Stalinism Revisited

Tismaneanu, Vladimir

Published by Central European University Press

Tismaneanu, Vladimir.
Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/16028.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/16028
“What’s the time now in Moscow?” (D. Ćosić in the novel The Sinner) is one of the best metaphors for international Stalinism. The time in Moscow did, indeed, change continually and unforeseeably in rhythm with the super-despot’s twists and turns, while all the other communist parties set their own clocks in tune with the Kremlin’s (until the Yugoslav communists began, so to say, asking “What’s the time now in Belgrade?”).

Diffuse Stalinism

Stalinism was a somewhat diffuse phenomenon. A long time ago I put forward some conceptual and other distinctions for it, relying on the specific example of the Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP). In the following paper, I will elaborate once more and revisit my earlier observations on the topic.

From the time of their inception, communist parties in Eastern Europe were for almost three decades in opposition, underground, under foreign occupation, and not in power, as was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The former were able to realize their full Stalinist potential only after assuming total control of the state in their countries. One should also not underestimate the difference between the Stalinism of the YCP during the anti-fascist and civil war, and revolution (1941–45), on the one hand, and the ruling Stalinism in Yugoslavia once that Party assumed power. Furthermore, Stalinism in power was one thing and the Stalinism of the communist parties in Western democracies was another. Parliamentarism lay at one end of the Stalinist spectrum, while totalitarianism was at the opposite one.
Stalinism was the result of a process and therefore its phases and degrees have to be differentiated. In that process even the incomplete Stalinists were eliminated. For this reason, the key question fueling the present paper is “To what degree had the YCP become Stalinized prior to Stalin’s onslaught in 1948?” Three years in power had apparently not been sufficient for that party to complete the stalinization process. It is also important to note that while in 1948 the YCP’s ideology was completely Stalinized, in practice some important differences with Moscow had already accumulated. In Yugoslavia, as in other countries as well, there was a pronounced difference between the Stalinists as initiators, orderers, and executors of mass terror and the Stalinists who were naive believers. Let me say that the political regimes in the first Yugoslavia actually abetted the hardcore Stalinists (a special type being the convict-Stalinists) through their policies of harsh persecution of communists. It would also be unjustified to equate the uninformed Stalinists with those who became Stalinists even though they were well informed. Up until the end of World War II, there were only a minuscule number of Yugoslav communists who knew what the real situation was like in the USSR. The rest, living at a great distance and possessing scant knowledge of Soviet affairs, were Stalinists in the sense that they blindly supported Stalin, the CPSU, and the Soviet Union, in their belief that communist ideals were genuinely being materialized there. These were mostly young, virtually still teenagers, who joined the Communist Youth League and the YCP only in 1941, and unlike some of their elder comrades, were not genuinely tormented by the late 1930s Moscow trials or the Hitler–Stalin Pact. After all, such problems were being rapidly pushed into the background, even by the experienced communists, especially when the German occupation and the liberation struggle began. This is hardly surprising, considering that even a section of the Russian anti-communist émigrés in the West altered their stance vis-à-vis the USSR, when Hitler attacked that country. It would also be unjust to lay special blame on the young and inexperienced Yugoslav communists for their loyal devotion to Stalin and the USSR, when we know that some of the most prominent intellectuals in the West nurtured similar illusions. Tito himself believed that the USSR would defeat Germany within six months. The Yugoslav Partisans hoped they would receive military assistance from the USSR, even when that country was on the brink of defeat. After the war, Yugoslav
communists also expected economic aid from the USSR although its territory was even more devastated than Yugoslavia’s.

Neither should we pass overgeneralized judgments on the Stalinists because of the generational differences. An important component of idealistic as opposed to realistic Stalinists was the utopian nature of the communist youth. The “highly developed” Soviet Stalinism was marked by terrorist industrialization, terrorist etatisation of agriculture, and terrorist purges in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) itself. The conflict between the YCP and Stalin, however, occurred at a time of a fairly enthusiastic (not mass terrorist) industrialization of Yugoslavia. More importantly, it occurred at a time when the YCP had not yet irreversibly plunged into the mass terrorist collectivization of the countryside. How significant this was is evident from the fact that such terrorization of the peasantry in the USSR, starting from 1928 onwards, marks the watershed between Leninism and Stalinism. Prior to Stalin’s offensive in 1948, the YCP likewise had not engaged in mass terrorist purges in its own ranks. By a curious play of chance, every 10 years—1928, 1938 (the completed stalinization in the USSR), and 1948—crucial events took place in the history of Stalinism. Just as the CPSU had 20 years earlier, the YCP in 1948 reached a crossroads but—in contrast to the Soviet case—it turned to its own type of NEP, after a period of forcing the peasants into the so-called work cooperatives.

Stalinism moved in a vicious circle of self-enlarging and self-justifying mass terror. Even the most active manifestation of loyalty to Stalin was not enough to save anyone from wholly arbitrary terror. Under such circumstances, a mood of panic spread rapidly and even penetrated intimate human relations. In a certain sense, the family was the basic foundation of the expanded reproduction of Stalinist totalitarianism. In those days, school children brought home a godlike image of Stalin. Distraught parents most certainly dared not call this image into question in front of their children, but sometimes even bent over backwards to uphold and strengthen it. And in order not to collapse under the burden of self-debasement, many parents convinced themselves that the super-cult of Stalin was justified. A similar totalitarian mechanism was operative in Yugoslavia with regard to Tito and his leadership, both before the break with Stalin and, even more so, with the heightened terrorization after the break.
Stalinist terror constantly produced its own justification as well. The harsher the consequences of Stalinism, the more it considered itself indispensable. For instance, when the private peasants did not have sufficient farm produce for the requisitions, the repressive measures had to increase in intensity because the towns were threatened with greater danger of starvation; and, since even the intensive terrorization did not augment agricultural yields, the only solution was the forced collectivization of the peasants’ farms. This resulted in an upward spiral of shortages of agricultural products. Subsequently, a vicious circle of violence was institutionalized. This is also an approximate picture of Titoist policy before the peasants were allowed (on small holdings) to produce for the market, after the break with Stalin. But the latter change was already a *Bukharinist turn in Titoism*.

Unless one perceives the differences among the Stalinists, it is impossible to understand what was to happen later during the de-Stalinization process, the liberal communist reforms, or, finally, during the recent implosion of communism. Some idealistic and naively loyal Stalinists, such as for example Gorbachev and his associates, became later transformed into the principal initiators and leaders of communist reformism and even into decisive actors in the process of the self-negation of communism.

**Stalinist Anti-Stalinism in Yugoslavia**

The biggest irony in the YCP’s history, however, was that its most Stalinist potential was manifested only at the time it openly resisted Stalin. This is why I have described, more than 40 years ago, Tito’s initial “no” to Stalin as a form of *Stalinist anti-Stalinism*. In doing so, I primarily had in mind the forced establishment of the so-called peasant work cooperatives that were dissolved only after Stalin’s death. Another reason for my statement was the imprisonment of “bourgeois elements” within the Popular Front, the annihilation of the last remnants of small private businesses and trades, the brutal terrorization of real or imputed cominformists, the convictions (based on earlier Soviet denunciations) and even the execution in Slovenia of a group of former Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camp inmates. My own father, a pre-war merchant, a “bourgeois fellow-traveler” of the communists
(though never a member of the YCP) from the very outset of the uprising against the occupiers in 1941, was a candidate on the Democratic Party’s list for deputy within the framework of the Popular Front in the first post-war elections. He was arrested soon after Stalin’s first letter to Tito, in the spring of 1948, and sentenced to 14 years of hard labor, of which he spent more than three years in prison. This was one in a series of actions which in practice meant implicit acceptance of the “criticism” by Stalin, but which was rejected at an official declarative state level. One can draw the following conclusion from the above analysis: it was a typical feature of our Stalinist anti-Stalinism to intensify repression, especially by the secret political police, the latter phenomenon being a lasting hallmark of Titoism.

When we observe the Titoists’ treatment of the cominformists within their own ranks, from 1948 onwards, we must also bear in mind the distinctions among the Stalinists. Many good communists were imprisoned as being cominformists only because they insisted that their leaders should have attended a Cominform meeting in Bucharest in order to defend themselves from the accusations leveled against them. They had no inkling of the possibility that such a delegation would not have returned to Yugoslavia alive. The leadership, headed by Tito (who, in his own words, experienced Stalin’s attack with great astonishment) was thoroughly acquainted with the situation in the USSR. Yet, that leadership required communists who were quite ignorant of all this to take up the proper attitude straightaway. Such communists were not even aware of the real nature of their own leadership and naively responded to the call to freely voice their opinions about the Cominform Resolution against the YCP, at their Party meetings. The top-rank leadership of the YCP was quite patient with some of the leaders who were hesitant. But, at the same time, the leadership hurriedly arrested the young and ill-informed cominformists. Incidentally, Stalin committed a serious blunder in 1948 by disparaging the YCP and its wartime and revolutionary contribution, thereby alienating numerous idealistic Stalinists in the Communist Youth League and in the YCP. The Titoist leadership that had taught the communists to worship Stalin now required them, virtually overnight, to turn against him. The realistic Stalinists, Tito and Kardelj, before all others, who had sojourned in Moscow before the War and were best acquainted with Stalinism, began dealing brutally with even the youngest of Stalinist idealists.
In the Bare Island (Goli otok) concentration camp (our anti-Gulag), as in other such camps as well, real and imputed cominformists were subjected to appalling terror, at a time when Tito and his closest associates enjoyed the pleasurable amenities of the Brioni Islands and even sailed past the torture sites in his floating palace, the cruise ship “Galeb,” as he travelled on his “missions of peace” around the world. Aleksandar Ranković, Tito’s right-hand man, was later to admit that almost half of the imprisoned cominformists were innocent. He did not, however, feel the need to draw any political conclusions from this fact as to the possible consequences for the YCP leadership. The latter continued claiming successes while distancing itself from all responsibility for its misdeeds and crimes, as though they had been caused by natural disasters. The fact that at least one-fifth of the YCP membership declared itself in favor of the Cominform Resolution seemed not to have had any connection with the previous policy of unquestioning loyalty to Stalin. Not to mention the treatment in the concentration camps for the cominformists that, in some sense, was even more inhumane than that in the Soviet camps. Some cominformists were cynically given the freedom to exercise “self-management and self-reeducation” in the camps, which led to brutal physical and psychological torture amongst the inmates who in this way competed to deserve being paroled. One must also not forget that, in Yugoslavia, some communists, even some non-communists and anti-communists, who criticized the Yugoslav leadership from liberal and democratic positions, were deliberately incarcerated in perfect Stalinist style, as being cominformists. Not only were these people subjected to torture but their families, friends, and even some chance acquaintances were also persecuted. Even if we agree that the physical isolation of genuine cominformists was necessary, this certainly could not justify the brutality toward them. I want to add, as a side note, a tale which shows the grotesque and contradicting leadership’s attitudes at the time: Tito decided to confine the cominformists to a wooded Adriatic island (that was far from the Eastern and Northern borders of Yugoslavia, so as to prevent their liberation in the event of a Soviet military intervention), while also sending selected communists, who rejected Stalin’s accusations with the right arguments, to work among the inmates for the purpose of patient persuasion without torture. And as we are speaking of the suffering cominformists, it should be emphasized that very few of them recognized
the organic link between their own fate and the mass terror perpetrated on the anti-communists and non-communists in which they themselves had earlier actively or passively participated.

What course would our history have taken had Stalin not demanded the overthrow of Tito and his trio (Kardelj, Rankovic, and Djilas), but had continued setting them up as models to other communist leaders and had then craftily induced them to forge ahead into the mass terrorist collectivization of agriculture, into a more rapid and more radical nationalization of private property, into still more brutal persecution of “bourgeois elements,” into the organization of countless trials similar to the so-called Dachau and Buchenwald trials? In a word, if he had urged them to turn the whole of Yugoslavia into a specific “Gulag Archipelago”? After all, Stalin’s emissaries at the first Cominform Meeting in 1947 had already persuaded the Yugoslav delegation to arrogantly criticize the French and Italian communist parties and thus unwittingly contribute to its own isolation when its turn came the following year. Another counterfactual question is what would have ensued if Stalin had allowed Tito to create a Balkan federation with Bulgaria and Albania, to integrate it straightaway into a kind of Warsaw pact (which was established only in 1949 after Tito had already successfully defected) and then had militarily intervened against Yugoslavia by invoking these “international” institutions?

However, nothing of all this would have been necessary for Stalin in his younger days. He would have known how to invite Tito and his trio to some celebration, give them a handful of medals and decorations and then arrange for them to perish in an airplane accident on their way home. He would then have had the occasion to “mourn” them at their funeral just as he did at Kirov’s. True, Stalin “missed” doing this as early as mid-1946 when Tito last visited the USSR, before the rift between the two leaders. Subsequently, using various pretexts, Tito preferred to send others from among the leadership to the Soviet Union.¹ This is one of reasons for the “paradoxical”

¹ Djilas was in Moscow at the last meeting before the conflict broke out. On that occasion something occurred that he has never made public but which I learned from him personally. Namely, in January 1990 the Moscow journal Literary-Gazette and the Belgrade weekly NIN arranged in Moscow a Soviet–Yugoslav discussion on the “Stalin–Tito Conflict.” Of the Yugoslavs, among others, Djilas and I participated. After Djilas spoke I asked him whether Sta-
conclusion that the YCP could not have successfully resisted Stalin had it not been led by a Tito with his Stalinist characteristics and experience.

After the break with Stalin, Tito and his ideologists re-styled earlier differences, even lifting them to mythic proportions by means of hindsight projections. We were to believe that when Tito assumed the leadership of the YCP on the eve of World War II, the YCP was a non-Stalinist, almost anti-Stalinist, party. This was a case of retroactive metaphysics: the “essence” of the YCP was the same both when it obsequiously followed Stalin and when it wrenched itself free from his coattails! During the war, the Soviet leadership secretly rebuked Tito for calling his military detachments “proletarian” and for setting up a temporary government at the second session of the Anti-fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), in November 1943. Furthermore, in a speech on 27 May 1945 in connection with the forced withdrawal of his troops from Trieste, Tito criticized the policy of spheres of influence, which the USSR considered an insult and therefore protested. In addition, the Titoist leadership obstructed Soviet intelligence services in their efforts to recruit agents within the YCP, even after the end of the Second World War. Finally, while the war was still in progress and, particularly in its aftermath, the Soviet side looked askance at the equal glorification of Stalin and Tito by the Yugoslav communists. Nevertheless, the fateful discord between the Soviet and Yugoslav leaderships cropped up only after Tito attempted to create a Balkan federation under his leadership.

Lin had ever suggested in one way or another that he (Djilas) should assume Tito’s position. Djilas responded by describing the following scene. In Stalin’s dacha, during a working dinner, attended by the highest Soviet leaders, and from among the Yugoslavs only by Djilas, at a certain moment the conversation lapsed and was followed by a long silence. All those present fixed their eyes on Djilas, who intuitively felt that Stalin was about to suggest a change in the Yugoslav leadership. So he (Djilas) broke the silence by an abrupt warm praise of Tito. After a while, Stalin cut Djilas short with an energetic, dismissive wave of his hand and a sharp look, returning to topics from the previous conversation.
Jugo-Stalinism and Anti-Fascist Patriotism

On the eve of Hitler’s attack on Yugoslavia, the YCP was a fully disciplined section of the Communist Internationale. The leading Yugoslav Stalinists endeavored primarily to assist the Soviet Union, overthrow the government in their country and integrate it into the USSR as one of the republics. They supported Stalin’s pact with Hitler. We need to look only as far as the Resolution of the Fifth National Conference of the YCP, dated 1940, which defined World War II as an “imperialist” war and stated that the “English and French imperialists sparked a new conflict.” When he saw how enthusiastically the Ustasha government was welcomed in Zagreb in April 1941, Tito moved the central headquarters of the YCP to Belgrade. His first thought undoubtedly was to survive, but his decision was also motivated by the prospects for eventual resistance to the occupational forces. The bulk of the partisan units that launched the uprising in July 1941 were made up of young persons who had just joined the Communist Youth League and the YCP. True, they did aspire to come to power, no less than did the older communists, but they were at least equally motivated by patriotic anti-fascism. The culture of resistance and revolt against foreign invaders, so pronounced in the Serbian territories of Yugoslavia, exerted great influence on them. I believe that a few autobiographical details can provide some idea of the reality of those times. During the German occupation of Serbia (1941–45), I was 10–14 years old. My post-war decision to join the Communist Youth League was decisively influenced by the fact that several young communists passed through our home on their way to join the Partisans. I was also influenced by the fact that my father, as a patriot, cooperated with the Partisans—for which his life had hung on a thread on several occasions. Likewise, another circumstance that left an impression on me was that a Jewish woman, who managed to survive the war, was hidden in our home for a period of time.

Going back to my argument, I believe that unless one clearly differentiates the motivation of the leading communists from that of the younger ones, one cannot understand the relationship between Stalinism and patriotic anti-fascism. These two components of Yugo-communism were in a state of tension, but Stalinism became dominant as
soon as the question of priority was raised, because for the communist leaders patriotic anti-fascism possessed an instrumental and not intrinsic value. After all, the essential feature of Stalinist totalitarianism was to treat everyone and everything as a means to its end. Thus, for example, by subsequent ideologization, it was “established” that the communists played the decisive role in the 27 March 1941 overthrow of the Yugoslav government’s pact with Hitler, signed two days earlier. However, the real communist contribution to this event was negligible. During the whole time they ruled, the communists concealed from the people the fact that Tito had immediately rebuked the then communist leadership in Serbia for surrendering to the mass anti-fascist enthusiasm.

The YCP sent out a call for an uprising against the occupiers on 4 July 1941 only after Hitler’s attack on the USSR, which was launched on 22 June of that year. This was in line with Stalin’s appraisal that the attack radically changed the nature of World War II from being an imperialist war to a liberation war. One of the first moves of the Yugoslav Stalinist war leadership was to kill those communists who had earlier opposed the “Bolshevisation” of the YCP. Thus, Živojin Pavlović, author of a book entitled The Soviet Thermidor, in which he criticized Tito for Stalinizing the YCP, was killed on the liberated territory (the Užice Republic) in the fall of 1941. As the liberation war in Yugoslavia gained momentum, so did the aspirations of the communists to monopolize anti-fascism. For this reason, 4 July 1941 was finally selected to mark the beginning of the uprising, as it was on that day that the YCP called for the armed struggle. As long as it could, the leadership glossed over the fact that the armed struggle had been launched before that date by the non-communist Serbs in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in their efforts to save themselves from the Ustasha genocidal assault.

My thesis on the instrumentalization of anti-fascism is also confirmed by the negotiations conducted in March 1943 in Zagreb, by a partisan delegation led by Milovan Đilas. This delegation proposed to the German command that the mutual hostilities should cease for the purpose of concentrating their forces on their conflict with the Chetniks, before the expected landing of the Western Allies on the Adriatic coast. To the very end of his life, Tito denied that these negotiations were conducted on his orders because he knew that the truth would
cast doubt on the proclaimed anti-fascist purity of the Partisans, a matter of key significance for the assertion of their patriotic moral superiority over that of Draža Mihajlović’s Chetniks. The official history of the National Liberation War did not ascribe any significant differences to what the Chetniks represented, on the one side, and the Nedić, Ljotić, and even the Ustashi formations, on the other. In order to understand what I mean by this, I must first remind the reader of the existence of two crucially different dimensions in Serbian tradition. One such tradition is the rebel-deontological one and the second is the opportunist-utilitarian tradition. The first was manifested, for example, in the desire to reject in entirety the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum in 1914, in the refusal to accept the Yugoslav government’s pact with Hitler in 1941, as well as in the outbreak of the Partisan and Chetnik uprisings against the occupiers in that same year. The second tradition was manifested in the partial acceptance of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum by the Serbian government, in the signing of the accord with Hitler on March 25, 1941, in the goodwill shown to him by the new Simović government as soon as it assumed power after the 27 March 1941 coup d’état, in the Chetnik decision to refrain from continuing the uprising and, most of all, in the Nedić quisling government and its armed struggle against the Partisans up to the end of the War.

In Serbian history these two dominant tendencies constantly conflict and interplay, while occasionally also mitigating each other’s effects. When a fatal danger appears to threaten their national dignity or independence, the rebel-deontological elite often prevails by bestowing its voice and their actions to the masses, and by conveying the impression that the majority of the Serbs are ready to sacrifice their lives for higher values. In fact, the Serbs are generally educated to feel shame if they evince fear or the readiness to be flexible. But, when due to the activities of a relatively small uncompromising avant-garde, huge sacrifices ensue, a decisive role is then taken up by the opportunist-utilitarian camp and even, in some instances, by those who pursue a collaborationist orientation. It is in this light that I see what happened in Serbia during the 1941–1944 occupation. As is already well known, the Partisans and the Chetniks rose against the German occupying forces and succeeded in freeing a considerable area of Serbia in the second half of 1941. However, the two groups soon separated not only because of their ultimate wartime aims, but also by dint of the defeat of the
uprising and especially because of their attitudes to the mass reprisals against the civilian population.

The bulk of the Partisans fled beyond Serbia while the few remaining ones did not cease harassing the enemy, despite the subsequent civilian casualties. These sacrifices, however, shocked the Chetniks of Draža Mihajlović and marked them psychologically and politically until their final collapse. “It is not yet time to fight,” became the Chetnik watchword. They waited, more or less, for the Allied victory over Hitler, and then only to participate in the war during the concluding military operations and in this way impose a solution to the problem of the post-war rulers in Yugoslavia. The Chetniks, however, continued fighting the Partisans with the latter paying them in the same coin. In this ostensibly winning combination, there was “only” one oversight: Churchill was no less an opportunist and utilitarian than Draža Mihajlović. He therefore withdrew his support from the Chetniks and extended it to the Partisans. Mihajlović’s position was quite fragile from the moral standpoint as well: he ultimately wanted to save his people at the cost of the wartime losses from the leading anti-fascist powers. If we compare the two anti-fascist formations in Yugoslavia, we can note that the main cause for the Mihajlović movement’s collapse was the leader’s unwillingness to continue fighting the occupying forces. The moral decadence of Titoism manifested itself primarily in the continuation of the worst dimensions of the civil war even after its victory had been attained.

More light is thrown on the relationship between communism and anti-fascism in former Yugoslavia if one turns to the main patterns that were taken over at the local level from the Stalinized history of the Bolshevik revolution and the USSR. This is how one can explain, in my opinion, the fact that anti-fascism was no obstacle to the Yugoslav communists in their “sharpening of the class struggle” as well as in their rapid shift from the “bourgeois phase” of the revolution to the “proletarian” one. In doing this, they annihilated actual and potential enemies and rivals, particularly those anti-fascists who competed for recognition, both at the level of the populace and on the international scene. When the communist terrorization led to grave defeats, the leadership of the YCP and the National Liberation War distanced themselves in true Stalinist fashion from the acts of terror as from “leftist deviations,” although the terror was inspired by leadership itself.
Another evidence of the official ideologization regarding the “intrinsic” anti-fascism of yugo-communism was the declaration that every form of anti-communism in Yugoslavia was pro-fascist or even fascist, at least “objectively” so, if not by deliberate choice. All potential rivals of the communists, not to mention the real enemies, were proclaimed “fascists,” “the servants and helpers” of fascism, or “enemy collaborators” and the like. These terms were used to justify the mass arrests and executions that incurred when the communists assumed power. They also made use of the confiscation of the property of “enemy collaborators” (often falsely accused as such), one of the YCP’s favorite forms of etatization. There was also a close link between the instrumentalization of anti-fascism and the absence of an enlightened de-nazification in Yugoslavia, after the end of World War II, despite the fact that in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Croatia numerous Ustashi and their accomplices were to be found. Let me add: more Nazis and fascists were imprisoned and executed in Yugoslavia than in Germany, Austria, or Italy, but unfortunately much less effort was exerted to explain why there was such a large number of them in our country. The communist leaders and ideologues were guided by the tacit premise that Nazism and fascism was, in some of national communities in Yugoslavia, just a kind of “accident” in comparison with their “essence,” personified by the communists and the National Liberation War.