

GUŽVICA, Stefan: *Before Tito.*

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge (1936-1940)

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The accession of Josip Broz Tito (1892–1920) to the top of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, KPJ) in 1937 was celebrated in the socialist era as one of the most fundamental milestones in history. It was to mark both the consolidation of the party itself, which had until that point been torn apart by organizational and ideological confusion and factional struggles, and the beginning of the Yugoslav revolution, culminating in the epic national liberation struggle of 1941–1945. The official historiography, not only during Tito's lifetime, but also in the 1980s, tried to give this event a fateful character. Totally in line with the basic foundations of the cult of Tito, it was emphasized that only after he took over the leadership of the KPJ in the late 1930s was it possible to speak of a truly revolutionary party, which later managed to seize the decisive initiative and lead a heroic and most of all successful partisan resistance. It was also to give the impression that if it had not been for 1937, the entire history of Yugoslav society after the Second World War would most likely have been totally different. As if Tito's party and political career were not only an inseparable part of one whole, but also a precondition for the historical development of a specific type of socialism that had finally prevailed in Yugoslavia – again allegedly thanks to Tito's principles, determination and foresight.¹

Stefan Gužvica, who is currently a doctoral student at the Institute for Research in Eastern and South Eastern Europe in Regensburg, has carried out a detailed examination of the complex situation in the KPJ during the second half of the 1930s. Unlike most previous works, however, he has decided to approach the topic from a completely different perspective, one which is not dominated solely by the personality of Josip Broz Tito, but also includes a number of other actors, and not only Yugoslav communists. He has structured his own research on methodologically completely different procedures as well as a rich base of sources, drawing heavily from the funds of the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow. All this makes his book an extremely valuable and now indispensable

¹ For example, see *Tito – četrdeset godina na čelu SKJ: 1937–1977*. Narodna knjiga, Beograd 1977.

contribution to the history of the Yugoslav left and international communism as a whole. The book has already appeared in Croatian and Slovenian editions, which provoked a considerable response. Translations into other languages are being prepared. All this only confirms that there is currently a strong demand, both among the professional public and amongst readers, for new, seriously conceived analysis of the history of the communist movement with special regard to the biographies of individual communist leaders as well as lesser-known actors.

The author of this title, which is based on the text of a Master thesis defended at the Central European University in Budapest, was able to focus his study of the history of the interwar KPJ on several relevant publications. These are mainly the monographies of Ivan Banac and Kosta Nikolić,² which to this day remain the standard historiographical works on the various stages of the party's development, although the latter does not in any way hide its nationalist orientation and strong tendency towards a priori and unbalanced criticism of the leftist movement as such. At the same time, however, Gužvica had to deal with the fact that the most recent more systematic and long-term research into the history of the KPJ was undertaken by those who wrote historiography during the former socialist Yugoslavia.³ A separate chapter is the work of a historical-journalistic nature which focuses on the personality of Tito and his often-mysterious life between the two world wars. Although its respective authors managed to collect an admirable number of new documents, their unprofessional and often headstrong interpretations of this material frequently make their conclusions very controversial. Vladimir Dedijer's voluminous books from the 1980s are considered to be the founding works of this canon, which, thanks to a number of details from Tito's private and political life, caused unprecedented uproar and criticism from the leaders of the post-Tito regime.⁴ Gužvica, however, had to deal with the titles of three contemporary authors much more purposefully: Belgrade-based journalist Pera Simić, his Croatian colleague Zvonimir Despot and the Slovenian researcher Silvin Eiletz.⁵ In their case, Gužvica was able to very skilfully and thoroughly determine in what respect their books represented a truly relevant shift in the academic knowledge of the history

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- 2 BANAC, Ivo: *With Stalin against Tito. Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca – London 1988; NIKOLIĆ, Kosta: *Boljševizacija Komunističke partije Jugoslavije 1919–1929. Istorijske posledice*. Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 1994; Idem: *Komunisti u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji. Od socijal-demokratije do staljinizma*. Centar za savremenu istoriju Jugoistočne Evrope, Beograd 2000; Idem: *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu*. Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd 2015.
 - 3 JELIĆ, Ivan: *Komunistička partija Hrvatske 1937–1945*, I–II. Globus, Zagreb 1981; CVETKOVIĆ, Slavoljub: *Idejne borbe u Komunističkoj partiji Jugoslavije (1919–1928)*. Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 1985; FOLIĆ, Milutin: *Komunistička partija Jugoslavije na Kosovu 1919–1941*. Jedinstvo, Priština 1987.
 - 4 DEDIJER, Vladimir: *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*, I–II. Liburnija, Rijeka 1980–1981; Idem: *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*, III. Rad, Beograd 1984.
 - 5 SIMIĆ, Pero – DESPOT, Zvonimir: *Tito. Jedna biografija*. Despot infinitus, Zagreb 2017; EILETZ, Silvin: *Titova skrivnostna leta v Moskvi 1935–1940*. Mohorjeva, Celovec 2008; Idem: *Pred sodbo zgodovine. Stalin, Tito in jugoslovanski komunisti v Moskvi*. Mohorjeva, Celovec 2010.

of KPJ and to what extent it was a demonstration of the unprofessional handling of sources and their arbitrary interpretation. However, this critical approach to previous research has not prevented Gužvica from rightly highlighting some high-quality work, as was the case with the published dissertation by the Russian Balkan specialist Nikita Bondarev, who drew on new sources from the RGASPI to focus on Tito's work in Moscow during the second half of the 1930s.⁶

The texts by Simić, Despot and Eiletz clearly show a trend that has been observable in connection with the critical grasp of the Yugoslav leader's life at least since the publication of Dedijer's writings. On the one hand, these authors place enormous emphasis on new revelations and hitherto hidden and secret details from Tito's political and personal life, on the other, they incline to cheap sensationalism, which makes it difficult to avoid the impression that the authors are merely striving to discredit their (anti)hero. They construct this almost demonic image of Tito on the basis of a detailed account of his activities during the 1930s, when he regularly found himself in Moscow and, as one of the representatives of the KPJ, maintained regular contacts with the leaders of the Comintern. At the same time, the three researchers try hard to prove that the future partisan leader committed long-concealed denunciations as part of internal party struggles, and that behind his rise in the structures of the KPJ was a cocktail of intrigue, slander and allegations, i.e. practices he is meant to have learnt as a devoted Stalinist. However, even some professional historians resort to this method of interpretation, as evidenced by the example of the aforementioned Serbian researcher Kosta Nikolić. Although Gužvica repeatedly takes these works into account and shows an objective appreciation for their factual innovations and findings, much more often he indulges in direct polemic with their conclusions and convincingly refutes them. Based on an analysis of a much wider range of sources, he manages to disengage himself from Tito's story and present the history of the KPJ not only in light of complicated factional struggles, but also taking into account the multi-layered ties of leading Yugoslav communists to other actors of the Comintern and international communism on the eve of the Second World War.

In the book's extensive introduction, Gužvica outlines the historical development of the KPJ from its founding in 1919 until the early 1930s. He introduces the reader to the fundamental milestones and leading figures of the Yugoslav communist movement. At the same time, however, he also succeeds in explaining the consequences of the experience of this period for the KPJ's further development. The party's forced transition to illegal status in the early 1920s and the subsequent series of internal disputes turned the KPJ into a small group of party members which the Comintern authorities soon began to view with criticism, suspicion, and an intensified effort for greater control. Of course, this in itself did not lead to

6 BONDAREV, Nikita Viktorovič: *Zagadka Tito. Moskovskije gody Iosipa Broza (1935–1937 gg.)*. Izdatelstvo „FIV“, Moscow 2012.

a number of KPJ leaders falling victim to Stalinist purges in the second half of the 1930s, but this feature of its mutual relations is certainly essential for understanding subsequent developments. Gužvica demonstrates a feeling here both for analysis of these longer-term trends and also acknowledgement of the unpredictable, subtle and at times totally random moments that together outlined the dramatic path of the KPJ during the Great Terror. At the same time, the Stalinist purges dealt the Yugoslav communists an extremely hard and cruel blow in comparison with other parties, both in terms of the number of total casualties and in terms of interventions against their top leaders.

Gužvica demonstrates his ability to take into account various factors in interpreting events while carefully assessing their momentary relevance in his analysis of the case of Milan Gorkić (party nickname), who, as the party's general secretary between 1932–1937, stabilized the party and blunted the factional in-fighting. In a quieter period, this successful leader of the KPJ, who initially succeeded in gaining the trust of the Comintern, would certainly have strengthened his own position and would have used the party's consolidation to strengthen its ranks. However, this scenario was completely disrupted by the onset of the Great Terror. Gužvica shows how the heightened tensions in the USSR quickly led to general shifts in the perception of political rivalry and ideological disagreement in the camp of international communism. Accusations of factional activity or Trotskyism no longer just caused the party member concerned damage to his or her career, but carried with them serious and often fatal accusations of terrorism and other forms of anti-state activity. And it is in this context that Gužvica recounts the case of Gorkić. He not only emphasizes the reversals influenced by the unpredictable dynamics of the Great Terror, but also seeks to take into account the long-term causes of Gorkić's downfall. In this context, he states repeatedly that there was really little indication that the Secretary General of the Yugoslav Communists, given his position and profile, would himself have fallen victim to Stalinist reckoning. Gorkić came from a working-class background and, thanks to his Czech origin (he was born as Josef Čižinský to the family of Václav Čižinský, a worker of Austrian-Hungarian railways in Bosnia and Herzegovina), also kept his distance from the national disputes that plagued the Yugoslav environment. The fact that he also fully met the demands placed by the Comintern on the leader of the Bolshevized and disciplined party was also a bonus. However, Gužvica immediately demonstrates how, despite all these advantages, the card was able to turn so quickly against Gorkić. In the atmosphere of the Great Terror, his earlier tolerant approach towards party opponents and factional leaders suddenly became an extremely aggravating argument (in October 1937, Gorkić was arrested and executed after a short interrogation). The ensuing struggle for Gorkić's succession at the head of the KPJ, the narrative of which forms the core of this peer-reviewed monograph, took place in extremely tense conditions, in which it was almost impossible to determine who would eventually

take over this weakened party with an uncertain future.

We have already mentioned that Gužvica has decided to give sufficient space to all relevant groups and actors who had an influence in various ways on the KPJ during the second half of the 1930s. Josip Broz Tito, who was paradoxically most similar to Gorkić and also remained loyal to him for a long time, eventually emerged from this fight as the winner. For Gužvica, however, Tito is only one player on a confusing party pitch, not the predetermined leader. In his book, he pays no less attention to how Tito's rivals acted and what form of political struggle they chose. Although the future Yugoslav president became the head of the so-called interim leadership after the fall of Gorkić, his position was more than precarious given the Comintern's prudent approach to the KPJ and the machinery of the Great Terror. At the same time, Gužvica states repeatedly that at certain moments virtually any of the groups within the KPJ could have taken over the leadership of the party. He therefore presents each of them to the reader so that their advantages and disadvantages in the fight for the party throne are clear. In this context, he describes in detail the activities of the so-called parallel centre of Ivo Marić and Labud Kusovac in exile in Paris, who possessed a number of valuable contacts, organized volunteer involvement in the Spanish Civil War and enjoyed, among other things, the support of the leaders of the French Communist Party. Equally interesting are the passages about Kamilo Horvatin, whom Gužvica characterizes primarily as a solitary figure in the party, but also as a candidate who at first enjoyed much greater confidence within the Comintern. Gužvica aptly notes that the political and ideological differences between Tito and Horvatin were minimal at first glance. However, the growing months of the Great Terror, with the authorities of the Third International increasingly investigating the situation inside the KPJ, eventually led to these men's fates being reversed: while Tito became the new Secretary General, in 1938 Horvatin was led away to be executed. In other parts of the book, Gužvica pays close attention to the reason for this surprising reversal and many others.

Horvatin's tragic end completely confirmed all the ambiguity with which the fate of the entire KPJ developed. Although Gužvica seeks the least possible teleological approach, to avoid automatically favouring Tito, nevertheless his book does move in this direction. It is logical in many respects – one of the aims of the work is not only to present possible alternatives to Tito's leadership, but also to explain why they were ultimately unsuccessful. Gužvica thus points to the politically quite vague and relatively passive approach of the so-called parallel centre, which could hardly compete with Tito's clearer rhetoric and communication style, as well as his organizational skills and initiative. Differences that we might characterize as ideologically motivated were secondary or highly controversial. For example, Petko Miletić's ultra-leftist group, which consisted of imprisoned communists in Sremska Mitrovica penitentiary, did not understand the then significance of the line taken by the national front, which the Comintern had been promoting since 1935,

but the group ultimately failed for various other reasons. Miletić and his followers (who due to their radicalism were dubbed “Wahabis”) found themselves unable to dispense with their romantic-heroic poses, which could not even for an instant replace Tito’s concept of the revolutionary party. The party’s task was to focus systematically on strengthening its own positions and influence, through careful selection of staff, activities within non-communist organizations and unions and so on. Gužvica also draws attention to another important aspect of Tito’s leadership style, which was that he did not hesitate to give a chance to young, until then almost unknown and loyal party members (Ivo Lola Ribar, Edvard Kardelj, Aleksandar Ranković etc.), who were mostly unburdened with previous factional struggles. Thus, from the beginning of his work at the head of the KPJ, Tito mainly emphasized in his relations with his closest collaborators personal devotion, reliability and cooperation. Even in this respect, none of his party rivals came even close.

Undoubtedly, one of the advantages of Gužvica’s book is that although it focuses primarily on the situation in the KPJ, it also analyses the transnational and international overlap. It shows how the fate of the Yugoslav communists was influenced, for example, by Wilhelm Pieck, Georgi Dimitrov, Traicho Kostov or the aforementioned leaders of the French Communist Party. This was done not only within the activities of the Comintern bodies in which these politicians worked, but also through complex personal ties, which in the case of the KPJ could have had a considerable influence on the selection of a new party leader. Gužvica thus manages to shed new light on some controversial issues, proving, for example, that Dimitrov’s support for Tito was not nearly as clear-cut, straightforward, and above all permanent as the Yugoslav leader himself later claimed. At the end of December 1938, the Bulgarian communist party leader was still labelling Tito as a factionalist, something which could have had fatal consequences for him in the context of the lingering Great Terror; not only political consequences, but also human ones. On the contrary, Gužvica creatively describes the activities of another Bulgarian communist Ivan Karaivanov, who to a large extent interfered in negotiations on the future of the KPJ and after 1945 even lived in Yugoslavia.

As already mentioned, Gužvica has made great efforts to ensure his book helps to deconstruct the image that saw Tito’s victory as proof of his genius and uniqueness, as well as a kind of lawful and proper outcome of the KPJ’s development. At the same time, however, he tries with no less thoroughness to expose the dishonesty of some writers who saw Tito as an agent of the Soviet secret services and an exemplary Machiavellian. The author manages to revise both of these extremely tendentious interpretations, among other things, by mapping in detail the moments when Tito’s victory seemed unlikely or even seriously endangered. Such dramatic moments certainly included the arrest and subsequent execution of Tito’s close collaborator Vladimir Ćopić, which put the future KPJ general secretary in an extremely delicate situation and personally threw him into a state of uncertainty

and fear for his own life. Tito's decision to come to Moscow to personally participate in the ongoing investigation of his detained or mysteriously disappeared comrades seemed risky, but also logical given his position in the party. This gesture of Josip Broz Tito, which – with regard to the illegal activity of the KPJ and the extraordinary uncertainty about his own destiny – is characterized by Gužvica as undoubtedly brave, but in many other places in the book he shows that it was not a decisive factor in his victory. Although Tito had (in comparison with his rivals) a wide range of objective abilities and advantages, Gužvica's analysis clearly shows that none of these advantages could in itself guarantee Tito's final success in the context of the second half of the 1930s. On the contrary, simple luck, accidental timing and the interplay of coincidences often played a role here. These dramatic and suspenseful elements will certainly be among the most reader-friendly passages in the whole book.

It would be an oversimplification to evaluate Gužvica's critical and extensive source research on the circumstances of Tito's journey to the head of the KPJ only through the prism of Yugoslav history. We have already stated our appreciation of the fact that the author of the book manages to follow the clear transnational factor in the history of the KPJ. However, it is not the sole, and it seems not even the most important positive aspect of Gužvica's work. Through extensive documentation from the RGASPI, he also reveals a number of interesting findings and details about the activities of the Comintern itself, including the mechanisms of its investigations. Gužvica, who does not hide his inspiration from revisionist historiography, thus boldly exceeds many methodological and interpretive boundaries that still determine the research of Stalinism, the period of the Great Terror and especially the history of communism as such in the South Slavic region. Without being subject to Soviet propaganda of the time, which purposefully wrapped the alleged sins and mistakes of the victims of Stalinist purges into a one-dimensional whole, he is able to demonstrate in specific cases how the Comintern authorities worked (especially in the initial stages of the investigation) with evidence which more than once documents acts of an undeniably criminal nature. As an illustration, let us mention the case of Ivan Gržetić-Fleischer, a close associate of Milan Gorkić, who was accused of sexual violence, something which was assessed by the Comintern as a completely inadmissible violation of the Bolshevik ethos and revolutionary morality. As a whole, Gužvica's work is valuable not only for the number of discoveries and original interpretations, but also for its rich set of similar observations, which disrupt a whole series of still firmly rooted stereotypes not only about Yugoslav communism.