

STUDIE

Books and Rifles: The Political Activity of Yugoslav Communist Students in Prague from 1927 until 1937 (Part II)

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This second part of the article deals with the communist takeover of “Jugoslávija,” the umbrella organization of Yugoslav students in Prague, in 1935. Following their ultimate victory over the monarchists, they continued their agitation in the student dormitory, drawing in large numbers of new communist organizers and sympathizers. Soon after, however, they departed for Spain to fight in the Civil War, after which their organization effectively ceased to exist. Those who survived World War II went on to become the political elite of the new socialist state. Their subsequent writings reveal the impact of their activity in Prague on their later political and intellectual development. They show that, even though the communist students rarely questioned the tenets of Stalinism before 1948, the experience of working in a pluralist left-wing environment, as well as within an internationalist and pan-Yugoslav framework, had been an influence on their postwar efforts aimed at reforming socialism and creating a system different than the one centered in Moscow.

Key words: Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Communism in Yugoslavia, Spanish Civil War, Student Movement in Yugoslavia, Student Movement in Prague, The First Czechoslovak Republic

The Takeover of “Jugoslavija” and the Popular Front

On 19th January 1935, Nikola Petrović, the President of “Matija Gubec” Academic Association, was served papers informing him that the association has been banned by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Interior. The reason for the ban was that the association engaged in political activity, which was in violation of its statute. It turned out that the Czechoslovak police had been closely following the activities of “Matija Gubec” since October 1933. They provided a comprehensive list of their activities which are considered “political,” including protest letters sent to embassies of Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania and (rather optimistically) Nazi Germany over their treatment of political prisoners. The police also pointed out the many flyers issued under the name of the association which commented on the political situation in Yugoslavia, and their support for the antifascist student congress in Brussels.¹ It remains unclear why they decided to crack down on “Matija Gubec” at this particular point, but it probably had to do with increased repression in the wake of the assassination of King Alexander. Nikola Petrović left Prague soon after and returned to Yugoslavia, where he became one of the most important Belgrade Party organizers.

This move by the Czech authorities was protested by Czechoslovak and Yugoslav student organizations.² In spite of the temporary setback, the communist group was too large and too well-organized to be deterred at this point. The Association of Yugoslav Technical School Students (DJT) easily took over all organizational matters that were in the hands of “Matija Gubec.” The communist students began returning to the dormitory and new supporters arrived every semester. The increasingly unstable political situation, both in Yugoslavia and at a European level, only helped communist recruitment efforts. Thus, the Yugoslav communist student movement in Prague was at its strongest point in 1935.³ The Popular Front policy, which included calls for an alliance of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, made it more difficult for the police to persecute communist students, thus enabling

1 Archive of the Capital City of Prague (AHMP), archival fund Registry of Associations (Spolkový katastr, SK), “Matija Gubec” section (X/364), proposal to the Presidium of the State Office of Prague to ban the “Matija Gubec” Academic Association, January 1, 1935.

2 Jovan R. BOJOVIĆ, “Napredni jugoslovenski studentski pokret u Pragu 1929–1935. godine,” *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis* 4 (1964), p. 49.

3 Vljako BEGOVIĆ, “Sarajevski studenti u revolucionarnom pokretu jugoslovenskih studenata u Pragu,” in *Sarajevo u revoluciji: Revolucionarni radnički pokret: 1937–1941*, Vol. 1 (Sarajevo: Istorijski arhiv Sarajevo, 1976), p. 585.

them to express their ideas more openly, and effectively bringing their policy more in tune with the official aims of the Czechoslovak government. At the same time, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) reached the pinnacle of its relations with the Independent Democrats of Pribičević. They successfully negotiated a Popular Front of the communists and Independent Democrats which was to be led by Pribičević. They demanded an end to the monarchy, an alliance with France and the Soviet Union, and a new Constitutional Assembly. The negotiations with Pribičević took place in Paris over the course of 1935 and 1936 and were conducted by Politburo member Vladimir Čopić (1891–1939), and by Milan Gorkić.⁴

The students at the dormitory continued pushing ever further with their demands. They took up again the issue of systemic discrimination against technical school students in Yugoslavia. An All-Students' Assembly met on 18th April 1935 to discuss the topic. However, the Assembly immediately split along political lines. It was divided between those who wanted to accept the representatives of the Students' Self-Management (which at this point had become a separate student organ recognized by the Czechoslovak government) into the All-Students' Assembly and those who did not. The monarchists, led by "Jugoslavija", aware that they would probably not be in control of the Self-Management any time soon, decided to oppose the motion. They were joined by the Collective of Serbian Students (ZAS).⁵ Nonetheless, the list of signatories shows that communists had made significant advancements in other national student societies. Both the Collective of Croatian Students (ZHA) and the Slovenian Students' Collective (SDZ) were decisively taken over by communists. ZHA was even led by another prominent communist, Ivan Ropac.⁶

The Assembly was dissolved soon after it met, and the pro-communist organizations – the Students' Self-Management, DJT, ZHA, SDZ and the Association of Yugoslav Agricultural Technicians (DJAT) – decided to organize a separate one. The new Assembly was much more radical in its demands. It was supposed to raise the issue of the representativeness (and hence also legitimacy) of the "Jugoslavija"

4 Ivan OČAK, *Gorkić: Život, rad i pogibija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1988), pp. 202–203.

5 Archive of the Charles University (AUK), archival fund All-students' Archive (VA), International and Foreign Societies section (IV), carton B 337, invitation to Yugoslav students in Prague for an All-Student Assembly, May 10, 1935.

6 Ivan Ropac (1912–1979) fought in Spain and in the Partisans, but fell out with the Party during the Cominform period. He was not imprisoned, but his career was ruined. He committed suicide in 1979 due to family troubles. See Lazar UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti: pismo mojoj deci* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 1997), p. 82.

Academic Association and address continued attempts to expel opponents of the regime living in the dormitory.⁷ They invited members of “Jugoslavija” and ZAS, but they refused to attend. A battle of words ensued as the monarchists adopted the communist strategy of circulating anonymous flyers. The monarchists accused those who organized a new student assembly of being “quasi-communists and separatists” and claimed that the organizers of the Assembly were responsible for the illegal magazine circulated in the dormitory.⁸ These accusations were primarily directed at the DJT, which was also accused of hijacking the student assembly. The DJT leadership, led by Ivan Jakšić and Ranko Trifković, responded with a pamphlet which did not directly address the accusations of communism and separatism, but focused instead on emphasizing their struggle for improving the material position of Yugoslav technical school students. Their response was framed in Marxist terms, emphasizing the lower class origin of most of their students, while repeatedly pointing out the refusal of the government to end legal discrimination of graduate students of technical schools, which they considered to be an “antisocial and reactionary measure.”⁹

As the atmosphere in the dormitory grew increasingly tense, the new assembly was eventually banned by the Czechoslovak police, as they feared a disturbance of peace.¹⁰ “Jugoslavija” was to remain in the hands of the monarchists, but the Students’ Self-Management organization was firmly in communist hands. After Krsmanović forced Udovički into resigning, another communist, Čedomir Milićević, took over as president of Students’ Self-Management.¹¹ The next president of the Student Self-Management in the Alexander Dormitory would be Krsmanović (1915–1941) himself. In the summer of 1935, he started dating Vera Vejvoda (1917–2002), the sister of Ivo Vejvoda and later a distinguished Yugoslav archeologist and curator of the Archeological Museum in Zagreb. After having spent the holidays with her, Krsmanović switched his allegiance from the Agrarians to the KPJ.¹² He fought in Spain and distinguished himself with his bravery and

7 AHMP, SK, DJT section (X/211), the decision of the State Office of Prague regarding the ban of the Yugoslav All-Students’ Assembly, August 5, 1935.

8 AUK, VA, IV/B 337, a flyer to the Yugoslav students signed by “Watchful students,” May 1935.

9 AUK, VA, IV/B 337, a flyer of the DJT to all the Yugoslav students in Prague, May 18, 1935.

10 AHMP, SK, X/211, the decision of the State Office of Prague regarding the ban of the Yugoslav All-Students’ Assembly, August 5, 1935.

11 Another one in a series of extraordinary Yugoslavs to have studied in Prague in this period, Milićević was later the head of the National Electricity Company of Yugoslavia and a Supreme Court Justice in communist Yugoslavia. See L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 92.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 65.

command skills, for which he was sent to attend a Republican Officers' School. He returned from the war with the rank of a captain. When the communist uprising began in occupied Serbia in July 1941, Krsmanović was one of its main organizers, as a member of the Main Operational Group for Serbia. He was killed by the Germans on 8th August 1941, when his regiment was encircled on Mount Kosmaj.

Under the leadership of these people, the Dormitory became a center of student life and communist agitation.¹³ The fall of 1935 saw the arrival of openly communist students from Slovenia, Rudolf Janhuba (1914–1976) and Sigbert Bastijančić (1915–1939),¹⁴ both from Maribor, and Jože Breskyar (1913–1943) from Ljubljana. This was significant simply due to the fact that communist convictions had been rare among the Slovene student population in Prague, which presented a clear contrast compared to the scope of the student revolts at the University of Ljubljana at the same time.

The most valuable new member of the group was a farmer's son from Southern Serbia called Ratko Pavlović (1913–1943). Known to his comrades as Čičko, he was the most well-educated and most politically insightful of the Yugoslav students in Prague. Pavlović was already well-versed in literature, philosophy, history and political theory. A Party member since 1933, he was a prominent communist in the city of Leskovac, where he went to high school, and he even published a book of socially-engaged poems. According to Lazar Udovički's near-hagiographical account, he could recite the entire *Communist Manifesto* and the 19th century classic of South Slavic literature, *The Mountain Wreath*.¹⁵ He impressed his comrades with his knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and his skills as a public speaker and writer. His free-spirited personality and his moral code led him to publically speak out against Stalin's purges, which resulted in him being labeled a "Trotskyist".¹⁶ In spite of the rumors surrounding his Trotskyism, he was extremely popular among his comrades, who elected him Secretary of the KPJ Committee in the Saint-Cyprien internment camp after the fall of the Republic. A special commission found him ideologically "pure" enough to be admitted into the Partisans in the late

13 Zora GAVRIĆ, "Odlazak jugoslovenskih studenata iz Praga," in *Španija 1936–1939: Zbornik sećanja jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca u Španskom građanskom ratu*, Vol. 5, ed. Čedo Kapor (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1971), p. 351.

14 Bastijančić was the very last Yugoslav volunteer to die in Spain in January 1939 during a retreat on the Catalanian front. Veljko Vlahović wrote him a touching eulogy, which is kept in his personal fond in the Archive of Yugoslavia.

15 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 72.

16 Ibidem.

fall of 1941. His troops inflicted great losses on the Chetniks and Germans. Pavlović was killed by the Bulgarian troops on 26th April 1943. Today, some authors allege that he was murdered by the Partisans themselves and on Tito's orders.¹⁷ However, no evidence has so far been brought in to support this claim.

In October, when the new students arrived, the assemblies of student societies took place as usual. The communists proposed Čedomir Milićević for president of "Jugoslavija". Their flyer accused the old leadership of corruption, embezzlement and even pawning of student property. The communists pointed to the refusal of the leadership to address the pressing issues at an All-Students' Assembly, and stated that they are so incompetent that even many of their own old political allies resigned during the year, disappointed with the corruption and reactionary ideas that they hold. This was a clear reference to mass desertion inside the monarchist camp for Marko Spahić's Centrist faction, which gathered people who were disillusioned with the monarchist leadership, but were still unwilling to join the communists. Further, the communists insinuated government support for the current leadership of "Jugoslavija" and pointed to their reluctance to hold an election, knowing that they would lose. As an alternative to the monarchists, the communists proposed a two-fold program focused on improving the economic security and cultural life of the students. They promised free lunches, higher scholarships and a continued struggle for the rights of students in Yugoslavia. In the cultural sphere, they promised greater Czechoslovak-Yugoslav cooperation and an end to favoritism of Serbian holidays over others, as only the Serbian ones were commemorated by the old leadership.¹⁸ Čedomir Milićević won the election, and the umbrella organization of Yugoslav students in Prague finally fell into communist hands. The organization of student life became the task of Milićević, Krsmanović, Udovički and Spahić, who had become a communist by this point. Winning over the voters of Spahić's Centrist faction was crucial for the communist victory.¹⁹

At the same time, the communists issued political statements which were now explicitly calling for a Popular Front against war and fascism. They have gotten bolder with their new victories and the increasingly legal nature of their agitation in Czechoslovakia. A flyer issued on 25th October includes the names of its authors

17 Pavluško IMŠIROVIĆ, "Borba protiv trockizma u KP Jugoslavije," in Jean-Jacques Marie, *Trockizam i trockisti* (Belgrade: Polinom, 2011), p. 10.

18 AUK, VA, IV/B 337, a flyer announcing the candidacy of Čedomir Milićević for presidency of "Jugoslavija" Academic Society, October 1935.

19 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, 79.

for the very first time.²⁰ In it, they commented on the current political situation in Yugoslavia. A parliamentary election took place on 5th May, the first one since the 1929 Coup in which opposition candidates were actually allowed to run. Furthermore, the federalist and pro-democratic parties created a common platform, and went to the election as the United Opposition, and the KPJ supported them.²¹ The voting was public and intimidation was widespread, so the pro-regime coalition won a resounding victory. By June, a government was formed, led by Milan Stojadinović, who was considered to be an openly pro-German politician, especially by the far-left. During his four-year reign, the state would make a significant turn to the right. A far-right youth organization loyal to the government was formed, and he started politically aligning Yugoslavia with Germany and Italy.²² The communists were naturally opposed to his government, and in the flyer, the students wrote about the struggle of the United Opposition against an authoritarian, “anti-people and anti-democratic government.”²³ They intentionally referred to the alleged last words of King Alexander in 1934, “Save Yugoslavia!” in order to emphasize that the government which claims to be preserving Yugoslavia is actually destroying it through its reckless dictatorial policies. They called on the government to strengthen their old ties with France and the Little Entente and to form new ones with the USSR.

Thus, the alliance that was attacked just a year ago was now presented as the best way to preserve the Yugoslav nation from fascism. Not only did the communist take away the power over “Jugoslavija” from the monarchist students, but they also took away their right to speak in the name of the nation. They actively partook in KPJ’s development of a left-wing Yugoslav nationalism. As Eric Hobsbawm has argued, the left of the time had reclaimed nationalism for the first time since 1848. According to him, this was done through participation in an international ideological conflict, albeit one motivated primarily by individual national circumstances, and which ultimately tied together the idea of social and national conflict.²⁴ The

20 AUK, VA, IV/B 337, a flyer titled “A message for the democratically-minded students of Prague,” October 25, 1935.

21 Hilde Katrine HAUG, *Creating a Socialist Yugoslavia: Tito, Communist Leadership and the National Question* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 43.

22 Ivan T. BEREND, *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001), p. 330.

23 AUK, VA, IV/B 337, a flyer titled “A message for the democratically-minded students of Prague,” October 25, 1935.

24 Eric J. HOBBSAWM, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth and Reality*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 146–147.

Yugoslav communists in Prague are a textbook example of this: their proclamations connected ethnic and class oppression, reclaimed nationalism from the right and insisted on the need for a joint international and a national struggle against fascism.

The year 1936 was the most dynamic and interesting one of all. It was a year of rapidly unfolding events which further destabilized the situation in Europe: most notably, the officers' rebellion against the Popular Front government in Spain, which escalated into a Civil War; and the First Moscow Trials, which marked the beginning of the Great Purge in the Soviet Union. Both left a profound impact on the communist student community in Prague. Such a significant year began with a significant event. In January, the Old Bolshevik and one of the most famous ideologues of the All-Union Communist Party, Nicolai Bukharin, came to Prague. His lecture in a theater was attended by all of the communist students, who wanted to see a living legend. It was at this meeting that Pavlović first distinguished himself among his peers. While others were far more interested in Bukharin's appearance and his mere presence, Pavlović was very critical of his speech, pointing out that Bukharin was still arguing for the same agricultural policies which he had renounced in the Soviet Union.²⁵

At the same time, student struggles in Yugoslavia were intensifying. The students in Belgrade protested against the new government and the fact that there was no real end to political repression. The elections were a sham and the state remained as repressive. A rally on 1st February which commemorated the anniversary of death of the student activist Mirko Srzentić grew into an anti-government riot. The university rector Vladimir Ćorović created a "student guard" in response. It was a pro-fascist organization which collaborated with the Yugoslav police in arresting (and sometimes murdering) students who supported the opposition. The Prague students tried to raise awareness of this in Czechoslovakia by organizing an all-students' meeting about it. The meeting gathered 98 people and took place on 14th February. A certain Ante Popović (his first name suggesting he was an ethnic Croat) tried to raise the issue of abstention of the Serbian students from the assembly, but was prevented by Udovički. National conflict was to be avoided; instead, he said, the focus should be on the currently ongoing struggles in Yugoslavia and standing united against them.²⁶ The speakers then spoke of the police repression,

25 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 71.

26 The National Archive in Prague (NA), Ministry of Interior I – Presidium (PMV – AMV 225), carton 1263, call number 225-1263-9. Report to the Presidium of the Ministry of Interior on the Yugoslav students' assembly on university autonomy.

the history of student struggles in Yugoslavia, and the bad socioeconomic conditions of students. Among the speakers was Zdenko Štambuk (1912–1976), who was already a relatively prominent Croatian writer and poet at the time. In the end, Udovički read the resolution they prepared and then passed. It was to be sent to all the rectors of universities in Yugoslavia, as well as translated into Czech and sent to all the major Prague newspapers. The resolution was published by the leading Czech liberal daily *Lidové noviny*.²⁷ By the summer of 1936, they had managed to establish cooperation even with the Serbian students' organization, as testified by their attendance at the All-Students' Assembly against the War on 22nd June. The Assembly was also attended by many notable Czech liberal politicians and intellectuals, such as Beneš's advisor Hubert Ripka, the Protestant theologian Jan Blahoslav Kozák, the president of the Czechoslovak Women's Association Mrs. Hrdličková, and Petr Zenkl, the future Mayor of Prague.²⁸ The attendance of Zenkl is particularly interesting, given that he was a former enemy of the communists, as he had supported the draconian measures of the Yugoslav government in the dormitory when he was the president of the Central Institute for Social Welfare. Regardless of that, the presence of the Czechoslovak liberal elite at the Yugoslav students' assembly serves as the finest illustration of how the young Yugoslav communists became accepted by the mainstream society following their orientation towards the Popular Front policy.

Nevertheless, in March and April, the communists faced one last major crackdown by the Czechoslovak police. The Central Committee planned to hold a Plenum in Prague on 9th April. The police found out about it, and they arrested Central Committee members Ivan Krndelj and Prežihov Voranc, as well as the organizers of the KPJ press, Ivo Rukavina and Ivan Jakšić.²⁹ Jakšić was then deported to Vienna, from where he would go to Spain, while Rukavina³⁰ acquired

27 The National Archive in Prague (NA), Police Directory Prague II – Presidium (PP II), Prague Police Directory (1785–1942) section, sg. S112/2, newspaper clipping “Jugoslávští studenti na československých školách”, *Lidové noviny*, 19. 2. 1396. č. 89,” February 19, 1936.

28 AHMP, SK, X/211, report to the Associations Department of the Police Directory, June 19, 1936.

29 I. OČAK, *Gorkić*, p. 241.

30 Ivan Rukavina (1912–1992) would go on to become a general of the Yugoslav People's Army and deputy Minister of Defense. He participated in the reformist and nationalist Croatian Spring movement of 1971, after which he was forcibly retired. In 1990, he was one of the founders of the liberal Croatian People's Party.

Czech documents and stayed. In Prague, he was subordinate to Velimir Dreksler,³¹ who replaced Jakšić as the head of the Party press after the latter's deportation.³² Dreksler was originally sent by the KPJ leadership to Prague in order to serve as a connection between the Yugoslav communist students and the Party Central Committee.

By the summer of 1936, as the communist presence in the Alexander Dormitory was consolidated, they organized into two Prague Party cells. One was in the dormitory itself, and the other was composed of the older Party members and gathered at the Straka Academy, which was the headquarters of the Czechoslovak Students' Association. This was similar to the organizational structure established in 1927, except this time the students were full-fledged KPJ members as well. They remained in Czechoslovakia over the summer, which gave them plenty of time to organize work for the next school year. This measure was also a matter of expedience, as all of them were wanted by the Yugoslav authorities. The KPJ cell in the Alexander Dormitory was led by Ratko Pavlović Čičko, who was its General Secretary. Other members were Lazar Udovički, Branko Krsmanović, Marko Spahić, and Veljko Vlahović. The cell in the Straka Academy consisted of Ilija Engel, Oskar Danon, Ivo Vejvoda, Adela Bohunicki, and Zora Gavrić.³³ The newest member of the group, Veljko Vlahović (1914–1975), was a friend of Ratko Pavlović and one of the most famous communist students at the University of Belgrade, where he studied law. He left Yugoslavia to escape police persecution. From Prague, he went to Spain and lost a leg in the Battle of Jarama. After being wounded, Vlahović was sent to Moscow, where he spent World War II working as the editor of Radio Free Yugoslavia. After the war, Vlahović was the editor of the Party newspaper, *Borba*, Minister of Education, deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and one of the main creators of the ideological program of the KPJ. Veljko Vlahović helped prepare the students for the World Youth Congress in Geneva that was to take place in September. They prepared a brochure called *All for Peace – Peace for All!* The brochure was

31 Velimir Dreksler (1914–2000), who later lived under the pseudonym Marko Perić, was an electrician of Jewish origin from Osijek. He moved to Zagreb in 1929 and was one of the founders of the socialist Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair there. He then joined the Metal Workers' Union and became an organizer of the People's Theater in Zagreb. After joining the KPJ, he was sent to Prague, from where he went to fight in Spain. He fought in the Partisans from August 1941 as a member of the 6th Lika Division and performed various jobs for the Party Agitprop. After the war, he published memoirs of his revolutionary work in 1963. He died in Nanterre in France in 2000.

32 Marko PERIĆ-VELIMIR, *Doživljaji jednog Španca* (Zagreb: Stvarnost, 1963), p. 38.

33 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 77.

a collection of speeches against war and fascism from the All-Students' Assembly in June. All speeches were written by Ratko Pavlović, except for the one of ZAS, the Serbian students' organization, which was written by Dragutin Paranos.³⁴ Two thousand copies of the brochure were circulated in Yugoslavia, while the students in Prague were kept busy preparing for the fall semester and partaking in discussions of the two KPJ cells.

There was plenty to talk about at Party meetings in the summer of 1936. The Spanish Civil War broke out in July, and in August, the so-called "Trial of the Sixteen" began in Moscow. On 25th August, Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, members of the first 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 even dared to question the validity of the claims about a "Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center." In the Alexander Dormitory in Prague, however, Ratko Pavlović Čičko did just that. He criticized the trial and claimed that these people are indeed oppositionists, but not traitors of the Soviet Union. He even went as far as to point to inconsistencies between classical Marxist works and Stalin's interpretation of them, calling for a return to Lenin.³⁵ According to Udovički's later memoir, he agreed with Pavlović's critique, and Krsmanović reacted angrily against Stalin, so Pavlović actually had to calm him down. Spahić and Vlahović were quiet. Pavlović believed that his friend Vlahović had doubts about Stalin too, since he did not dare to question his statements.³⁶ Member of the other Party cell were not so kind. Adela Bohunicki openly attacked him, saying that there is no reason to doubt and dispute Stalin. Soon after, rumors of Ratko Pavlović being a Trotskyist started to circulate. Udovički remembers that Bohunicki made many negative comments when they spoke about Pavlović shortly before her death in the 1970s, almost forty years later.³⁷

At the end of the summer, Udovički travelled to Geneva. He was elected by the All-Students' Assembly to represent the Yugoslavs of Prague at the World Youth Congress. The leader of the delegation was the Secretary of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ), Ivo Lola Ribar (1916–1943). Later, Udovički would claim that Pavlović would have been a better choice for a delegate at the Congress, since he actually spoke French, but the comrades in Prague chose

34 Ibidem, p. 76.

35 Miloje GRBOVIĆ – Nikola KORBUTOVSKI, *Branko Krsmanović: životni put i revolucionarno delo* (Paraćin: Opštinski odbor SUBNOR-a, 1981), p. 74.

36 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 77.

37 Ibidem, p. 93.

him as a way of thanking him for his activities in the previous couple of years, especially his role in taking over the self-management of the dormitory.³⁸ Thus, he spent the Congress in silence, not being able to understand much apart from the standing ovation given to the Spanish delegation.

Meanwhile in Prague, Svetozar Pribićević passed away on 15th September 1936 after a long illness. Before the funeral, the communists met with the representative of Independent Democrats Savo Kosanović and agreed that they will attend and hold a speech. The funeral took place in the Church of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in the New Town, and Ratko Pavlović Ćićko, as the finest orator among the communists, spoke in praise of Pribićević.³⁹ After the speech, a member of KSCŽ and an MP in the National Assembly came and placed a wreath before the coffin which said, in Serbo-Croatian: “To the fighter for democracy from the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.”⁴⁰ Not being able to arrest an MP, the police immediately started arresting the students who were present. However, they were released by the evening because the Yugoslav opposition leaders who attended the funeral threatened not to attend the official dinner prepared by the Czechoslovak politicians if the students remained in custody.⁴¹

In October, several new communist students came to Prague from Yugoslavia: Lazar Latinović, Tahira Hadžihalilović, Mirko Kovačević, Ratko Vujović Čoče, and Mirko Horvat.⁴² All of them except for Hadžihalilović would leave for Spain four months later. Lazar Latinović (1915–2006) reached the rank of a captain in the Spanish Republican Army in 1938 and joined the KPJ in the same year. He fought in the French resistance in and around Marseille and attended a pan-European conference in Geneva in 1944 as a Yugoslav representative. This conference passed the Manifesto of the European Resistance, one of the early documents that espoused the vision of a federal Europe.⁴³ After the war, he was the Yugoslav ambassador to Belgium, Japan, Argentina and Sweden. From 1999 until his death, he was the president of the Association of Spanish Civil War Veterans of Yugoslavia, be-

38 Ibidem, p. 76.

39 Ibidem, p. 79.

40 Gojko BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće: Sjećanja Ive Vojvode* (Zagreb: Profil, 2013), p. 67.

41 V. BEGOVIĆ, “Sarajevski studenti u revolucionarnom pokretu jugoslovenskih studenata u Pragu,” p. 589.

42 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, pp. 79–80. Udovički mistakenly lists Bastijančić as well, although he arrived the year before.

43 Veronika HEYDE, *De l'esprit de la Résistance jusqu'à l'idée de l'Europe: projets européens et américains pour l'Europe de l'après-guerre (1940–1950)* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 138.

coming the last veteran to actually hold that position. Mirko Kovačević (1916–1941) had a similar path, joining the KPJ and becoming a captain in Spain. He organized the resistance in Dalmatia together with KPJ Central Committee member Pavle Pap. However, he fell in the very first days of the uprising in a battle with Italian and Croatian collaborationist forces. He was posthumously awarded the Order of the People's Hero of Yugoslavia.⁴⁴ Ratko Vujović (1916–1977) became a prominent Partisan commander and later rose to the rank of the colonel general in the Yugoslav People's Army. He was also the founder and first president of Football Club Partizan, one of the country's most popular football teams.

The arrivals had made the group stronger than ever, and communists thus secured every single spot on the new Executive Committee of "Jugoslavija" in early October. In spite of the controversy surrounding his views of the Great Purge, Pavlović remained a popular organizer and leader, as testified by his successful candidacy for president of the association. Vlahović and Spahić were his vice-presidents.⁴⁵ Udovički writes about an interesting incident that occurred during the election: the communists wanted to know where the loyalties of the new students lay, so they marked all the ballots with invisible ink, giving each voter a unique number. This gave them insight into who exactly supported them and who was against them. They were surprised to find out that the member of the KPJ cell from the Straka Academy, Ilija Engel, actually abstained in the election. He had used his ballot to express disagreement with Pavlović's critique of Stalin and the Moscow Trials.⁴⁶ Following the election, the new communist leadership of "Jugoslavija" sent a letter to the Action Committee of Professional Student Associations of the University of Belgrade, the communist umbrella organization of Yugoslav students, in which they announced their willingness to cooperate.⁴⁷ However, this cooperation did not last for long, simply because they now had different priorities. The Yugoslav students in Prague had turned to organizing a struggle far greater than any before, one that would change all of their lives.

The years 1935 and 1936 saw the peak of communist activity among the Yugoslav émigrés in Prague. They strengthened their grip on the student dormitory, effectively preventing the Embassy from cracking down on anti-regime activities; they took over the umbrella organization of Yugoslav students in Prague and

44 Institut za savremenu istoriju, *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*, 2nd ed. (Belgrade: Mladost, 1975), p. 253, http://www.znaci.net/00001/10_141.htm (accessed February 12, 2017).

45 M. GRBOVIĆ – N. KORBUTOVSKI, *Branko Krsmanović*, p. 68.

46 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, 84.

47 M. GRBOVIĆ – N. KORBUTOVSKI, *Branko Krsmanović*, p. 68.

politically marginalized the right; they received new, dedicated and extremely active members, such as Veljko Vlahović and Ratko Pavlović Čičko. These two years were also years of momentous happenings at a global scale. The two most important events for the long-term development of the revolutionary movement (and the postwar Yugoslav state) were the Popular Front strategy and the Great Purge. Popular Front made their antifascist orientation more explicit than ever, but it also led to them embracing a Yugoslav identity which had been shunned by the communists from KPJ for almost a decade. Communists developed a distinct form of left-wing Yugoslav nationalism as a consequence. It was a nationalism with an internationalist Marxist background. National differences were acknowledged, but at the same time a need for a common pan-Yugoslav and international struggle against fascism was emphasized. They would consider it to be a form of loyalty to the state different from what they called “national chauvinism” of the right.⁴⁸ Such a view remained the official ideology of the socialist state until its collapse. The second important event was the Great Purge. Although no one but Pavlović appears to have dared question Stalin in front of others, the confusion caused by Stalin’s actions among the communists pointed at what would become the second important ideological aspect of the post-war Yugoslav state: the split with Stalin and a break with Stalinism, which led to the opening of the Yugoslav socialist system. While there were both future “Titoists” and “Stalinists” among the Prague students, they all appeared to be unified on the surface in the 1930s. It is important to remember that, despite the occasional turbulences, they in fact were unified. The differences appeared minor until the later moments of rupture – namely, the Revolution, the reality of building socialism in practice, and the Cominform Resolution that followed in 1948. Disagreements were considered normal, which was certainly helped by the fact that these lower levels of the Party did not experience Stalinization and rigid Party hierarchy. Even if there was divergence from the Party line, it was rarely as drastic as Pavlović’s criticism against Stalin (a criticism which he never expressed outside of the Party circles). As a rule, however, in the case of everyone but Pavlović, there was no fundamental questioning of Marxism-Leninism (as defined by Stalin, of course), the Soviet model of socialism, or Stalin’s reign. As Ivo Vejvoda put it, perhaps somewhat harshly, “we were all Stalinists until 1948.”⁴⁹

48 Desanka PEŠIĆ, *Jugoslovenski komunisti i nacionalno pitanje* (Belgrade: Izdavačka radna organizacija “Rad,”: 1983), p. 277.

49 G. BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće*, p. 208.

The Spanish Civil War

In December of 1936, a group of thirty Yugoslav students in Prague went on a ski trip in the Krkonoše Mountains, organized by the “Jugoslavija” Academic Association. They rented a hut in the mountains in which they all stayed. They skied, cooked their own meals, and sang revolutionary songs in the evenings. The environment was perfect for conspiratorial work: they were isolated, far away from Prague and any Yugoslavs who worked against the student revolutionaries. While there, Ratko Pavlović and Veljko Vlahović had individual conversations with every single one of the students present; a few were conducted by Udovički and Krsmanović. The matter they discussed was simple. It had been decided that the Yugoslav students were to leave from Prague for Spain and join the war against fascism there. It was up to these thirty people to decide whether they would go or not. They actually chose to go to Krkonoše in part because they wanted to get used to the harsh climate and prepare for crossing the Pyrenees.⁵⁰

After talking to Pavlović and Vlahović, about half of them agreed, and were joined by half a dozen more from the dormitory later. Some, like Oskar Danon, were not allowed to go by the Party itself, as the leadership considered their schooling to be more important. Others, like Ivo Vejvoda and Safet Hadžić, refused to go for personal reasons – Vejvoda because of his parents, and Hadžić because of his girlfriend, Tahira Hadžihalilović, who was also a communist, but did not want him to go and get killed. Others, like Zdenko Štambuk, for example, were not even invited due to lack of subtlety in previous conspiratorial work.⁵¹

The first initiative for joining the Spanish Republican Army was undertaken by the older communist émigrés. Ivan Krajačić⁵² and Danilo Radušević sent a letter to the Central Committee in Vienna asking for the permission to go to Spain. Their contact was Velimir Dreksler, who asked to come along with them.⁵³ The request was granted and the two left for Spain in October and November. Dreksler was to stay in Prague and organize other volunteers. He would become the link

50 Vojo KOVAČEVIĆ, “Španija i Beogradski univerzitet,” in *Španija 1936–1939: Zbornik sećanja jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca u Španskom građanskom ratu*, Vol. 5 ed. Čedo Kapor, (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1971), p. 254.

51 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, pp. 81–83.

52 According to Adela Bohunicki, the presence of this already prominent revolutionary in Prague was kept secret and only Dreksler was aware of him being there. See: Adela BOHUNICKA, “Španska poznanstva u Pragu,” in *Španija 1936–1939*, p. 416.

53 M. PERIĆ-VELIMIR, *Doživljaji jednog Španca*, p. 43.

between the student émigrés in Prague and the Central Committee on one side, and the émigrés and the Party intermediaries in Paris on the other. Not long before the trip to Krkonoše, Veljko Vlahović had met with Adolf Muk,⁵⁴ the representative of the CC, who gave them the official permission to go to Spain.⁵⁵ The first group left just before New Year's, probably arriving to Spain on 31st December 1936. It was a group of only five people led by Marko Spahić. The others were Ivan Ropac, Olga Dragić-Belović, her husband Ratko Belović, and Gerhard Vajs – Bracco.⁵⁶ They were the very first group of Yugoslav students to go and fight in Spain.⁵⁷

The second group was to go a couple of weeks later. Their trip was postponed because an order came to stop sending volunteers to Spain. They had no intention of giving up, and they managed to eventually persuade their connection to send them the financial aid needed to get to Spain. Dreksler later claimed that the “precautionary measures” they took when postponing the trip were “quite useful,” but did not elaborate further on what those measures were.⁵⁸ Given that the students were still leaders of “Jugoslavija,” they organized the traditional Saint Sava's Day Ball, which was scheduled for 27th January. This was done to avoid suspicion and create the impression that everything was going on as usual. They finally left on the morning of Saint Sava's Day, while a scandal broke out in Prague in the evening after they failed to make an appearance at the Ball. The departure of Yugoslavs from Prague to Spain became a widely discussed topic in the Czechoslovak press in the next few weeks. The students arrived to Paris on the morning of the 28th. Vlahović wrote “An Appeal to All the Peoples of Yugoslavia from the Prague Student Volunteers” calling them all, “regardless of political, religious, or national affiliation,” to join the struggle of the Spanish people against fascism.⁵⁹ They wrote letters to their families in Yugoslavia and continued to Spain the next day, having stayed in Paris for only 24 hours.

54 Adolf Muk (1893–1943) was a Montenegrin communist. By mid-1930s, he became a member of both the CC and the Politburo. He was the main organizer of the transport of Yugoslav volunteers to Spain, but was arrested in Kotor in March 1937 after a police raid, along with about 400 potential Yugoslav volunteers. Following his arrest and torture, he gave the names and detailed biographies of all the Central Committee members to the Yugoslav police. For this, he was expelled from the KPJ while in prison. He remained imprisoned after the occupation of the country and was shot by the Italian fascists after refusing to collaborate with them in 1943.

55 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 81.

56 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 82.

57 V. KOVAČEVIĆ, “Španija i Beogradski univerzitet,” p. 253.

58 M. PERIĆ-VELIMIR, *Doživljaji jednog Španca*, p. 47.

59 V. KOVAČEVIĆ, “Španija i Beogradski univerzitet,” p. 253.

After they arrived to the Sant Ferran Castle in Figueres, they formed “The Prague Platoon”, which was led by Mirko Horvat, as he was the only person among them with any actual military experience.⁶⁰ After they received some training, they became part of the newly-formed Dimitrov Battalion of the XV International Brigade “Abraham Lincoln”. After less than two weeks of training, they were sent to the Jarama River, where they were to have their baptism of fire. Matija Šiprak, a law student, fell first, on the 14th of February. In the coming days, Marko Spahić and Veljko Vlahović were heavily wounded – Vlahović eventually lost a leg. Ahmet Fetahagić, Mirko Horvat and Ratko Pavlović were also wounded, albeit much more lightly. In the next few months, Vujović, Janhuba and Bastijančić were wounded too.⁶¹ Their bravery and dedication did not go unnoticed. Vladimir Čopić, who was first the political commissar and then the commander of the Lincoln Brigade, wrote: “It is hard to pick the best in groups where everyone is at their finest. We will only mention the heroic bearing of the Prague students from Yugoslavia. They came to Spain to replace their books for rifles and machine guns in defense of culture, freedom, and progress.”⁶²

The Prague Platoon was quickly scattered throughout the country. They would not be reunited until they arrived at the French internment camps in 1939. Surprisingly enough, all but three of them survived the Spanish Civil War.

In the next few months, several other prominent communists from Prague came to Spain: Adela Bohunicki, who served as a nurse there, came in January; Ivo Vejvoda came in June, against his family’s wishes, together with Slavko Čolić⁶³ and Velimir Dreksler.⁶⁴ Dreksler was the last one to arrive in September 1937, after he finished the job assigned to him by the KPJ, which was sending off the volunteers from Prague to Spain.⁶⁵ With this, the communist activity among the Yugoslav community in Prague started to fade. Periodic outbursts of communist activity still

60 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 95.

61 Lazar UDOVIČKI, “U bataljonu ‘Dimitrov’ na Harami,” in *Španija 1936–1939*, Vol. 2, pp. 415–420.

62 Čedo KAPOR, ed., *Krv i život za slobodu : slike iz života i borbe studenata iz Jugoslavije u Španiji* (Belgrade: Udruženje bivših jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca Španske republikanske vojske, 1969), p. 99.

63 Slavko Čolić (1918–1993) fought in the Partisans and later lived to return to Spain as a representative of the Federal Chamber of Commerce following the fall of Franco’s regime. See Lazar UDOVIČKI, *O Španiji i španskim borcima: (članci, intervjui, pisma, govori, izveštaji)* (Belgrade: Stručna knjiga, 1991), p. 81.

64 Lazar UDOVIČKI, “Sa drugom grupom iz Praga,” in *Španija 1936–1939*, Vol. 1, p. 380.

65 M. PERIĆ-VELIMIR, *Doživljaji jednog Španca*, p. 49.

occurred, and the student Danka Ekert kept the students at the University of Belgrade informed of the events in Prague and in Spain.⁶⁶ Veljko Vlahović played the same role, but he did it directly from behind the lines.⁶⁷ There were still plenty of supporters and fellow travelers left in Prague, but all those who had the dedication and organizational skills had left. Thus, the political activity of Yugoslav communist students in Czechoslovakia had mostly ceased by the end of 1937.

Yugoslav Communists in Their Own Words

For all those Yugoslav communists who studied in Prague in the decade before the Spanish Civil War, the experience had left a profound mark on their life and thoroughly influenced their future work. Some of them died before they could reach an age in which the old revolutionaries reflect on the experiences of their youth. Fortunately, many of those who had lived wrote extensively about it in the post-war years, and their memories were sought after, given that they now formed the elite of the new socialist state. Others, like Marko Spahić, Adela Bohunicki and Dragan Ozren, ended up imprisoned at Goli Otok after 1948. Given that the imprisonment of Cominformists was a taboo topic in Yugoslavia for a very long time, there really aren't that many sources that can shed light on these people's version of events, whether it is their participation in the pre-war revolutionary movement or their (sometimes alleged) support for Stalin. Thus, the views of these people remain largely a mystery to us.

The only exception is a rather sympathetic second-hand account by Udovički of Adela Bohunicki. He says that she was in Paris with a delegation of Yugoslav doctors when the Cominform Resolution was announced. While some of them decided to stay, she chose to return to Yugoslavia and explain to her comrades why Stalin was right. Needless to say, the attempt was not very successful.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Udovički attempts to portray her as somebody who did not have experience with the Soviet system and thus should not be judged too harshly. There is also a text that Spahić published in a 1938 book about being wounded in Spain, which was reprinted in Yugoslavia in 1969, and in which he mentions that he shouted

66 V. KOVAČEVIĆ, "Španija i Beogradski univerzitet," p. 253.

67 Idem, "Španija i Beogradski univerzitet," p.256.

68 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 93.

“Long live Stalin!” in delirium after being wounded.⁶⁹ This is particularly fascinating for somebody who had hesitated joining the ranks of the communists for several years. Additionally, Udovički wrote on the aforementioned opposition that Pavlović faced when criticizing Stalin, especially coming from Engel and Bohunicki. Thus, it is beyond doubt that there existed a genuine faith in Stalin and Soviet socialism among the Yugoslav communists in Prague. It is safe to say that in the 1930s, all of these students were far from apostates in the international communist movement that they later became. However, Vejvoda’s reassurance that “they were all Stalinists” is as unfair as saying they were staunchly anti-Stalinist. They certainly did not doubt Stalin’s leadership, but they did not share the conspiratorial Stalinist mentality that reigned in the Soviet Union at the time.

Rather than calling them Stalinists, it would be far more appropriate to say that they were communists who experienced both right-wing authoritarian and democratic regimes, but had little to no experience of revolutionary practice or socialist reality. They fought for a system that would be better adapted to solving the issues of the time than both of the ones they lived in. They had an opportunity to enjoy the advantages of a comparatively freer (and wealthier) society that many in Yugoslavia did not get. Ivo Vejvoda spoke of the “emotional, intellectual, and political shock” he experienced in Prague: “From the provincial darkness of a small Croatian town, from the state of Yugoslavia which suspended its Constitution and introduced a police-led regime just several months before, I came to a country of parliamentary democracy in which the president of the Republic was a philosopher by profession. Prague attracted me because of the flourishing of life I had experienced there. You could see President Tomáš Masaryk shaking hands and talking to people in the streets or riding a horse in a park. To me, this world seemed unreal. The kiosks sold Soviet newspapers, including *Izvestia* and *Pravda*, alongside French, Austrian and German ones. It was not merely Golden Prague; it was also a free Prague. This immense difference in the social atmosphere and civilizational level between Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia had impressed me so much that I momentarily became ready to accept anything that seemed like an extreme left critique of the Yugoslav regime.”⁷⁰

Vejvoda was not alone in his judgment. Udovički also emphasizes the role that the political freedoms and availability of information had on the recruitment into the communist movement. For him specifically, it was not so much the impres-

69 Č. KAPOR, ed., *Krv i život za slobodu*, p. 38.

70 G. BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće*, p. 49.

sion created by the Czechoslovak society as his newly-found awareness of the difficulties that the working people in Yugoslavia were going through – the difficulties that he was unaware of while living in the authoritarian state: “In spite of my ongoing belief in the goodness of our king, I felt a great pain because of the crisis in the country: I could not help but think of my father’s laments for the hardships of peasant life, nor my discovery of the hardships in underdeveloped areas (like Lika and Montenegro), where people ate cornbread and children got a sugar cube only once a year, for Christmas; I thought of the complaints of the peasants about the big taxes and debts, usurious bills, the taking away of the last cow from the peasant who could not pay his taxes, and so on.”⁷¹

At the same time, they were very well aware of the disadvantages of their adopted society too, such as the hypocrisy that they saw in Masaryk supporting a regime that oppressed their country, or the cooperation between the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav police forces, due to which they had to be constantly on guard.⁷² Perhaps this is why the more pragmatic and disciplined older KPJ members like Begović saw Czechoslovak democracy as a way of gaining a tactical advantage over the Yugoslav government, rather than a model to be emulated.⁷³ Certainly this was consciously done every time when the communists attempted to draw attention of the liberal Prague public to the oppression in Yugoslavia. Even Adela Bohunicki, who praised the possibilities opened by the Czechoslovak liberal democracy, primarily emphasized the high development of the Czechoslovak working class and the leading role of the KSČ in organizing it.⁷⁴ Ironically, it is these conservative members of the group, like Begović and Bohunicki, whose views did not evolve much during their lifetimes, who give us a more realistic grasp of the atmosphere in the 1930s. Those whose road to Damascus occurred after the split with Stalin usually had a tendency to over-emphasize the impact of the liberal atmosphere in Prague on their political views. In more extreme cases, they would project the reform communist views they had gained later in life onto their youth in Czechoslovakia.

This is not to say that no mark was left on them, but rather that all the ideological changes they had undergone later were heavily influenced by the events in Prague, even if it took more than a decade to feel their impact. Perhaps the finest

71 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, p. 59.

72 G. BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće*, p. 51.

73 V. BEGOVIĆ, “Sarajevski studenti u revolucionarnom pokretu jugoslovenskih studenata u Pragu,” p. 584.

74 A. BOHUNICKA, “Španska poznanstva u Pragu,” p. 410.

description of the situation that the Yugoslav communists found themselves in was given by somebody who was an outsider to the group. Gojko Nikoliš⁷⁵ was a doctor of medicine and a communist who fought in both the Spanish Civil War and World War II. He found himself in Prague for only several weeks during the summer break in 1934, but he had an opportunity to meet many of the Yugoslavs who studied there. His insightful analysis starts with his wonder at seeing books of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin sold freely in bookstores, and then points out at how different the intellectual outlook of those in Prague was from those who lived under the Yugoslav dictatorship: “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 them as ‘bourgeois’) had left a clear mark in the psyche of our Party comrades. I liked that. It was hard to understand why certain comrades in Belgrade insisted on closing themselves within the confines of ‘pure’ politics, as if the revolutionary politics of the day did not need to be based on contemporary human achievements in the fields of science, philosophy, and art. As a matter of fact, there were those among us who thought that non-Marxist perspectives are detrimental for the purity of Marxist thought and could lead to an abandonment of working class positions. [...] Hence I was pleasantly surprised to hear our Prague comrades discuss not only the political situation in Yugoslavia and Germany, but also the latest developments in contemporary visual arts, the avant-garde Prague theaters of Burian, Voskovec and Werich, the articles in Šalda’s *Zápisník* or Kučik’s [sic] *Tvorba*.⁷⁶ I can say that I did not hear a single word about the evils happening high in

75 Gojko Nikoliš (1911–1995) reached the rank of the colonel-general in the Yugoslav Army and was the head of its sanitary administration, as well as the Yugoslav ambassador to India and a member of the Central Committee of both KPJ and KPH. He was a prominent public intellectual and a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and a sort of a moral conscience of the Party, as he was among the first revolutionaries who publically condemned the Goli Otok camp. In the late 1980s, Nikoliš became a prominent critic of the regime, and called for the Serbs of Croatia (he himself was one) to unite with democratically-minded Croats against both Milošević and Tuđman at their assembly in Belgrade in June 1990. As a consequence, he was booed off the stage. Two years later, he left his country for France and died there in a self-imposed exile 1995.

76 He is thinking of Julius Fučík, who took over the editorship of *Tvorba* from Šalda in 1928.

our Party ranks at the time, even though the Prague circle was certainly aware of them too. I can only thank them for sparing me from having to listen about it.⁷⁷

This insightful assessment by Nikoliš was very accurate. He was right about their attitude to arts, which was harbored by the “Matija Gubec” Academic Club. Although the Prague atmosphere was undoubtedly important, the professional orientation of those who studied must have played a role as well. Many of the communists in Prague were fine artists, and art of this era was the art of the radical left-wing avant-gardes. Most were architecture students: Vejvoda, Miler, Krajačić, Demić, Kavurić, and Kadić. Additionally, Vučković and Danon were composers, and Pavlović, although a student of law and later of economics, wrote poetry. It was a group full of creative and open-minded young people. Even those who were not artists themselves showed an interest in it. Udovički too wrote about going to Buričan’s theater, as well as watching Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*, a theater adaptation of Sholokhov’s novel *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, Smetana’s opera *The Bartered Bride*, and films of Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Gloria Swanson.⁷⁸ The socially-engaged nature of the interwar avant-gardes had a great impact on them: Vejvoda went as far as to say that the book *Sotsgorod* by the Soviet architect Nikolay Alexandrovich Milyutin played an instrumental role in making him a communist.⁷⁹

The communists understood that art was not merely for consumption, and art inspired many of their own political engagements. Moreover, it left a mark on the culture of Yugoslavia. Ivo Vejvoda was a pioneer of film theory in Croatia. After familiarizing himself with modern films in the theaters of Prague, he started reading extensively on contemporary cinematographic trends. He was disappointed to learn that no one was actually writing about film in the Yugoslav cultural revues of the time, so he started publishing his own works in the Zagreb-based, communist-run magazine called *Glas Trešnjevke*. He later (probably half-jokingly) claimed that he did it not only to foster the cultural life of the country, but also in part to deter communist attacks on his friend Miroslav Krleža, which according to him were pretty much the only topic of communist cultural magazines at the time.⁸⁰ Several years after Vejvoda’s ground-breaking work, in 1939, Oskar Danon founded an artistic association in Sarajevo called *Collegium Artisticum*, a left-wing group which organized theater plays, musical concerts, exhibitions and lectures. It was essen-

77 Gojko NIKOLIŠ, *Korijen, stablo, pavetina (memoari)* (Zagreb: SN Liber, 1981), pp. 89–90.

78 L. UDOVIČKI, *Španija moje mladosti*, pp. 70–71.

79 G. BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće*, p.50.

80 Ibidem, p. 185.

tially doing for Sarajevo the same job that “Matija Gubec” was doing for Prague. In it, Danon gathered his fellow Prague students: the architects Jahiel Finci and Emanuel Šamanek, as well as Šuica Salom.⁸¹ In his last interview, ten months before his death, Oskar Danon spoke of the influence that the young intellectuals returning to Sarajevo from abroad had on the foundation of *Collegium Artisticum*.⁸² Although this openness rarely meant a questioning of Stalinist policies, it did allow for disagreement in the cultural sphere, which was much more permissible. Vejvoda remembers his disagreement with Stalin’s condemnation of Shostakovich, but he also says that he “did not draw any political conclusions” from this.⁸³

While the democratic lessons of Prague helped broaden their political views, the Spanish Civil War turned them into staunch internationalists. If Czechoslovakia, surrounded by Germany, full of left-wing refugees, and with a hostile minority loyal to Nazis, taught them about the need to fight fascism, the Spanish Civil War taught them the need for this struggle to be international. They were the first Yugoslav students to go, and thus served as an inspiration for those at the universities in the country.⁸⁴ Udovički said that their motives were twofold: “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.”⁸⁵

Zora Gavrić echoes this by saying that “the fight of progressive forces against fascism abroad was considered merely an extension of the fight of their own [Yugoslav] people.”⁸⁶ They both essentially repeat Hobsbawm’s idea of the conflation of nationalism and internationalism on the left at the time: “First, antifascist nationalism emerged in the context of an international ideological civil war, in which a part of numerous national ruling classes appeared to opt for an international political alignment of the right, and for the states identified with it. [...] [This] could only too easily be read as: rather a foreign country than our own. This made it easier for the left to take back the national flag from the now slackened grip of the right. [...]

81 V. BEGOVIĆ, “Sarajevski studenti u revolucionarnom pokretu jugoslovenskih studenata u Pragu,” p. 593.

82 Tamara NIKČEVIĆ, “Jugoslavija je moja jedina domovina,” *Dani*, issue 609, 13th February 2009.

83 G. BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće*, p. 56.

84 V. KOVAČEVIĆ, “Španija i Beogradski univerzitet,” p. 253.

85 L. UDOVIČKI, *O Španiji i španskim borbama*, p. 130.

86 Z. GAVRIĆ, “Odlazak jugoslovenskih studenata iz Praga”, p. 349.

Second, both workers and intellectuals also made an international choice, but one which happened to reinforce national sentiment. [...] Issues which were essentially domestic in each country were, by the accidents of history, being fought out on battlefields in a country so remote and unknown to most workers that it had virtually no association for the average Briton other than those of the struggle which concerned them.”⁸⁷

As a consequence, consciously or not, the communists simultaneously took part in the formation of a new kind of Yugoslav identity, a left-wing nationalist one, which would come to be known as “Brotherhood and Unity” in postwar Yugoslavia. A good example of this is the eulogy of Veljko Vlahović at the grave of Matija Šiprak, the member of the Prague Platoon who fell at Jarama. Šiprak came to Prague in 1936 to study law. He was from a devoutly Catholic family which traditionally supported the Croatian Peasant Party.⁸⁸ However, he was also an anti-fascist, and was introduced to radical left ideas by his colleagues after his arrival to Prague.⁸⁹ In the eulogy, Vlahović reiterated the vision of a nation of antifascists, opposed to the nationalist and chauvinist ideas of the sympathizers of Franco. He intentionally referenced the fact that some Croatian fascists also went to Spain as volunteers to fight on the Nationalist side, and the speech was aimed at attacking them as much as glorifying a fallen comrade: “We are convinced that the entire Croatian nation together with us will solemnize and avenge your heroic death, helping us in our struggle against fascism and condemning that group of misguided children at the University of Zagreb, who think that politically and nationally they are closer to you, comrade Šiprak, than us – followers of other parties and sons of different nations – and who extended their hand across your grave to the murderer of the Spanish people, the enemy of the Croatian people, General Franco. We are convinced that the entire younger generation of the Croatian people is not going to follow their example, but yours, comrade Matija. May your glory be everlasting, worthy son of the Croatian nation!”⁹⁰

87 E. HOBSBAWM, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, pp. 146–147.

88 Vjeran PAVLAKOVIĆ, “Radicalization at the University of Zagreb during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939,” *Historical Journal* 62, no. 2 (July 2011), p. 500, <http://hrcak.srce.hr/70239?lang=en>, accessed July 5, 2015.

89 Đuro GAJDEK, *Španjolski borci Siska i Banije* (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1985), p. 145.

90 Čedo KAPOR, *Krv i život za slobodu*, 4th ed. (Belgrade: Unija-publik, 1978), p. 42, quoted in PAVLAKOVIĆ, “Radicalization at the University of Zagreb during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939,” p. 500.

Although he is the “son of the Croatian nation”, he is nevertheless closer to “followers of other parties and sons of different nations” – that is, his communist friends of other Yugoslav nationalities – than he is to the people who also consider themselves “sons of the Croatian nation” but fight for the fascists. This idea, according to which a fellow human of a different ethnicity is closer than a member of the same ethnic group that fights alongside the fascists, would become the cornerstone of Yugoslav communist ideology in World War II.

Combined with their ideological development and cultural impact, there was also the fight for a revolution in Yugoslavia itself. As already stated, it had mostly consisted of renewing Party organizations in the country in the wake of the dictatorship and sending illegal books and flyers from Czechoslovakia. Those who returned to the country used the experience gained in Prague to help the communist cause. An interesting incident occurred in Belgrade in 1940, which illustrates how critical thinking and openness of some held on after their return to Yugoslavia. Vejvoda claims that Nikola Petrović, who was Tito’s connection with the Comintern at the time, began telling some comrades stories he had heard about innocent people disappearing in the USSR. Tito, already the Party leader at the time, found out and forbade him from talking about it, although he did not punish him in any way.⁹¹ Ironically, Petrović was among the people who were expelled from the KPJ as Cominformists in 1951.

Many years later, after World War Two, Oskar Danon told Ivo Vejvoda that he cried when he visited Prague again, watching the old spirit of the city destroyed by years of Stalinism. Vejvoda himself found the city too depressing, which prompted him to ask to serve as an ambassador elsewhere, and he got transferred to London.⁹² He remembered the city of Prague in that he had studied in, with its avant-gardes, libertine atmosphere, student and workers’ movements, and the contrast was too painful to bear.

Conclusion

The activity of Yugoslav communist students in Prague in the 1920s and 1930s played a significant role in the development of the Yugoslav communist movement as a whole. The Party always considered political agitation among the students to

91 G. BERIĆ, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće*, p. 210.

92 *Ibidem*, p. 139.

be a key for success. The universities abroad were not neglected either, as many European countries had political systems significantly less authoritarian than the Yugoslav one, opening space for political agitation. Czechoslovakia was particularly important because of its political ties with the Yugoslav state, which meant financial support for those who decided to study there. Due to misguided government policies, the social situation of these students was often very bad, which directly benefited the communists. The importance of Prague additionally rose with the end of democracy in Germany and Austria in the early 1930s, which made it one of the most important KPJ centers outside of Yugoslavia.

The communists led a constant battle with the representatives of the Yugoslav authorities in Prague, but the Yugoslav Embassy was unable to stop the spread of anti-regime sentiment due to both organizational failures and the political, social, and economic disarray that the country perpetually found itself in and of which the students were acutely aware. More and more of them joined the communist ranks each year. The legal framework set up by the Czechoslovak democratic constitution and the pressure of the liberal public often exacerbated the situation for the Embassy and its extended hand, the School Inspector. Even if parts of the public were not in favor of revolutionary Marxism, they still preferred the underdogs who fought for it over the oppressive Yugoslav royal government.

This attitude became even more pronounced in the mid-1930s, when the KPJ began implementing the Popular Front strategy, and entered an alliance with the liberal forces of Czechoslovakia that was enthusiastically embraced by both sides. This alliance was much more successful than similar attempts in Yugoslavia itself,⁹³ and it had a side-effect of educating young communists about the merits of an environment based on political cooperation of the left forces. The cooperation was already practiced in Prague long before it became official Party policy, even though it was against the ultra-leftist course set by the Comintern in 1928. This openness would later become a significant cohesive factor in World War II, when forces such as the Christian Socialists in Slovenia, the left wing of the HSS in Croatia and the Left Agrarians in Serbia united with the communists against fascists and collaborationists. Indeed, the communists in Prague had already collaborated with some of these groups in the early 1930s.

At the same time, this approach helped foster a left-wing Yugoslav nationalism, which became for them inseparable from the Marxist internationalism.

93 For the struggles and failures of the KPJ leadership during their attempt to join the Yugoslav United Opposition, see K. HAUG, *Creating a Socialist Yugoslavia*, pp. 39–44.

Although the Prague students were devoted to the anti-Yugoslav stance of the KPJ between 1928 and 1935, they became equally dedicated to the change of course after the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. Their Yugoslavism was strengthened by the fact that their organizations consisted of Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Muslims, Montenegrins and Jews, as well as a small number of non-Slavic minorities (Germans and Albanians).

The student leaders, all anonymous at the time, were extraordinary figures, and dozens of them left significant marks on the history of 20th century of Yugoslavia. They were the future Party intelligentsia – engineers, agronomists, economists, artists, lawyers, and philosophers. Regardless of professional orientation, they were Renaissance men and women with a broad range of interests other than revolutionary politics. Some sacrificed their lives for the Revolution, while others lived through it and shaped the new state. A small, but not insignificant group sided with Stalin after the Cominform Resolution in 1948. Two did not survive the labor camp set up for Stalinists, but all others were pardoned and reintegrated into society, although they never held positions of power again. These figures serve as a testimony of the unrelenting belief in Stalin and the Soviet Union held by many.

Nevertheless, many more sided with Tito and took an active role in the reform of the state and the drift away from Stalinism in the 1950s. This was the case with the majority of the Prague students. They were cosmopolitans who often worked in diplomacy – which in itself was always the most open-minded part of the Yugoslav socialist state apparatus. When they started critically examining Stalinism in the 1950s, they did not shy away from accepting Western influences, and many started learning retroactively from their student experience in Prague. Still, their open-mindedness did not mean an acceptance of capitalism or electoral reformism. Almost all remained dedicated revolutionary socialists who did not shun the egalitarian ideals that had originally inspired them. If they lived long enough to see their country collapse, they were marginalized, ignored, or sometimes openly abused because of their refusal to bow to the newly-victorious nationalist hegemony. Those same people who risked everything in the 1930s in order to build a better world, sacrificed their own comfort and security in old age for the sake of the ideals of the world they had created and which had then crumbled before their eyes.

The dual experience of studying abroad and fighting for a revolution at home played an important, but underestimated, role in the development of the Yugoslav revolutionary left. The relatively democratic society of Czechoslovakia

and cooperation with all the anti-fascist forces in Prague contributed to a development of ideas which were able to fully express themselves after the break between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Although the rupture with Stalinism was virtually invisible before 1948, it became a defining feature of the Yugoslav state once it occurred. The experience of those new Yugoslav elites who had lived abroad before World War II then became a valuable lesson for the entire state. Thus, the role that the Yugoslav students in Prague had played in the construction of the Yugoslav socialist experiment that followed can hardly be overstated.

SUMMARY

The extraordinarily successful struggle of Yugoslav communist students in Prague after 1935 was a consequence of both their active work within the community and the failures of the Yugoslav Embassy to stop them. Even before the outbreak of World War II, they had left their mark on Yugoslav society, mostly in the sphere of culture. However, they were at their most influential after 1945, when they became the elite of the new state. The two crucial experiences that would form their outlook after the war had occurred in the mid-1930s: work in a pluralist left-wing environment (which became the basis of the KPJ's Popular Front policy after 1935) and the pan-Yugoslav atmosphere in which they worked and with which they came to identify. The young communists had thus spent their formative years working in a broad coalition of left-wing, pro-Yugoslav forces. A decade and a half later, when they began critically examining Stalinism, many started learning from their student experience in Prague. Although lessons drawn were primarily retroactive, this experience of working in broad left-wing coalitions had helped them open their minds and actively partake in the construction of the unique and relatively open Yugoslav socialist system.

