedoms, pluralism, and similar things perceived by Nikoliš as the advantages of Czechoslovak democracy – things that do not seem to have interested Begović much even later on in his career as a politician and intellectual in socialist Yugoslavia.

Begović formally became a communist in 1927 and Nikoliš in 1934. In spite of a difference of only seven years, the two were worlds apart. These seven years were an interregnum in a world which, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm,

was simply not expected to last, in something that could not really even be described as a world, but merely as a provisional way-station between a dead past and a future not yet born, unless perhaps in the depth of revolutionary Russia (Hobsbawm, 2003, 47).

In 1927, Weimar Germany was trembling before the danger of communist takeover, Yugoslavia was torn by inter-ethnic conflict embodied in corrupt nationalist parties, and the Soviet Union was in the final stages of Trotsky’s defeat. Seven years later, the world of 1927 seemed as peaceful as *La Belle Époque*: Weimar was no more, the communists

were crushed, and the Nazis were in power; Yugoslavia had a royal-military dictatorship which was showing no signs of subsiding; and a world economic crisis had plunged millions into poverty in an already impoverished and brutal world. It was only in the Soviet Union that the situation seemed more stable and more optimistic than before; but the Soviet Union was directly and very seriously threatened by the forces rising out of the ruins of the Old World.

These two worlds, I will argue, left a clear divide between different generations of Yugoslav communists. Using a case study of the Yugoslav communist émigré community in Prague, I will show that the older communists, who joined the party in the 1920s, underwent a different experience of communism than those who joined the movement in the wake of the rise of fascism. While the older were more focused on party discipline and world revolution, the younger were as concerned with saving the world from fascism as they were with establishing socialism. The Generation of the Third Period, as I will call them, was more likely to remain on the side of the Soviet Union in 1948, and even those who sided with Tito did not become reformists within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije – KPJ) starting from the 1950s. The Generation of the Popular Front, on the other hand, was often radicalized upon arrival to Prague, as a consequence of observing the differences between Czechoslovakia and their country of origin. This generation of students underwent its own ideological formation during the Popular Front period, making them more likely to embrace a plurality of opinions on the left, but also leaving them in a contradictory relationship between ideological pluralism and the need to follow a unified party line in the wake of Stalin's show trials and the Comintern's frequent U-turns. Ultimately, I will use this case study to argue that the generational shift in the mid-1930s, along with the experiences of émigré life in Prague and the Spanish Civil War, helped facilitate the Yugoslav transition away from Stalinism in the 1950s.

THE YUGOSLAV COMMUNISTS IN PRAGUE, 1919–1938

Prague was one of the most significant hubs of Central European communism in the interwar period. Initially lagging behind Berlin and Vienna, its significance grew as both of these cities fell to fascism. However, it became important to the Yugoslav communists long before that. After the banning of the KPJ in Yugoslavia in 1920, the communists quickly saw that they could use the comparably more democratic places such as Prague and Vienna to propagate views which were illegal in their country. Moreover, Czechoslovakia was a special case: it was an ally of Yugoslavia and a fellow Slavic nation, which made it easy to obtain visas. As such, it was not only appealing to the communist rank and file, but also to students of working class and peasant backgrounds, as well as economic émigrés, groups which were particularly open to communist agitation.

Many prominent Yugoslav communists were active in Czechoslovakia. In 1920 and 1921, Prague was the home of young communist terrorists Rodoljub Čolaković and Nebojša Marinković (Cvetković, 1980, 167). The two were members of the terrorist organization *Crvena Pravda* which assassinated the Yugoslav Minister of Interior, Milorad

Drašković, in July 1921, as response to banning the KPJ. While Čolaković was sentenced to 12 years in prison, Marinković was cleared of charges and then immigrated to Prague, where he worked on connecting all Yugoslav Marxist émigré organizations to the KPJ (Gavrić, 1971, 350).¹ However, a more serious attempt at expanding the influence among the Yugoslav youth came only several years later. The initiative originated from the communist medical student Dragiša Mišović. He arrived in 1925 from Paris after the government revoked his scholarship because of his decision to join the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français – PCF). Mišović began working through the umbrella student organization, the Yugoslavia Academic Society, and organized a movement against the Yugoslav embassy's repression of radical students.² However, a permanent and well-grounded Marxist student organization would not be formed until 1927.

The late 1920s were a turning point in the relations between the KPJ and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa – KSČ). 1928 and 1929 saw the rise of two Yugoslav communists who would dominate party politics in the following decade. They were Milan Gorkić and Vladimir Čopić. Milan Gorkić's real name was Josef Čižinský, and he was an ethnic Czech from Sarajevo. In 1928, he became the organizational secretary of the Young Communist International. A faithful follower of the Stalin party line and a protégé of Bukharin, this young Czech would rise to the post of the *de facto* leader of the KPJ in 1932. Čopić was already a well-known communist and a member of parliament in the short period before the outlawing of the KPJ in 1920. However, he had spent several years in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), distant from party affairs, teaching at the The Communist University of the National Minorities of the West (Kommunistichesky Universitet Natsionalnykh Menshinstv Zapada – KUNMZ)³ and attending the International Lenin School. In 1929, he was assigned to the post of a party instructor in Czechoslovakia. He would remain in that position until 1932, when he would join Gorkić in the temporary leadership of the party. His contacts with the KSČ would continue through his wife, Růžena Fialová.

Moreover, 1929 was the year of a first successful takeover of a legal student organization by young communists. Under the supervision of the party cell led by Marinković, the students were engaged in infiltrating largely apolitical student organizations since at least 1925. Their first target was the Society of Yugoslav Technical School Students (Društvo jugoslovenskih tehničara – DJT). It was targeted due to the class position of the technical school students. The law of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes barred those who completed their secondary education in technical secondary schools from entering university, which essentially excluded people from the lower classes from higher education, forcing them to get scholarships for studying abroad (Cvetković, 1980, 168).

-
- 1 He stayed in Prague until 1933, when he immigrated to the Soviet Union, where he would eventually fall victim to the Great Purge. Čolaković would go on to become one of Tito's closest associates in Paris in 1937 and 1938, before eventually being dismissed by Comintern intervention due to connections with the purged former KPJ general secretary Milan Gorkić.
 - 2 AJ, 66, 441, 702, Jugoslavensko akademsko društvo "Jugoslavija" g. Svetozaru Pribičeviću, Ministru prosvete Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, March 30, 1925.
 - 3 KUNMZ was a training school for communist cadres of Central Europe, Scandinavia, and the Balkans.

However, the more moderate students managed to prevent their takeover, after which the communists turned to the Croatian nationalist student society “Matija Gubec”. The ranks of the Croatian nationalist organization swelled with the increasingly successful communist agitators. Their strategy was twofold: raise class consciousness through personal work with students and legalize aspects of Party work through infiltrated student societies. By the spring of 1929, they completely took over the organization,⁴ and the Croatian nationalists either accepted their leadership or became passive and abandoned their political work. Over the next several years, the “Matija Gubec” Society would be the hub of Yugoslav communist activity in Prague, arranging lectures, events, and political actions aimed at improving the life of students.⁵ By 1936, the young communists would also succeed in taking over the DJT and several other “national” Yugoslav societies, eventually even winning a majority in the Jugoslavija Academic Society, the umbrella organization of Yugoslav students in Prague (Udovički, 1997, 79). Their success was greatly facilitated by the KPJ’s new Popular Front line, which gave the communists a reputation of principled antifascists, and even defenders of the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav states.

With the rise of fascism, the significance of Prague for both the KPJ and the international communist movement grew significantly. The Yugoslav party technical apparatus, which was in charge of producing falsified documents and printing *Proleter*, moved to Prague in 1934, after Vienna became too unsafe for it to continue operating from there (Očak, 1988, 183). Additionally, the Czechoslovak capital was, at the time, also the home of Svetozar Pribičević, the head of Independent Democrats and one of the most famous Yugoslav political exiles. Formerly a royalist Minister of Interior, Pribičević completely broke with the court and, being a pragmatist, began allying with republicans and federalists, for which he was forced to emigrate in 1931. The communists were close to him throughout this period, and in January 1936, Čopić met with him to negotiate “a worker-peasant coalition” along Popular Front lines (Očak, 1980, 267). The KPJ and the Independent Democrats reached a deal on a peasant-worker antifascist coalition, led by Pribičević, which would be oriented towards preserving the Yugoslav-Czechoslovak-French alliance and extending it to include the Soviet Union (Očak, 1980, 268; Očak, 1988, 202–203). The cooperation was cut short by Pribičević’s sudden death in September 1936, after which the Independent Democrats’ political influence began to decline. Gorkić, who also negotiated with Pribičević, would be arrested in Moscow less than a year after Pribičević’s death. His heir, Josip Broz Tito, would present a different vision of the Popular Front, one in which the communists do not follow the leadership of a bourgeois democratic party, but instead play a leading role, with other political parties in a subordinate position.⁶

Prague appears to have been an important backdrop to Gorkić’s political downfall.

4 AHMP, SK, X/364, Stanko Aranjoš, Policejni ředitelství (společenské oddělení), April 7, 1929.

5 For a detailed account of Yugoslav student organizations in Prague in this period, see Gužvica, 2017a and Gužvica, 2017b.

6 For a discussion of the difference between Tito’s and Gorkić’s conceptions of the Popular Front, see Swain, 1989.

This was because the city became, after Paris, the second most important point for sending Yugoslav volunteers to Spain. The main organizer and the link between the KPJ and the volunteers was Velimir Dreksler (Marko Perić), a Croatian Jew who was sent by the party to Prague in order to work in the party's technical apparatus (Perić, 1963, 43). As the general secretary, Gorkić frequently visited the city and met with him, as well as other volunteers and organizers. Gorkić also sent Čopić to Prague to work in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia again, after the pair had a political fallout in the spring of 1936 (Očak, 1980, 303–304). Čopić would then go on to Spain and become the commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, most likely thanks to his connections with the Czechoslovak comrades. In December 1936, Gorkić met in Prague with Tito, then a newly-appointed member of the Politburo, to discuss the transfer of volunteers to Spain on the ship *La Corse* (Očak, 1988, 226, 257). The ill-fated plan resulted in the arrest of several hundred potential Yugoslav volunteers, as well as Politburo member Adolf Muk, in April 1937. Muk confessed to everything and gave the Yugoslav police detailed information on every single individual member of the Central Committee, most of who had been known to them only under pseudonyms at that point (Očak, 1988, 285–288). This was the final nail in the coffin for Gorkić, who came under investigation and got arrested by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del – NKVD) after being recalled to Moscow four months later.

The decline in importance of Prague coincided with the downfall of Gorkić. The causal relationship was only partial, however. The deteriorating political situation in Czechoslovakia in 1938 played a significant role. The city already became secondary to Paris in late 1936, when the Central Committee was moved to France and the party press to Brussels (Očak, 1980, 222). Moreover, as Tito was trying to posit himself as the next general secretary, he took steps to move the Central Committee back into Yugoslavia for the first time since 1930. This necessitated the abolition of party centers in Vienna and Prague before the central party apparatus was moved from France into Yugoslavia. In September 1937, after having sent the last remaining Yugoslav volunteers to Spain, Dreksler – Perić himself left for Spain (Perić, 1963, 49). Three months later, around Christmas, Tito arrived in Prague and oversaw the closing of the party headquarters (Damjanović, 1981, 314). The KPJ was no longer active in the Czechoslovak capital.

THE THIRD PERIOD AND ITS DEVIATIONS

The KPJ organization in Prague evolved as émigrés came and left, but it also followed the Comintern's frequent U-turns of policy. This enables me to observe both the development of Yugoslav communist political thought and the subsequent impact of the Czechoslovak context. Through an examination of their political *praxis* and memoirs, I intend to identify the two very distinct generations of communist organizers: the Generation of the Third Period and the Generation of the Popular Front. Finally, I will also briefly reflect on the “heretics:” those individuals who, for one reason or another, do not fit within the broader interpretation of their generations, as well as those who radically questioned, or even abandoned, the communist movement.

The Generation of the Third Period was different from the generation of radicals who became communists during the Bolshevik Revolution and its immediate aftermath, although the faith in the new world brought about in October 1917 would be an ideological constant and inspiration for all who became communists in the interwar period. The first generation, at least in the case of Eastern European communist parties, was mostly composed of former social democrats radicalized by the war and the Bolshevik Revolution, and the former ultra-leftists and anarchists who believed Bolshevism to be the first step in bringing the long-awaited revolution to their own countries (Fowkes, 2008, 207). The latter were opposed to reformism and sometimes engaged in terror, and were aptly described by the Yugoslav communist Kamilo Horvatin as “*half national revolutionary and half anarchist in character*” (AJ, 790/13, H/10, 1). By contrast, those who joined the party later in the 1920s became communists when the movement and the first workers’ state were in a period of soul-searching after the expected revolutions outside of Russia failed to materialize. International communism thus became divided between the right and the left. This was, broadly speaking, a question of whether revolutionary action abroad and construction of socialism in the USSR should take place gradually or rapidly. In the Yugoslav context, factional struggles led to an over-intellectualization of the contemporary political issues at the cost of actual active engagement with the working class.

The Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, which took place in the summer of 1928, was the culmination of efforts to save the movement from such divisions. The constituent parties of the Communist International expelled left and right factionalists and adopted a unified and confrontational ultra-left line predicated on the assumption that revolutionary upheavals in Europe would happen in the near future. Although such a development was certainly pushed from above by the Stalin-Bukharin duumvirate, it also received impetus from below, in particular coming from younger and more radical party members (McDermott & Agnew, 1997, 72). The changes in the Comintern also brought about a dominance of general secretaries in constituent parties, working class leaders who were not notable theoreticians but were unquestionably loyal to Moscow, such as Gottwald, Thorez, Thälmann, or Togliatti.⁷ The communists who became active in this period emphasized loyalty and proper adherence to the party line, as well as a rejection of the cooperation with the non-communist left, which would later be denounced as “sectarian.”

The Yugoslav communists in Prague broadly followed this development. The two KPJ members who were the most prominent profiteers from the changes that took place in 1928 were simultaneously those whose ties to Czechoslovakia were the closest, namely Gorkić and Čopić. As both eventually fell victim to Stalin’s Great Purge, we cannot know how the experience of Prague would have reflected on them in their subsequent political career. However, their political actions show a loyal adherence to the Comintern line. Gorkić, who, as already mentioned, had been a follower of Bukharin,

7 Such was also the case with the Yugoslav Đuro Đaković, whose term was cut short by his murder at the hands of the Yugoslav police in 1929. For an excellent analysis of these leaders, see: LaPorte & Morgan, 2008.

was in charge of enforcing the “Open Letter” of the Comintern to the members of the KPJ, which politically marginalized the previous leading members of the left and the right (Očak, 1988, 118–123). Interestingly, Čopić had quite a similar task in Czechoslovakia: he was sent there as a Comintern instructor who oversaw the Stalinization of the KSČ (Očak, 1980, 208–209).

Meanwhile, the communist students in Prague became a textbook example of young communist militancy. They adopted a confrontational attitude towards the Yugoslav regime and focused on working with organizations radically opposed to the Yugoslav regime and the monarchy. The choice of taking over “Matija Gubec,” a Croatian nationalist student society, was by no means accidental or opportunist. It was in line with the contemporary view of the KPJ which saw Yugoslavia as an artificial creation of the Versailles Treaty that needs to be abolished. The communists allowed the Croatian nationalists to stay within the ranks of the society, although most of them became passive after the police began investigating the society’s political activity (Begović, 1976, 586). At the same time, the communists became involved in the more radical Collective of Croatian Students (Zadruga hrvatskih akademičara – ZHA), who adopted a “national revolutionary platform,” meaning a violent overthrow of the Yugoslav state and establishment of an independent Croat state (Bojović, 1964, 40–41).

The subsequent life trajectories of leading students and party members active at this time show the lasting impact of lessons they learned about revolutionary agitation and belonging to the international communist movement, then interpreted as loyalty to the USSR. Given that the communist party cell and student organization had a total of about two dozen people between 1927 and 1933 (Gužvica, 2017a, 73), it is striking that five of them found themselves on the side of the Cominform during the 1948 Tito-Stalin Split. Dragan Miler-Ozren and Franjo Huša both died on Goli Otok in 1951. Adela Bohunicki, the founder of the KPJ party cell in 1927, spent five years in women’s prison on the island of Sveti Grgur. Even though she was eventually rehabilitated, she remained an unrepentant, but passive Stalinist until her death in the 1970s. Nikola Petrović was relieved of all his party duties in 1951 and spent the remainder of his life as a historian. Zora Gavrić remained in Prague as a Czechoslovak citizen and was arrested under false charges of Titoism in 1949. Another one of the group, Ljudevit Trilnik, found himself siding with Petko Miletić’s ultra-left faction against Tito in the late 1930s, before he was expelled from the KPJ, allegedly for being a police informant. Although not in line with the ideals of party discipline, his actions were certainly compatible with the ideals the Comintern held in 1928 (Damjanović, 1981, 257, 374).

The only prominent communist of the period who successfully navigated through changing party politics was the aforementioned Vljajko Begović. He was a major figure in the postwar Yugoslav socialist state, but was always strongly on the conservative wing of the KPJ after 1948. Another exceptional case was Miron Demić, whose consistent leftism led him away from the mainstream communist movement, as he was, shortly before his death in Spain in 1936, accused of Trotskyism (RGASPI, 495, 277, 1827, 82). The only one of this generation who, by disposition, belonged more to the Popular Front generation, was Ivo Vejvoda, who arrived in Prague in 1930. An architect from a middle-class family,

he became a communist “*not out of hunger, because I was not starving back in Karlovac, but out of my own intellectual and moral revelations and beliefs. For me, Prague played a crucial role in that development*” (Berić, 2013, 49). He went as far as to say that the book *Sotsgorod* by the Soviet architect Nikolay Alexandrovich Milyutin was instrumental in awaking his initial interest in communism (Berić, 2013, 50). The artistic orientation of some of the communists must have played a role both in their radicalization and in ideological openness beyond confines of the Third Period. Many of the communists in Prague were students of art academies, and their main influence was the art of the radical left-wing avant-gardes. While Vejvoda became a diplomat and a “liberal” within the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Savez komunista Jugoslavije – SKJ), those Prague-based Yugoslav communist artists from the Third Period remained loyal to modernist and avant-garde styles. The most notable examples of that were Zvonimir Kavurić, the founder of the Prague party cell in 1927, and Muhamed Kadić, the founder of the student cell. An exception among the artists was Vojislav Vučković, one of the most prominent composers in Yugoslavia who, after 1938, created works in the socialist realist style.

The most typical expressions of ultra-leftism in the Third Period were direct confrontations with Czechoslovak authorities and the Yugoslav Embassy in Prague, which they considered to be representative of a “fascist” regime (RGASPI, 495, 277, 1827, 10). The Yugoslav communists engaged in joint actions with the Czechoslovaks, criticizing the Czechoslovak liberal elites and President Masaryk for their support of the Yugoslav dictatorship (Bojović, 1964, 44). They also disrupted events organized by the Yugoslav Embassy or pro-regime student,⁸ and engaged in vandalism. The incident that attracted the most attention was the tearing of the Yugoslav flag on the student dormitory on the night of November 30, 1931, a day before the Yugoslav Unification Day. The colors blue and white were torn off, leaving only red, in act which was to show both the opposition to the Yugoslav state and a commitment to international socialism. What is interesting about this act of political vandalism is that the communists did not act alone, but with the United Revolutionary Youth (Ujedinjena revolucionarna omladina – URO), the youth wing of Pribičević’s Independent Democrats.

Independent Democrats and the URO were essentially left-liberal and republican political forces (Avramović, 1986, 170–171), and collaboration with this group should have been anathema according to Comintern orders. Nevertheless, the two groups worked very closely. The communists helped the URO and Pribičević by teaching them about underground work: they taught the URO rank and file how to establish connections with their supporters in Yugoslavia, how to keep their correspondence secret, and how to send orders and receive reports from the country while avoiding police detection (Bojović, 1964, 42). Admittedly, there are plenty of cases of adaptation during the Third Period, where the communists would work with the rank and file of the non-communist left while taking a hostile stance only to their “opportunistic” reformist leadership. However, in this particular case, they worked with the reformist leadership itself. Pribičević stood in their defence, pleading with his political allies in the Czech National Social Party to help the

8 AJ, 38, 32, 77, Studentske demonstracije u Pragu protiv našeg režima, November 25, 1931.

students. They refused because they considered the tearing of a national flag to be too grave of an offence, and the students were expelled from the country.⁹ Such cooperation between a high-ranking reformist bourgeois politician and the communists was unprecedented in the Third Period.

Although the KPJ, under Gorkić's leadership, would become a cautious vanguard of the Popular Front (Banac, 1988, 64), this kind of cooperation seems to have been instrumental, and not an expression of early ideological unorthodoxy. Whenever this generation of communists spoke about the non-communist left, they did not show an interest in a broad left platform or in liberal democratic values. Vejvoda, again, was the only exception, and only much later, at the end of the 1980s, when he spoke of Masaryk in superlatives (Berić, 2013, 49). Other communists acted more in accordance with Begović's claim about "*utilizing Czechoslovak bourgeois democracy*" (Begović, 1976, 584). Bohunicki, for example, praised the possibilities for communist agitation provided by the Czechoslovak democracy, although she first and foremost emphasized the high level of development of the Czechoslovak working class and the role of the KSČ in organizing them (Bohunicka, 1971, 410). Begović's reflections seem more adequate for understanding the position of communists in the 1930s than Vejvoda's, as his political views did not change drastically over the decades. Vejvoda, on the other hand, self-critically admits that "*we were all Stalinists until 1948*" (Berić, 2013, 208). When Begović, engages in self-criticism, he does it in the language of the party line expressed in official histories of the KPJ/SKJ. He criticizes the ultra-leftism in a matter-of-fact way, writing that "*certain attitudes and individual statements were a reflection of sectarian radicalism, but this was not typical of the student movement as a whole*" (Begović, 1976, 584).

THE GENERATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE POPULAR FRONT

The Popular Front brought about a radical shift in policy, and it also profoundly affected the ideological formation of the newly-recruited Yugoslav communists. The emphasis of the movement was no longer on the socialist revolution, but on defense against fascism. Once the revolution came, however, the consequence of such a shift in policy were much more far-reaching. Writing in the American context, James R. Barrett observes that the efforts to reform the CPUSA after 1956 were led primarily by the generation of the Popular Front. For them,

Union organizing, military service, and electoral coalitions brought [...] deep immersion in American political and cultural life, in the process transforming the perspectives of these activists. The mass movements of the 1930s and the wartime alliance had allowed this generation of Communists temporarily to bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap between their political commitments and their lives as American citizens (Barrett, 2009, 545).

9 AJ, 66, 442, 702, Dragutin Prohaska, Izveštaj u vezi sa demonstracijom protiv jugosl. zastave na jugosl. stud. domu u Pragu u noći 30.XI na 1.XII 1931. January 14, 1932.

I argue that the process which the Yugoslav communist émigrés in Prague went through, with their defense of Czechoslovak democracy and the Yugoslav state, played the same role in setting the stage for the reform of the Yugoslav party and society in the 1950s and 1960s. It should be noted, however, that the Popular Front strategy, in spite of its failures in Spain and France at the time, was reinvented in the 1940s and used for the ultimate goal of establishing socialism (Swain, 1992, 642), with the KPJ at the vanguard of this more revolutionary interpretation of the Popular Front.

The replacement of the old ultra-leftists with the popular frontists was a seamless process. The Generation of the Third Period was scattered around Europe, as confrontational policies they adopted made it easier for the Czechoslovak government to find an excuse to deport them (the most notable examples were Demić, Miler-Ozren, and Begović). Although the communists tacitly abandoned confrontation by 1933 because it was counter-productive, the Generation of the Popular Front that came into being would rally to the defense of the Czechoslovak Republic that persecuted the previous generation of their comrades. Before that, however, the communists' popularity began to grow as a mixture of successful policy and failures of the Yugoslav regime. After a new dormitory exclusively for Yugoslav students was opened in 1933, the KPJ members began a successful struggle for "students' self-management" (Bojović, 1964, 43–44). This meant that the policies of the dormitory would be decided by the students who lived there, rather than the Yugoslav or Czechoslovak authorities. The popularity of this demand eventually led to a split among the monarchist students, with the so-called "Centrists" (centrumaši) beginning to work more closely with the communists (Bojović, 1964, 48).

The new strategy of increasing political openness benefited the recruitment efforts of the KPJ. By 1936, the leader of the centrists, Marko Spahić, had become a member of the KPJ (Udovički, 1991, 226–227). One of the leading supporters of the Agrarian Party in Prague, a student named Branko Krsmanović, also joined the KPJ (Udovički, 1997, 65). He would become one of the most prominent Yugoslav communist military commanders in Spain and Yugoslavia before dying in a battle during World War Two. The efforts at forming a mass communist organization among the émigrés in Prague culminated with the takeover of the Jugoslavija Academic Society in the fall of 1935 (Udovički, 1997, 79).

Nevertheless, the process of abandoning the positions of the Third Period was gradual. Although the KPJ was open to broader collaboration on the left, their rhetoric was still explicitly anti-Yugoslav until the end of 1934. In a flyer published in October that year, they spoke of a "so-called Yugoslavia" and reiterated their demands of a right to self-determination of nations oppressed by the Greater Serbian nationalists. They attacked the Little Entente, an alliance of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, as "*an exponent of French imperialism*" (NA, PP II, S 112/2). However, this was the last time the communists expressed such views, as the KPJ stopped explicitly calling for a breakup of Yugoslavia following the Fourth Land Conference in December 1934 (Pešić, 1983, 264–265).

Some consequences of the anti-Yugoslav national policy persisted. The only major Yugoslav student organization in Prague that the KPJ failed to take over was the Collective of Students from Serbia, Montenegro and Bay of Kotor (Zadruga akademičara iz Srbije, Crne Gore i Boke Kotorske – ZAS). This could be either because the organization

was largely inactive between 1927 and 1933 or because the official view of Yugoslavia as a project of the Greater Serbian bourgeoisie alienated the members of the society. However, few sources on the organization have been preserved, and the question remains open. In general, the Popular Front period was marked by an embrace of left-wing nationalism, which was combined with a support for Yugoslavia as a multinational state. The Yugoslav connected ethnic and class oppression, reclaimed nationalism from the right and insisted on the need for both an international and national struggle against fascism, reclaiming nationalism from the right (Hobsbawm, 1992, 146–147). Udovički was later quite explicit about these motives:

One was the more encompassing, internationalist motive, because we understood that we as a nation cannot fight for democracy and freedom on our own, and the other was that the war in Spain was preparing us for a struggle in our own country and the establishment of a more just social order (Udovički, 1991, 130).

It is, of course, noteworthy that the struggle in “our own country” was guided by a desire to establish a socialist order. The country was only worth fighting for the promise of revolution was fulfilled. Even more illustrative was the 1937 speech of Veljko Vlahović, a Montenegrin, about his fallen comrade Matija Šiprak, a member of the Croatian Peasant Party. Vlahović contrasted their struggle of a united internationalist left with the divisive ideology of fascism, saying that Montenegrin and Croat antifascists are closer together than a Croat fascist and a Croat antifascist who found themselves on different sides of the frontline in Spain (Pavlaković, 2011, 500). Both Vlahović and Udovički would find themselves on the reformist side of the KPJ/SKJ after the 1948 Split, with Vlahović serving as one of the party’s chief ideologues. An example of left-wing nationalism without the internationalist aspect, not foreign to the Popular Front, could be Ivan Rukavina, a Prague-based communist who also fought in Spain, and who eventually participated in the Croatian Spring of 1971, for which he was condemned as a nationalist and forcibly retired.

The appeal of the Popular Front, however, was far from being just a matter of left-wing nationalism. The participation in mass movements led by the KPJ was crucial. In Prague, this was accomplished through student organizations through which communists promised benefits such as free lunches and higher scholarships for lower class students, and not only a militant struggle against fascism (AUK, VA, IV/B, 337). Such grassroots initiatives ensured popular appeal, and mass mobilization in turn facilitated a culture of cooperation on a broad left-wing basis, under communist leadership. The prime example of that was the aforementioned collaboration with the Independent Democrats, which was at its peak in 1935 and 1936.

The crucial issue for communists was how to reconcile such ideological openness with faithfulness to the USSR and the Bolshevik ethos of democratic centralism and party discipline. Ivo Vejvoda remembers that his adoration for the “first country of socialism” was so great that he did not believe the socialist realist writer Vítězslav Nezval’s impressions about the beggars and prostitutes of Moscow. To him, the idea that there could be such things in the Soviet Union was simply unimaginable (Berić, 2013, 209). However,

the true test of party loyalty and of the boundaries of the Popular Front did not come from the prostitutes of Moscow. It came from the fantastic accusations of treason made against high-ranking Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, who allegedly attempted to secretly undermine socialism.

In August 1936, the so-called “Trial of the Sixteen” began in Moscow. Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, members of the first Bolshevik Politburo and Lenin’s close associates, were executed on Stalin’s orders following a brief show trial. The sensational news of their guilt spread quickly, and few in the international communist movement dared to question the validity of the claims about a terrorist conspiracy of Zinoviev and Kamenev in collaboration with Trotsky. This was as true of the Generation of the Popular Front as it was for the more radical communists of the Third Period. However, an internal party controversy developed in Prague about the validity of Stalin’s accusations. At the center of the dispute was a young communist named Ratko Pavlović Čičko.

Čičko, who arrived in Prague in the fall of 1935, was one of the best-educated and most insightful individuals among the young Yugoslav communists in Prague. A Party member since 1933, Čičko was already well-versed in literature, political economy, philosophy, history and political theory upon his arrival to Prague. According to Udovički’s near-hagiographical account, he impressed his comrades with his knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and his skills as a public speaker and writer (Udovički, 1997, 72). Čičko was the only Yugoslav communist in Prague who seriously questioned the validity of the accusation, raising havoc at the meeting of the KPJ youth cell. Over the following months, he would allegedly go as far as to point to inconsistencies between classical Marxist works and Stalin’s interpretation of them, calling for a return to Lenin (Grbović & Korbutovski, 1981, 74). Udovički claimed that he and Kršmanović agreed with Čičko, and that he thought Veljko Vlahović did too, although Vlahović did not dare to openly admit it (Udovički, 1997, 77). However, this memoir published sixty years after the events should not be considered proof of an existence of a dissenting party cell among the Prague émigrés. Although Udovički certainly remembered his comrade’s words about Stalin well later in life, the primary sources do not show that anyone but Čičko suffered the consequences for this alleged disobedience of the party line.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he never voiced his concerns publicly, respecting the party discipline, and his criticisms always remained an internal party matter.

The members of the other party cell, consisting of older communists, were furious. Bohunicki, a party member since 1925 and the founder of the KPJ cell in Prague in 1927, openly attacked Čičko, saying that there is no reason to doubt and dispute Stalin. Udovički remembers that Bohunicki, by then a former Cominformist, had made many negative comments when they spoke about Čičko shortly before her death in the 1970s, almost forty years after the events (Udovički, 1997, 93). Another member of this cell,

10 Pavlović was a subject of official investigations in the International Brigades and in the Yugoslav Partisans, always because of his comments about Stalin and suspicions that he might be a Trotskyist. He was killed in April 1943 fighting against the Bulgarian troops in Southeastern Serbia. Rumors of his alleged assassination by the Yugoslav partisans have circulated since the late 1980s, but no one has been able to offer definite proof of this.

Ilija Engel, later refused to support Čičko's candidacy for the president of Yugoslavia Academic Society (Udovički, 1997, 84). While Engel only formally joined the party in Prague in 1934, he was active in the revolutionary movement much earlier, and was first arrested in 1930, at the age of 18 (ISI, 1975, Engel). Therefore, his views are also far more consistent with the Generation of the Third Period that saw his ideological formation as a communist. While Čičko's cell consisted of students who had only recently joined the movement, the other cell, which was considered superior, consisted of Third Period communists who were both less open to broad left fronts and to dissenting views within the movement. This cell was most likely the place where suspicions of Čičko's Trotskyism first surfaced.

Čičko himself was the longest-standing party member among the younger communists, having joined the party in 1933, at a time when its sectarian radicalism was still dominant. Therefore, he could also be seen as somewhat of an anomaly within the generational model. Nevertheless, much like Vejvoda in the Generation of the Third Period, he is the exception that confirms the rule. He was seen by his peers as an eccentric and free-thinking individual who did not really fit well within the Stalinist party culture (Nikoliš, 1981, 253). Equally interesting is the story of Marko Spahić, a heretic of a different kind. Spahić, the former leader of the student "centrists," who deliberated on joining the KPJ for almost three years between 1933 and 1936, eventually became the only one of the group who sided with the Cominform Resolution (Banac, 1988, 116). Although it took him years to make the leap of faith, he became one of the most loyal communists. A 1938 article on the wounded Yugoslavs in Spain mentions Spahić calling Stalin's name in delirium (Kapor, 1969, 38). He is, however, the only member of the Popular Front Generation who parted with the KPJ as a consequence of the Tito-Stalin Split.

RETROSPECTIVE LESSONS: REFORMERS VERSUS CONSERVATIVES

Over forty Yugoslavs left Czechoslovakia for Spain in late 1936 and during 1937. About half of them died in the Spanish Civil War and World War Two; one, Vladimir Čopić, was executed in the Soviet Union upon his return from Spain. In the student group which left Prague in January 1937, seven out of twenty would receive the title of the People's Hero of Yugoslavia, which was the highest and most honorable order of the socialist state – if not according to rank, then certainly in terms of public perception.¹¹ Those Yugoslav émigrés from Prague who survived would become some of the most respected and influential Yugoslav diplomats, legislators and ideologues in the post-WWII period. As already mentioned, Veljko Vlahović became one of the leading reformers of the SKJ. His colleagues and comrades, Ivo Vejvoda, Lazar Latinović,¹²

11 These seven were Branko Krsmanović, Mirko Kovačević, Ratko Pavlović-Čičko, Ratko Vujović-Čočić, Veljko Vlahović, and Ilija Engel. The full list of twenty volunteers is available in Kovačević, 1971, 253.

12 Interestingly, Latinović was the Yugoslav representative at a pan-European conference in Geneva in 1944, which passed the Manifesto of the European Resistance, one of the early documents that espoused the vision of an anti-fascist, federal Europe (Heyde, 2010, 138). This was a time before the outbreak of the Cold War, when the communists and the non-communists alike harbored a hope of a peaceful and cooperative postwar

and Lazar Udovički became leading Yugoslav diplomats, who steered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a way which they saw as a consistent application of the principles of non-alignment, but which was derided by the more conservative party members as anti-Soviet (Petrović, 2010, 212). Gojko Nikoliš served as a moral conscience of the party and was the first prominent revolutionary to have publically condemned the Goli Otok prison camp (Banac, 1988, 253).

Nikoliš, Latinović, Udovički, and Vejvoda, as well as their colleague, the Prague-educated communist composer Oskar Danon, all remained committed internationalists in the 1990s, and frequently publically spoke out against the war in Yugoslavia. Vejvoda, unlike the others, no longer considered himself a communist, but was nonetheless still a pacifist. Another Prague comrade of theirs, Ivo Rukavina, like Vejvoda, became a social liberal, but did not share the opposition to war: he was a military advisor to the Croatian People's Party (FBIS, 1991, 20), which entered the government of national unity under Franjo Tuđman in 1991. Whether reform communist, liberal, or nationalist, these individuals were products of the Popular Front. Almost without exception, they had found themselves on the reform wing of the KPJ in the 1950s and 1960s, and from then on maintained their belief in the need for a plurality of left-wing views while working within the Yugoslav party.

The period of the Popular Front, with its embrace of broad cooperation on the political left and of antifascist (internationalist) nationalism, played a crucial role in shaping the minds of these young communists. Their life trajectories, when contrasted with those who became politically active during the Third Period, show the significance of the generational dimension for understanding Yugoslav socialism. Few works have dealt with the continuities and discontinuities of the KPJ from the interwar to the post-war period. So far, no one has observed the importance that the experience of antifascist struggle had specifically on the development of the reformist current within the KPJ/SKJ after the Tito-Stalin Split. This article should be read as a mere beginning of such an endeavor. Its limitations are twofold. First, I have not examined more thoroughly the class and ethnic background of these individuals. Second, I have only looked at a particular group of Yugoslav communists, those who spent some of the 1920s and 1930s in Prague. A more complete picture would require a more extensive survey of the Yugoslav party, as well as other reform communist movements whose members were influenced by the Popular Front. Moreover, in spite of both the attempts of Stalinist guardians of party discipline and of my own inclinations to find a working model for interpretation, the Yugoslav communists in Prague were not a monolith.

Finally, although the Popular Front left a clear political mark on them, this only became clear retrospectively, after Yugoslavia made a radical break with the Soviet Union and began the process of internal reform. The learning process did not take place

settlement – in the communist case, naturally, in the spirit of the Popular Front. The Geneva Manifesto was penned by Altiero Spinelli, the anti-Stalinist communist turned European federalist, whose ideas laid the grounds for Eurocommunism. Perhaps not so coincidentally, eurocommunism's most significant theoretical elaboration came from Santiago Carillo, another communist politician forged during the Popular Front.

during the Popular Front. The Stalinist project of combining a broad left-wing alliance with absolute devotion to the Soviet Union largely succeeded. Vejevoda, for example, claimed he did not really begin to value the experience of interwar Czechoslovak democracy until he contrasted it to the Prague, he encountered in the 1950s, as a Yugoslav ambassador to Czechoslovakia (Berić, 2013, 139). Many of the memoirs follow this kind of self-reflection, with Vejevoda, Udovički and Nikoliš all frequently contrasting their views from the period with the opinions developed after 1948, and which they uniformly considered to be more critical and less dogmatic. Although the Comintern clearly planted the seeds for a radical rethinking of Marxism-Leninism in the very idea of the Popular Front, this did not become apparent until later. Yugoslav, as well as other reform communists, learned the lessons of 1935 retrospectively.

RETROSPEKTIVNI NAUKI IN GENERACIJSKI PREPADI: JUGOSLOVANSKA KOMUNISTIČNA EMIGRACIJA NA ČEŠKOSLOVAŠKEM MED OBEMA VOJNAMA IN NJEN VPLIV NA POVOJNO JUGOSLAVIJO

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POVZETEK

Praga je bila v obdobju med obema vojnama eden izmed glavnih centrov jugoslovanske komunistične politične emigracije, ki je tam izkoriščala češkoslovaško demokratično ureditev za širjenje svojih, v domovini prepovedanih stališč. Glede na to, da se je v nekem trenutku v Pragi znašel celoten politbiro Komunistične partije Jugoslavije, ne preseneča dejstvo, da so številni izmed teh komunističnih emigrantov kasneje zasedli ključne položaje v povojni Jugoslaviji. Med njimi se je znašlo tudi več kot trideset kasnejših španskih borcev in sedem partizanskih narodnih herojev. Iz njihovih vrst so izšli najbolj spoštovani in vplivni jugoslovanski diplomati, pravniki, ideologi in kulturni delavci povojnega obdobja. Članek analizira njihova spominska gradiva in druge zapise kot študijo primera, kakšen vpliv so imela različna politična obdobja na njihovo poznejšo ideološko formacijo. Avtor prikazuje, da je v obravnavanem času večina jugoslovanskih emigrantov razumela češkoslovaško demokracijo kot sredstvo za doseganje komunistične agende, ob tem pa so sledili idealu Sovjetske zveze. Po sporu med Titom in Stalinom so nekateri izmed njih iz svoje praške izkušnje retrospektivno povlekli politične nauke, zlasti glede obrambe češkoslovaške demokratične ureditve na okopih ljudske fronte. Iz tega lahko sklepamo, da je generacijski preskok iz druge polovice tridesetih let pripomogel k jugoslovanskemu obratu od stalinizma v petdesetih letih.

Ključne besede: Komunistična partija Jugoslavije, Zveza komunistov Jugoslavije, študentsko gibanje, ljudska fronta, tretje obdobje (Kominterni), komunizem, Češkoslovaška, Češkoslovaška prva republika

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