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## Communist State Security's role in the persecution of "the old communists" in Slovenia

### Introduction

The black-and-white explanations of the takeover of power in communist countries far too often resort to describing two monolithic structures. One of these was supposedly the democratic opposition that opposed the communist takeover of power, while the other side allegedly consisted of the communist authorities settling scores with their opponents through merciless terror. Meanwhile, the fact often gets forgotten that democratic structures were sometimes very weak; that, on the other hand, the Communist Party also did not consist of people with singular political outlooks; and that, even before the Second World War, the Communist Party had been subject to struggles for leading positions. The following contribution will therefore focus on the issues that have ordinarily been somewhat overlooked in analyses of the communist takeover of power and the terror committed by its state security services; it will look at the attitude that the communist regime fostered towards the leading communists of the old generation, who had, for various reasons, fallen out of favour with the most important communists after the war.

This, therefore, does not involve the classic retaliation of the communist authorities against the democratic opposition after the communist takeover of power. Furthermore, the action against formerly important communists is simply incomparable with Stalin's cleansings in the 1930s, as the discussed Slovenian example did not involve communists capable of endangering the leading position of Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) in Yugoslavia. Tito took over the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, KPJ) after his return from Moscow in 1937, but many of his opponents had, by then, already vanished during Stalin's purges in the Soviet concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> During the war, the KPJ led the resistance movement, and its Partisan Army became a significant part of the anti-fascist coalition. When Tito became the indisputable leader of the new Yugoslavia after the end of the war, it seemed that the only true opponents of the introduction of his communist dictatorship were the leaders of the pre-war political parties. However, the group of people who disagreed with the way in which Tito's dictatorship was introduced included communists who had been in leading positions in the KPJ even before Tito assumed its leadership in 1937.

## Preparations for the KPJ's retaliation against the opposition

Already during the Second World War, the communist authorities in Yugoslavia established political police intended to persecute political enemies after the conflict ended. This service, organized in accordance with the Soviet model, was named the Department for the Protection of the People (Organizacija za zaščito naroda, OZNA) at the time of its establishment in 1944, and renamed as the State Security Administration (Uprava državne varnosti, UDV; UDB in Serbian) in 1946.<sup>2</sup> Under the absolute control of the KPJ, the OZNA started to persecute the Party's political opponents immediately after the end of war. These primarily included the leaders of the most important political parties that restored their activities in Serbia and Croatia in 1945.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the KPJ already controlled the country in 1945, although it had not registered its activities as an independent political party in accordance with the new legislation. It founded the People's Front of Yugoslavia (Ljudska fronta Jugoslavije, LFJ), joined by several other political parties, which thus subordinated themselves to the leading position of the communists in the state. As the head of the united list of the LFJ during the 1945 elections, Tito gained the mandate to form a new government.

In Slovenia, a similar organization had already been formed in 1941. The Liberation Front of Slovenia (Osvobodilna fronta Slovenije, OFS) was established at the initiative of the Communist Party of Slovenia (Komunistična partija Slovenije, KPS). Several different groups joined the OFS, which headed the resistance movement in Slovenia, but the organization had already lost its coalitional nature by 1943. In 1945, the OFS became the Slovenian part of the LFJ. As the OFS had already included a major part of the pre-war politicians of various political outlooks in its activities during the war, they did not deliberate on the restoration of the activities of the pre-war political parties after the war. In Slovenia, the OZNA had special divisions for the clergy, mobs (the name given to the remnants of various armed groups, mostly collaborationist units, which had failed to retreat to the West), and the remnants of former bourgeois parties (these mainly included the politicians who had not cooperated with the liberation movement during the war). In Slovenia, the attention of the communist politicians and the OZNA was focused on the politicians of the former Catholic Slovenian People's Party (Slovenska ljudska stranka, SLS) and certain liberal politicians. However, the leading Slovenian politicians determined that, unlike in Serbia and Croatia, where the OZNA was busy dealing with opposition from former pre-war parties, in Slovenia they barely registered any opposition activities.<sup>4</sup>

2 For more about the OZNA in Slovenia see DORNIK ŠUBELJ, Ljuba: *Oddelek za zaščito naroda za Slovenijo*. Arhiv Republike Slovenije, Ljubljana 1999; DORNIK ŠUBELJ, Ljuba: *Ozna in prevzem oblasti 1944–46*. Modrijan – Arhiv Republike Slovenije, Ljubljana 2013.

3 For more see PAVLOVIĆ, Momčilo: *Za Tita ili za kralja: izbori za Ustavotvornu skupštinu 11. novembra 1945*. Institut za savremenu istoriju, Belgrade 2007; RADELIĆ, Zdenko: *Hrvatska seljačka stranka 1941–1950*. Hrvatski institut za povijest, Zagreb 1996.

4 GABRIČ, Aleš: *V senci politike. Opozicija komunistični oblasti v Sloveniji po letu 1945*. Cankarjeva založba, Ljubljana 2019, pp. 80–84.

Due to the specific nature of the war and the resistance movement in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, the political opposition in the state was substantially weaker in comparison with those countries that ended up east of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> The OZNA in Slovenia assessed that the activities of its members entailed *completely amateur attempts at renewing their political activities, which, however, are uncoordinated and limited to the areas where these people reside*.<sup>6</sup> Some of the Catholic and liberal politicians had already emigrated, while some of those who remained in Slovenia had been active in the Liberation Front. Others were imprisoned and awaited so-called political trials. However, in the other centres, especially in Belgrade and Zagreb, the political police were far more preoccupied with persecuting political opponents, as they were more active there. On the other hand, in Slovenia, the discussions between the last remnants of what had once been the most prominent Slovenian political parties yielded barely any results.<sup>7</sup>

Realistically, the official opposition in Belgrade and Zagreb never had a chance either, as the communist authorities exercised absolute control over the police, the army, and the media. The most important party of the opposition, the Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka), was supported primarily by a part of the Serbian bourgeoisie, which argued in favour of classic liberal freedoms (freedom of the press, assembly, and association), criticized repression by the new authorities, and supported the independence of the judiciary.<sup>8</sup> Milan Grol (1876–1952), the leader of the Democratic Party, wondered in his newspaper *Demokratija* what kind of equal footing in the political competition, promised by Tito and his associates, would really exist, considering that the People's Front had 130 newspapers at its disposal, while the opposition was only left with a single one:<sup>9</sup> Grol's *Demokratija*. This newspaper also published the opposition parties' statement on 20 September 1945, declaring that they would boycott the elections because the authorities had not ensured equal conditions for the functioning of the opposition. The statement carried less importance for Slovenia than for Serbia and Croatia, as no opposition parties had been registered in Slovenia. At the end of the statement Grol added that *today's message shall be followed by the decisions of groups in Zagreb and Ljubljana*<sup>10</sup> and corroborated this with a claim that agreements had already been reached with the opposition leaders from the other parts of the country: *The exchange of ideas with progressive groups in Ljubljana has ensured this solidarity as well*.<sup>11</sup> Grol's observations were problematic, as he never explained who these "people from Ljubljana" actually were. The names of the opposition leaders from Belgrade and Zagreb were known to everyone, while the "Slovenians" or "people from Ljubljana" would always be referred to in this manner, without any personal or party labels.

5 For more see REPE, Božo: Povojna opozicija (alternativa) v Jugoslaviji in v vzhodnoevropskih državah. *Borec. Revija za zgodovino, literaturo in antropologijo*, 1992, Vol. 43, No. 1–2, pp. 79–130.

6 PUČNIK, Jože (ed.): *Iz arhivov slovenske politične organizacije*. Veda, Ljubljana 1996, p. 169. All translations in the text are the work of the translator of this contribution Borut Praper.

7 GABRIČ, Aleš: *V senci politike. Opozicija komunistični oblasti v Sloveniji po letu 1945*, pp. 55–72.

8 PAVLOVIČ, Momčilo: *Istorija Demokratske stranke: 1941–1952*. Istorijski arhiv Beograda, Belgrade 2017, pp. 126–132, 141–167.

9 GROL, Milan: *Silom ili razlogom? Demokratija*, 1945, Vol. 1, No. 5 (25. 10. 1945), p. 1.

10 Saopštenje udruženih opozicionih stranaka. *Demokratija*, 1945, Vol. 1, No. 1 (27. 9. 1945), p. 1.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

### The opposition in its own ranks

The reason for this impotence of the opposition in Slovenia had already been rooted in wartime developments on this territory. The Liberation Front had established a wide network of activities and successfully ensured the participation of many of the pre-war supporters of the traditional Slovenian parties, whose power and importance kept diminishing because of their passivity. The real opponents of the new authorities were thus also hiding within the official ruling Liberation Front of Slovenia and the Communist Party of Slovenia itself, although in 1945 the political police had not yet paid any particular attention to them. As it was, State Security first settled accounts with its wartime opponents. Then it started contemplating retribution against "colleagues" in the Liberation Front. These included those members and supporters of the liberation movement that nevertheless opposed the nascent political monopoly of the communists. However, immediately after the war, the communist authorities had not yet contemplated potential opponents within their own communist ranks, nor had this been one of the tasks of the OZNA political police. But people who were dissatisfied with the new authorities soon appeared, even within the Communist Party. This study will only focus on the leftist intellectuals who had already been known for their political and cultural activities before the war. During the war, they supported the liberation movement or were actively involved in it. After the war some of them were, in their own opinion, pushed aside and not appropriately rewarded for all the years of their dedicated Party service. Some of them were able to conceal their resentment, while others let their former colleagues know that they had earned a more respectable position in the state where the Communist Party had assumed power.<sup>12</sup>

The oldest of the three people under consideration is Dragotin Gustinčič (1882–1974), who was among the founders of the KPJ in 1920 and spent a decade as a member of its leadership. He was active in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, while during the Spanish Civil War he was an officer tasked as the chief censor and head of the military mail of the International Brigades that fought on the Republican side. After the end of the war, he returned to the Soviet Union, where he remained until as late as 1945. Among the older-generation communists he was already known for his advocacy of the federalist national programme in 1923, when this was not yet the doctrine of the KPJ. He counted on being (re)appointed for important political positions once he returned to Ljubljana, but soon realized that the leading communists did not want him in their circle. In letters addressed to the leading Slovenian communists, Gustinčič resentfully pointed out that the history of the workers' movement had in fact begun before 1937, when the KPJ leadership had been taken over by Tito and his associates, which meant that the older communists had therefore been unjustly pushed away from leading positions in the state. He was convinced that the leadership of the Com-

11 Ibid.

12 For more about the fights in KPJ before Second World War see GUŽVICA, Stefan: *Frakcijski boji v Komunistični partiji Jugoslavije med veliko čistko 1936–1940*. Sophia, Ljubljana 2019.

## Aleš Gabrič

munist Party of Yugoslavia was distancing itself from the theoretical principles of the Marxist-Leninist ideologies.<sup>13</sup>

Lovro Kuhar (1893–1950) was a part of the old communist circle as well. He was also a renowned Slovenian writer and known as Prežihov Voranc, which was his literary pseudonym. He was incarcerated several times due to his communist activities. In the 1930s, while he lived in Paris, he managed the illegal operations of the KPJ abroad together with Tito, but even then, their respective assessments with regard to the Party had already diverged on certain points. After the factional struggles that hampered its effectiveness, Kuhar evaluated the position of the KPJ very bleakly, while Tito simultaneously tried to gain the support needed to take over the leadership of the Party. Furthermore, Kuhar criticized the overly negative attitude of the Party towards the socialists, as he saw them as potential allies in the struggle for workers' rights. As he was one of the few leading communists with a peasant background, he had a better ear for rural issues and was not in favour of completely expropriating peasants. The difference between these two close associates (Kuhar was more committed to social feeling for everyman, while Tito, as a professional revolutionary, aspired to power) is also illustrated by an anecdote dating back to their association in Paris. Supposedly, Kuhar reproached Tito for spending too much Comintern money on lavish clothes. When Tito took over the leadership of the KPJ shortly afterwards, he did not include Kuhar in the new leadership of the Party.<sup>14</sup> After Lovro Kuhar returned to Slovenia, he devoted himself to his writing career. As a respected intellectual he became politically active again in 1941 and managed the operations of intellectuals in the resistance movement. He was arrested and incarcerated by the Italian and German occupiers. At the end of the war, he was released from the Mauthausen concentration camp and returned home in poor health.

The third man – Vinko Möderndorfer (1894–1958), a teacher and a prominent researcher in the field of ethnology – was already politically active in the 1920s. During the war, he arrived in the liberated territory controlled by Partisan forces, where the Liberation Front of Slovenia had also established civil authorities. He was assigned to the Department of Education and took part in the organization thereof. He also endeavoured to study in the Soviet Union, in order to familiarize himself with the development of education in that country.

At the end of the war, all three men under consideration were thus associates of the victorious political force that took power in Yugoslavia. However, after 1937, when the leading position in the KPJ had been assumed by Josip Broz Tito, the communist leadership had become a circle of people closed even to previously important communists, such as Kuhar and Gustinčič. After the war, such individuals were rewarded with important cultural or scientific positions by the authorities who, in

13 GABRIČ, Aleš: *V senci politike. Opozicija komunistični oblasti v Sloveniji po letu 1945*, pp. 153–156.

14 DEŽELAK BARIČ, Vida: *Politični vzpon in zaton Lovra Kuharja – Prežihovega Voranca v Komunistični partiji Jugoslavije v tridesetih letih*. In: GABRIČ, Aleš (ed.): *Prežihov Voranc – Lovro Kuhar: pisatelj, politik, patriot*. Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino – Slovenski znanstveni inštitut, Ljubljana – Wien 2010, pp. 85–105, especially pp. 90–104.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

turn, expected their political loyalty. Such an approach implied that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia used a softer method to purge the political scene of its political opponents. Harsher methods included police investigations, political show trials, as well as prison and death sentences. The latter, however, were used immediately, mostly against the people who had collaborated with the occupiers during the war. The authorities applied the softer method especially against experts who were in a position to contribute to developments in their respective professional fields. These people, therefore, were to be "confined to" scientific, cultural, or educational institutions, where they would be sufficiently engaged in their professional work to contribute to social development without having enough time on their hands to focus on political problems as well. They were thus supposed to be fully employed in their respective fields of expertise, where they had to disseminate the ideological influence of the authorities, while they were at the same time not supposed to exert any influence whatsoever on the development of political guidelines.

In the first post-war years, when the ruling Communist Party was establishing its monopoly in the political and economic sphere, the politics of putting prominent public and cultural workers out of action was understandable – at least from the viewpoint of the Party. However, in the middle of the 1950s this sort of politics returned, like a boomerang, to the centre of the political developments, as the leading communists focused their attention on the cultural field as well. They had to face the fact that, in the previous decade, the politically reliable cadre had been preoccupied with political and organizational tasks. However, it had been incapable of discussing more demanding professional problems and had a poor reputation in cultural circles. In the beginning of 1958, when the communists were planning to take over cultural institutions, the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia<sup>15</sup> established the following: *The predominant preoccupation of the communists with organizational activities led to the professional training of politically inactive sceptics or even opponents. [...] The thesis that politics was the only domain of the communists, while both expertise and creativity (scientific and artistic) lay outside their sphere of influence, seemed far more credible at that time, because it was supported by our own practice. In a few years, after the initial organizational tasks had been mostly completed and substantive work had become the priority, it turned out that the communists had not evolved and that non-political experts had been gaining prominence. After many reorganizations, the non-political professionals even took over the leadership of numerous scientific and cultural institutions.*<sup>16</sup>

This consideration goes beyond the scope of our subject, but it explains why the intellectuals were rewarded with important functions in 1945. Dragotin Gustinčič was appointed as the first dean of the newly established Economics Faculty (Gos-

15 In 1952, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia renamed itself as the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Zveza komunistov Jugoslavije, ZKJ). The Communist Party of Slovenia thus became the League of Communists of Slovenia (Zveza komunistov Slovenije, ZKS).

16 *Arhiv Republike Slovenije* (hereafter referred to as ARS), f. Centralni komite Zveze komunistov Slovenije (hereafter referred to as AS 1589), III, t.e. (Box) 76, Nekaj podatkov o razvoju političnih problemov na kulturnem področju, undated, p. 7.

Aleš Gabrič

podarska fakulteta; today the Faculty of Economics, Ekonomska fakulteta) of the University of Ljubljana. He was thus supposed to implement education policies that would produce a new type of economic development planner. Lovro Kuhar was selected as the President of the People's Education of Slovenia (Ljudska prosveta Slovenije), the only approved association of cultural societies, which was supposed to oversee all amateur cultural activities in Slovenia. Vinko Möderndorfer was employed at the Ministry of Education of Slovenia and appointed as the Secretary of the Society of St. Mohor (Društvo sv. Mohorja) – the only old publishing house that kept functioning without being under the complete control of the new authorities. He was tasked with implementing a programme in accordance with the wishes of the communist ideologues in this institution, which was otherwise Catholic.

In the opinion of the communist leadership, the three men were rewarded appropriately for their past activities in the Party, though kept at a sufficient distance from the political decision-making mechanisms that were reserved for the closest circle of Tito's associates. When the political monopoly was being established, the State Security Administration (UDV) focused particularly on old pre-war and wartime political opponents. At least initially it overlooked the fact that new critics had also appeared within their own ranks. The activities of these men, especially Gustinčič, revealed how far from reality the State Security apparatus could stray in its assessments, based on dogmatic ideological schemes.

### Communists as opponents of the communist authorities

As we have already mentioned, no serious attempts at organizing the political opposition were made in Slovenia in 1945, as the UDV would prevent such attempts in advance.<sup>17</sup> However, the UDV did not (yet) realise that some of the older communists had supposedly met at Gustinčič's initiative. He had then allegedly suggested that they should run as candidates in the elections of November 1945. When his friends refused to support him and when Lovro Kuhar mentioned that he had already been chosen as a candidate on Tito's list, Gustinčič's argument about the disregard for "the old communists" fell apart. Gustinčič's idea was not supported by any of his counterparts, as Kuhar and Möderndorfer warned him that taking action on his own – *when Gustinčič wanted to draw up an opposition list*<sup>18</sup> – could be deemed as a "destructive" act, as it would go against the leadership of the Communist Party and the candidate list of the People's Front for the Yugoslav Constituent Assembly elections.<sup>19</sup>

Gustinčič abandoned the idea, at least temporarily, only to resurrect it before the Slovenian Constitutional Assembly (Ustavodajna skupščina Ljudske republike Slovenije) elections in the autumn of 1946. He would hold regular meetings with the

17 PUČNIK, Jože (ed.): *Iz arhivov slovenske politične policije*, pp. 177–180.

18 ARS, f. Republiški sekretariat za notranje zadeve (hereafter referred to as AS 1931), microfilm XII-003, Zapisnik zaslišanja Möderndorfer Vinka, July 1948 (not dated further), p. 4688.

19 Ibid., Nadaljevanje zapisnika zaslišanja Möderndorfer Vinka, 12–13. 7. 1948, pp. 4665, 4668, 4688, 4590, and 4591.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

older communists that were supposedly ignored in the new Yugoslavia. In this case, Marcel Žorga – who had already been elected on the communist list to the Constitutional Assembly of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes already in 1920 – joined Gustinčič and Möderndorfer as the third member of the discussion. Möderndorfer assessed the candidacy at the Slovenian Constitutional Assembly elections as more realistic than a year ago, as it would take place at the district level, which is why he estimated that *considering my ten years of work in the industrial town of Mežica, I have a chance to succeed with my candidacy*.<sup>20</sup> When confronted with the question of how new candidates should be nominated at all, Gustinčič replied that they had to convince the workers to send a written *candidacy request to the Central Committee*. Möderndorfer, however, refrained from doing this, because Lovro Kuhar informed him that the candidate lists had already been drawn up and that it *would be impossible to change them*.<sup>21</sup> Möderndorfer accepted this as a fact and reconciled himself with not being able to run. By all means, these activities involved only a narrow circle of people without any backing, not even among the wider circle of the older generation of communists. Their deliberations would probably have remained completely unnoticed had Dragotin Gustinčič's further activities not triggered an investigation into the aforementioned group.

Similar activities of the politicians from the former Catholic or liberal parties were already monitored by the Slovenian UDV, but State Security did not yet pay any attention to the older communists. In fact, the reason for the investigation into the older communists was provided by Dragotin Gustinčič himself, as he wrote to some of the leading Slovenian communists. The standpoints, expressed in the letters, represented the most severe criticism of the communist authorities written in first post-war years by a communist ideologue in Yugoslavia. Gustinčič wrote them in the years 1946 and 1947 on the basis of narrowminded doctrine foundations that had even less to do with actual circumstances than in the case of the leading communists. The reason for Gustinčič's writing was his disappointment with regard to post-war developments and especially his own political impotence in the new state: as a former leading communist he was insulted by the fact that he had been pushed to the sidelines, and was convinced that he should be assigned to one of the more important positions in the state leadership.

He addressed the most comprehensive letter, more than 20 pages long, to the leading Party ideologue Edvard Kardelj on 31 May 1947. Gustinčič severely criticized the authorities and the Communist Party. He resented the leadership for pushing the older communists away from the mechanisms of power, although they had proven themselves even before Tito had assumed the leadership of the Party. For example, in May 1947 Gustinčič wrote to Kardelj<sup>22</sup> that *judging from your behaviour, the history of the workers' movement began around 1937 or perhaps even later*.<sup>23</sup> It was clear from his letters

20 Ibid., Nadaljevanje zapisnika zaslišanja Möderndorfer Vinka, 13. 7. 1948, p. 4665.

21 Ibid., Möderndorfer: Izjava, 25. 6. 1948, p. 4695.

22 ARS, f. AS 1931, t.e. 445, Pismo Dragotina Gustinčiča Edvardu Kardelju, 31. 5. 1947, pp. 313–333.

23 Ibid., p. 328.



## Aleš Gabrič

that Gustinčič was offended because he had supposedly not been suitably rewarded for all the years he had dedicated to the Party. He also criticized the fact that Partisans were given priority over communist experts during the appointment of management personnel, even though professional competence should have been the decisive criterion, and he claimed that this was the reason why the productivity of the nationalized factories (the first nationalization law was adopted in December 1946) had diminished. Furthermore, he disapproved of the national policy at the disputed border area in the Trieste region. At the peace conference after the Second World War, Yugoslavia demanded the territory of Primorska (mostly populated by Slovenians), which the superpowers had given to Italy after the First World War as a reward for joining the efforts of the Entente – including the city of Trieste (mostly populated by Italians). Gustinčič thought that, in its argumentation of border demands, the Yugoslav side over-emphasized the national principles instead of class-related and revolutionary ones. In Gustinčič's opinion, the KPJ was still overly lenient towards its associates in the Liberation Front, while it failed to consistently implement Party politics in the overall political space.<sup>24</sup>

The leadership of the KPJ was not ready for this sort of criticism in 1947. The letters produced a tempestuous reaction among the leading politicians who read them. However, they did not react in the manner that they would most likely have resorted to if such criticism had been voiced by their old political opponents. In a way, the manner in which the aforementioned old communists were investigated indicated how the UDV was subordinate to the KPJ leadership. The investigation took place on two levels. Initially, Gustinčič was summoned to Belgrade in August 1947 and questioned in front of a Party commission (instead of being immediately interrogated by the UDV).<sup>25</sup> State Security simultaneously started investigating Gustinčič's associates, including the Möderndorfer and Kuhar. Möderndorfer was the one who would type up and keep Gustinčič's letters, and therefore he was the one who was most familiar with their contents apart from the addressees in the highest leadership of the Communist Party. The authorities did not pay as much attention to Kuhar, though – perhaps because of his poor medical condition. Möderndorfer became aware that the matter was serious when Gustinčič asked him to burn the letter addressed to Edvard Kardelj even before his trip to Belgrade. After Gustinčič's return, Möderndorfer noticed profound changes and fear in the man.<sup>26</sup>

When Gustinčič mentioned that an *attack against people who had spent any considerable amount of time in the Soviet Union*<sup>27</sup> was apparent in Belgrade, Möderndorfer be-

24 Ibid., pp. 325–332.

25 ARS, f. AS 1931, t.e. 445, Zapisnik saslušanja Dragutina Gustinčiča, člana KPJ, po pitanju njegovog pisma upućenog drugu Kardelju, Belgrade, 27. 8. 1947, pp. 346–366.

26 GABRIČ, Aleš: Od somišljenika do nasprotnika komunističnoga režima. In: SLAVEC GRADIŠNIK, Ingrid – HUDALES, Jože (eds.): "Kar ustvariš ostane. Stetu cvet. Tebi rane." Vinko Möderndorfer – učitelj, politik in raziskovalec. Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, Ljubljana 2016, pp. 115–140, especially pp. 126–128.

27 ARS, AS 1931, microfilm XII-003, Zapisnik zaslišanja Möderndorfer Vinka, July 1948 (not dated further), p. 4681.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

came worried, as this shed a very different light on the opinion that the policy was aimed against the old communists in particular.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Gustinčič also asked his friends to help him establish connections with the representatives of the Soviet Union in Yugoslavia, as he wanted, in Möderndorfer's opinion, to inform them of matters regarding the communist takeover of power in Yugoslavia that did not adhere to the models established in the Soviet Union. More than once, Gustinčič would mention to Möderndorfer that the Soviet leadership was not appropriately informed of developments in Yugoslavia and that this should be remedied.<sup>29</sup> It seems that State Security did not start paying attention to Gustinčič and his circle of friends simply because of his letters, but also because of the information that these individuals were attempting to establish contacts with people from the Soviet Union. In this regard, the State Security Administration most frequently refers to Boris Bogomolov, who had already arrived in Slovenia during the war and led the Soviet military mission at the Supreme Headquarters of the National Liberation Army of Slovenia (Narodno osvobodilna vojska Slovenije). However, the documentation does not exhibit any evidence that either Gustinčič or any of his associates had any actual contacts with Bogomolov.

At the end of the interrogation in front of a Party commission at the end of August 1947 in Belgrade, Gustinčič was ordered to return to Ljubljana and told not to leave. He was also ordered not to perform any public functions until the end of the investigation. He was not allowed to work at the university either.<sup>30</sup> His interrogation in front of the Party commission was followed by a State Security Administration inquiry into his associates and contacts. Thus, the investigation had apparently started at least half a year before the dispute between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union took place.

### **The Cominform split and the persecution of Soviet Union sympathizers**

The worst followed in the spring of 1948, when relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union worsened. In Stalin's opinion, Yugoslavia's foreign policy was overly independent, while Tito's cult of personality in the state had already transcended that of the Soviet leader. The disagreements worsened on 27 March 1948, when the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, in a bitter letter, accused the leadership of the Yugoslav communists that their politics were anti-Soviet and that they did not sufficiently take into account the Soviet experience while introducing socialism. The Yugoslav leadership did not submit to the Soviet demands and refused to cooperate at the Cominform meeting in Bucharest in June 1948, where the communist parties condemned the situation in the KPJ and advised the Yugoslav communists to replace their leaders.

28 Ibid., pp. 4681–4682.

29 Ibid., pp. 4666, 4687.

30 ARS, f. AS 1931, t.e. 445, Zapisnik saslušanja Dragutina Gustinčiča, člana KPJ, po pitanju njegovog pisma upućenog drugu Kardelju, Belgrade, 27. 8. 1947, p. 367.

The worsening relations with the Soviet Union were the reason why, in Yugoslavia, the UDV started persecuting communists who allegedly supported Stalin's policy. In this sense, the communists of the older generation, who had spent many years in the Soviet Union, were particularly suspicious. The fact that some of the criticism, contained in Gustinčič's correspondence, resembled the reproaches concerning the KPJ that had been stated in the letters from the Soviet leadership and Cominform, was the reason why in April 1948 Dragotin Gustinčič and Vinko Möderndorfer were arrested as well. The example of Lovro Kuhar shows how even minor details could influence the fate of the people that State Security chose to look into. After the investigation of the "Gustinčič affair", the Slovenian Minister of the Interior Boris Kraigher wrote to Edvard Kardelj on 2 June 1948. He stated that the head of the Yugoslav UDV Marko (Aleksandar Ranković – author's note) *proposed that a Party commission should convene and interrogate Prežih[ov Voranc]*,<sup>31</sup> i.e. that the procedure implemented as the first stage of the pressure against Gustinčič would also be used in this case. However, Kraigher believed the opposite: that a more lenient approach should be taken at first, and *that it would be more appropriate to somehow discuss these issues with Prežih[ov Voranc] first, without in fact triggering an investigation into him.*<sup>32</sup> Kardelj accepted Kraigher's proposal and agreed that *we should first hear what Kuhar has to say about these things, but in a kind of less obligatory way – perhaps indirectly.*<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, he instructed Kraigher to *try this approach first, but get the commission ready as well,*<sup>34</sup> in case the informal discussions failed to yield the expected results. The police were unable to establish any proof that Prežihov Voranc agreed with those who were described as Cominform supporters, and thus Lovro Kuhar was not subject to the more severe repression that followed in the case of Gustinčič and his associates.<sup>35</sup>

In the atmosphere of the tense relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, Dragotin Gustinčič became one of the central targets of the UDV's police interrogations. They searched for his associations with those whom they described as "the old communists" and "the old leftists". The police investigators were especially suspicious of the communists who had spent a long time in the Soviet Union and could be associated with the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (regardless of the fact that the suspicions could not be proved). Therefore, at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia on 13 April 1948, Tito specifically named Gustinčič as one of Stalin's main informants about conditions in Yugoslavia. Gustinčič's fate was thus sealed.<sup>36</sup>

Some prisoners were – after they had already been confined – further accused of being Cominform supporters, i.e. that they supported Stalin in his dispute with

31 Ibid., Pismo Borisa Kraigherja (ministra za notranje zadeve Slovenije) Edvardu Kardelju, 2. 6. 1948, p. 334.

32 Ibid.

33 ARS, f. AS 1931, t.e. 445, Pismo Edvarda Kardelja Borisu Kraigherju, 2. 6. 1948, p. 335.

34 Ibid.

35 GABRIČ, Aleš: Informbirojevstvo na Slovenskem. *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, 1993, No. 1–2, pp. 163–165 (all pp. 163–175).

36 PREVIŠIĆ, Martin: *Povijest Golob otoka*. Fraktura, Zagreb 2019, pp. 437–441.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

Tito. The information that the local Party authorities in Celje were not even aware of the reason why Vinko Möderndorfer had been imprisoned and that they by no means associated his arrest with the Cominform clearly attests to the fact that these accusations were sometimes rather absurd. Towards the end of April 1949, when the arrests of the alleged Cominform supporters were at their height, the Party organization that Möderndorfer belonged to – the city committee of the Communist Party in Celje – reported the following: *The reason for the arrest is unknown to us. We suspect that it is related to the process against Bitenc and co-defendants.*<sup>37</sup> However, Möderndorfer obviously had nothing whatsoever to do with Mirko Bitenc, who was sentenced to death in 1948 as an organiser of anti-Partisan armed units during the war and as a post-war spy.

Historiographic literature often states that Cominform ideas did not take root among Slovenians, or that those who would openly declare their support of Stalin were rare among Slovenians and significantly fewer than expected, taking into account the percentage of Slovenians in the population of Yugoslavia.<sup>38</sup> Most Cominform supporters were leftist intellectuals. In April 1949, the Slovenian Minister of the Interior Boris Kraigher reported to the leadership of the Communist Party of Slovenia that as much as 72% of those arrested because of the Cominform dispute in Slovenia came from the ranks of the intelligentsia, state employees, liberal professions, and the dispossessed strata of society.<sup>39</sup>

We cannot rank Gustinčič's circle among those who were persecuted by the authorities after 1948 because of their actual or alleged support of the policy of Stalin, the Soviet Union, and the Cominform during the dispute between Tito and the Soviet leader, and who would eventually become known as the "Cominform supporters". State Security would sentence the so-called Cominform supporters to forced labour or imprisonment in concentration camps. The most famous of these was located on Goli Otok island.<sup>40</sup> In the camp, the prisoners were exposed to severe forms of torture. As this was one of the strictest taboos in communist Yugoslavia and because the primary sources required for analysing the fates of the individuals are often scarce, a large quantity of deficient or erroneous information has spread about the Cominform supporters. In 2019, the answers to large amounts of open questions and misinformation were suggested by Martin Previšić in his superb scholarly monograph about the Goli Otok concentration camp.<sup>41</sup>

37 ARS, f. AS 1589, t.e. 4531, Partbiro Mestnega ljudskega odbora (MLO), 26. 4. 1949.

38 BANAC, Ivo: *Sa Staljinom protiv Tita: informbirovski rascjepi u jugoslavenskom komunističkom pokretu*. Globus, Zagreb 1990, p. 150; RADONJIĆ, Radovan: *Izgubljena orijentacija*. Radnička štampa, Belgrade 1985, pp. 75–77.

39 ARS, f. AS 1589, III, t.e. 1, Zapisnik II. Plenarnega zasedanja CK KPS, 15.–16. 4. 1949.

40 The uninhabited island in the northern Adriatic, with barely any vegetation, was far away from the Yugoslav borders with the Eastern states from where the incursion of the Soviet Army could be expected. The lone and deserted isle, surrounded by strong sea currents, was almost impossible to escape. Even family members did not know where their relatives were incarcerated.

41 PREVIŠIĆ, Martin: *Povijest Golog otoka*.

If we look merely at the general overviews (encyclopaedias, biographical lexicons), we can find the following information regarding the aforementioned Gustinčič and Möderndorfer: that due to their support of the Cominform Resolution they were imprisoned for approximately three years, from 1948 to 1951, mostly on Goli Otok. Already the supposition that these two men agreed with the criticism that the Soviet Union expressed on the account of the KPJ leadership was baseless, as they had been arrested even before this correspondence was published and the Cominform Resolution on the state of affairs in the KPJ was consequently adopted. While in prison, they were unaware of what was going on outside their place of confinement. Gustinčič, Kuhar, and Möderndorfer were in no way alone in their feelings that they had been pushed aside after the war. Tito's ranks of leading communists thus took advantage of the retaliation against the "Cominform supporters" to put an end to the Party showdown that had dragged on between the Yugoslav communists for decades. An analysis of more than three quarters of the preserved Party dossiers of the Slovenian communists who had led the Slovenian Communist Party before 1937 has revealed that, in 1945, only a few of them were in the higher political structures. Some of them had disappeared already during Stalin's purges, and many of them fell during the Second World War. Numerous survivors disappeared mysteriously in 1948 and 1949 in the prisons of the state police or died during the torture on Goli Otok. This fate was, however, avoided by Lovro Kuhar – partly because certain Slovenian communist authorities protected him, and partly also because he had, by that time, already been severely ill due to the German concentration camps. They let him be in his native village, where he wrote his final literary works and died in February 1950.<sup>42</sup>

Dragotin Gustinčič was incarcerated in a special part of the Goli Otok concentration camp, named Petrova Rupa (Peter's Hole). It contained approximately 130 older, respectable communists who were completely separated from the younger generation that had earlier listened to stories of the heroes of the communist and workers' movement, and had been told about many of these prisoners. Here, physical torture was rarer, as the prisoners were older (Gustinčič, at the age of 68, was the oldest of them). They were, however, subjected to even worse psychological pressures. In order to humiliate and depict them as a group of people that had attempted to bring down Tito's regime, the UDV even formed a "Goli Otok government" that would supposedly be headed by Gustinčič. Due to the physical and psychological violence as well his illness, Gustinčič wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the KPJ in 1951, thanking them for allowing him to realize his mistakes. Such repenting letters were also a condition for these prisoners to be let out. Gustinčič was released soon after – ill, tired, and physically destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

If we look at Vinko Möderndorfer's case a bit more closely, we can establish the degree to which general records about his life, transcribed from the official evaluations of the communist authorities and their UDV, can in fact be trusted. As it is, Mödern-

42 DOLENC, Ervin: *Med kulturo in politiko: kulturnopolitična razhajanja v Sloveniji med svetovnimi vojnama*. Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, Ljubljana 2011, pp. 231–243.

43 PREVIŠIČ, Martin: *Povijest Golog otoka*, pp. 449–455.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

dorfer's dossier happens to be one of the best-preserved files in the archive materials of the Ministry of the Interior of Slovenia that have been reviewed. In the older records, accessible to the general public, the descriptions of Möderndorfer's work either conclude before 1948, or we can find indications that he spent three years on Goli Otok. However, the archive sources actually indicate that he was initially in solitary confinement in the Ljubljana prison for a long time. Then he was sent to forced labour in a variety of worksites around Slovenia, until he was finally transferred to the island of Goli Otok as late as 1951. Unlike the assessment that Möderndorfer supported the Cominform Resolution, one of the UDV's informants among the prisoners reported a completely opposite assessment of Möderndorfer's position on this issue: *Found out about the new circumstances only after he had already been imprisoned. Resolutely denies any agreement with the Resolution whatsoever, let alone supporting the Cominform. He is a communist patriot and a reserve officer, and therefore he rejects the Resolution.*<sup>44</sup>

Not until the final months of Möderndorfer's prison sentence, when he was exposed to the torture on Goli Otok, can we find any information attesting to the contrary. However, in May 1951, on Goli Otok, Möderndorfer wrote the text *Moja izpoved* (My Confession),<sup>45</sup> stating that *I failed to state decisively enough that I was against the Resolution* and that *I in fact did not oppose the Resolution in its entirety*,<sup>46</sup> and so on. We cannot find any other similar statements, neither in Möderndorfer's interrogations nor in the UDV's analyses of his political standpoints. The regret expressed under pressure was obviously one of the conditions for Möderndorfer's release from Yugoslav State Security's cruellest labour camp in the following month. He returned home ill and mentally broken. He told his acquaintances *that the treatment on Goli Otok was inhumane*.<sup>47</sup> His confession had obviously been coerced by the UDV and its procedures on Goli Otok. Furthermore, this final State Security evaluation then dragged on for a long time during the subsequent decades, just like in the cases of the other former prisoners.<sup>48</sup> It was later never checked against primary sources, neither by the subsequent UDV analysts nor authors of short biographical texts about Möderndorfer. The stereotypical assessments thus found their way online as well as into the expert literature.

### Conclusion

The comparison, made possible by the case under consideration, reminds us to be careful when reading State Security reports, as these have, after the archives were opened to the public, also become a means of manipulation and contemporary political struggle. By reading its primary documentation, the UDV is thus not revealed merely as the organization dedicated to the persecution of political opponents: it

44 ARS, f. AS 1931, microfilm XII-008, Möderndorfer Vinko, May 1950 (not dated further), not paginated.

45 Ibid., microfilm CM-016, *Moja izpoved*, 28. 5. 1951, pp. 2033465-2033468.

46 Ibid., p. 2033466.

47 ARS, f. AS 1931, microfilm CM-016, Möderndorfer Vinko (undated), pp. 68451, 2033465.

48 GABRIČ, Aleš: *Od somišljenika do nasprotnika komunističnega režima*, pp. 132-137.

## Aleš Gabrič

also co-shaped public opinion about people, as its assessments spread through the contemporaneous and subsequent media. Furthermore, the activities of the State Security apparatus did not only result in a diminished number of political opponents. Quite the opposite, its way of work also contributed to their number increasing, even among the people who had only a few years earlier been a part of the Communist Party.

Lovro Kuhar a.k.a Prežihov Voranc spent the last years of his life in his native village in Carinthia, close to the border with Austria. Until his death, he was formally the President of the People's Education of Slovenia and the Carinthian Slovenians Club in Ljubljana, but unable to actually perform any organizational tasks. He died in February 1950 in a Maribor hospital. After his death, he was celebrated as an important Carinthian who had not lost his hope that the part of Austrian Carinthia inhabited by Slovenians would one day be united with Slovenia. Only a few days before his death, he received the Prešeren Award (the most prominent Slovenian award for artistic achievements, given every year on February 7) for his literary opus. In contrast to celebrating the writer, the political work of the man who had once been among the leading communists was barely discussed during the communist regime. This aspect of his work only became scrutinized as late as a decade after the fall of the communist system.<sup>49</sup>

Upon their release from the Goli Otok camp, the internees had to sign a statement that they would not discuss where they had been and what had happened in the camp, while the UDV attempted to recruit many of them as collaborators. If they were intellectuals, they were unable to secure jobs that would correspond to their level of education. After his return from Goli Otok, Vinko Möderndorfer had to retire, yet needed to wait for another year for his pension to be approved. He would spend his time at home, no longer active. Due to his life in the camp, his health deteriorated and he died in September 1958. In the following decades, researchers only knew him for his ethnographic and pedagogical work. However, the political aspects of his activities have not been more thoroughly analysed until this decade.<sup>50</sup>

Dragotin Gustinčič – the oldest of the three men under discussion – also lived the longest. He kept maintaining contacts with certain former internees. Because the League of Communists of Yugoslavia decided to somewhat relax its attitude to the former internees in 1958, it divided them into several categories and opted to strictly supervise only those whom it deemed as the most ardent Cominform supporters. Dragotin Gustinčič was seen as one of them. In 1958, he was reimprisoned for a short period. Not even in this case was he tried at court. Despite his many years in prisons, he was in fact never convicted in court. He died in August 1974 at the advanced age of 92. To add to the absurdity, in 1974 – only a few months before his death – he was readmitted to the ZKJ.

49 DRUŠKOVIČ, Drago: *Prežihov Voranc: pisatelj in politik*. Drava, Celovec 2005; GABRIČ, Aleš (ed.): *Prežihov Voranc – Lovro Kuhar: pisatelj, politik, patriot*. Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino – Slovenski znanstveni inštitut, Ljubljana – Dunaj 2010.

50 SLAVEC GRADIŠNIK, Ingrid – HUDALES, Jože (eds.): *“Kar ustvariš ostane. Svetu cvet. Tebi rane.” Vinko Möderndorfer – učitelj, politik in raziskovalec*.

## Communist State Security's role in the persecution

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Many of the Cominform supporters never lived to see their rehabilitation. After the fall of the communist regime, the states formed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia declared these people political prisoners and victims of the communist regime. Slovenia and Croatia were the first to do so in 2000. However, as they were former communists, their rehabilitation went by almost unnoticed – unlike in the case of the public discussions about the rehabilitation of former dissidents or even collaborators with the occupiers. The heritage of the extreme leftist wing of the former Communist Party is nowadays obviously not claimed by any political party that would call these victims “theirs”.