# Was the Communist Party of Yugoslavia a Leninist Party?

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It will be this essay's purpose to state categorically that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was a Leninist party, and while it had its share of deviations, its actions consistently bore greater relevance to Lenin's own works and deeds than to those performed in his name in the USSR. From its inception, through the significant events of its history—the war, the ensuing peace, and the split with Stalin—its adherence to Lenin's theory is near-complete, but more importantly, its pragmatism and realism in the face of adverse circumstances—that which best characterised Lenin's own rule—is absolute.

**Fanatical Inaction**

Founded in opposition to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1919, the Communist Party's devotion to Lenin's Socialist Republic and the Comintern was consummated by the expulsion of all members who refused subordination (Wilson, 1979, p.13). Their commitment cannot be overstated, for despite being made illegal in 1921 and the fierce repression that followed, Duncan Wilson writes that their greatest weakness was nonetheless "because its leadership reflected *in exaggerated form* the debates on policy within the Soviet CP […] and because its line on the 'nationalities question' was not clear" [italics added] (Wilson, 1979, p.15; p.14). This question remained unclear for the debate still raged in Russia between Lenin and his Commissar for Nationalities, Stalin, over whether nationalities should have the right to secede; Lenin clearly in favour, and Stalin in resolute opposition (Lenin, 1914, Ch.1; Smith, 2005, pp.47-48). As ex-Yugoslav Vice President Milovan Djilas recalls, for a party in which "the basic assumption was that Marx, Engels, and Lenin were correct in everything they said," (Stalin being later appended to this canon) the solution to the Yugoslavian debate would have to wait until its solution at the source (Djilas, 1973, p.225). This was the degree of extreme deference prevalent in the pre-war Yugoslav Communist Party.

It is necessary now to establish that Leninism, in general, does not lend itself well to facsimile. When asked by Russian revolutionaries in 1880 whether Russia was ready for revolution, Marx replied that evidently it was not (it was not industrialised, and had not exhausted the material conditions of capitalism, for it had hardly experienced it); however, given the state of affairs elsewhere, it may well *be the spark of a world revolution* (Cohen, 2001, p.393). As such, the socialist tradition and Leninism adapted Marxism to suit the needs of backwards, agrarian Russia; it became an *exclusively Russian* ideology to break the capitalist system at its weakest link (Read, 2005, p.86).

It was fortunate then, that Yugoslavia was in many ways similar to Russia of the early 20th Century. It too was highly agrarian, had until recently been ruled by what resembled a feudal autocrat, and it was clear from the onset that "the very proletarian element on which the socialists depended for mass support, and in whose name they agitated, hardly existed" (Avakumovic, 1967, p.1). Thus, when Tito returned to Yugoslavia "a convinced Communist" in 1920 (having actively participated in the Russian revolution), he "devoted himself to political organisation within Trade Unions (since the Communist Party was banned), becoming Secretary-General of the Metal-Workers' Union" in 1927 (Wilson, 1979, p.15). Lenin had written in his 1902 *What is to be Done?* that "the organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession," and this is precisely what Tito set about becoming: "a social revolutionary, a professional organiser, and still a profound believer in […] world revolution" (Lenin, 1902, p.174; Wilson, 1979, p.22). It was Tito's intention to develop first the trade unions, and

second the professional Bolshevik-style party to lead the workers beyond what Lenin had called their "trade-union consciousness" (a limited consciousness of the necessity to fight employers, but not to revolt) to revolutionary action (Lenin, 1902, p.98). However, while the principle of the revolutionary vanguard was enshrined (though far from unanimous), and the nationality question at least reflected the mire of debate in the Soviet Union, each would be irrevocably transformed when war came to Yugoslavia in 1941.

**Pragmatic Leninism**

By this stage the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had become "at last what its leaders at home and superiors in Moscow had always intended the CPY to be: the Bolshevik type of party," (Avakumovic, 1967, p.184). Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June, an obedient CPY was instructed to put all efforts into a guerrilla war against the Axis invaders (Wilson, 1979, p.19). While Lenin, having written on just such a war, called on revolutionaries to "make it their duty not only to participate but also to play the leading role," here Tito, acting now as Secretary-General of the CPY, diverged from Soviet orthodoxy for the first time (Lenin, 1906).

Following the invasion he "could see that there might soon be new opportunities for activities by a Communist Party [to] acquire a popular basis" (Wilson, 1979, p.21). There was little doubt that mass support would be necessary in contesting the armies of four invading nations, and thus Tito sought as wide a base as possible. His Partisans were often hospitable to other factions, and even aped the policies of the Croatian Peasant Party (those who had been ignored, at their expense, by the pre-Tito CPY [Wilson, 1979, p.14]), described by Aleksa Djilas as "the very opposite of Marxism-Leninism" for their emphasis on "the sacredness of family life and the importance of religion and tradition" (Djilas, 1991, p.155). Presenting the Partisans as the "only defender of all ethnic minorities" in the midst of an Ustaša "campaign of appalling and mindless terrorism," among other atrocities, was crucial to support and infinitely valuable (Ferdinand, 1991, p.201; Wilson, 1979, p.20). Djilas recalls in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*,that with "the establishment of the concentration camp, dozens of Communists became professional revolutionaries overnight" (Djilas, 1973, p.339). However, while Djilas romanticises about their leadership role growing and the vindication of Lenin's vanguard prophecy, in actual fact "the CPY often claimed that it was just a leading member of a democratic coalition," and "when it occasionally admitted its primacy [… it] tried to present it as benign" (Djilas, 1973, p.305; Djilas, 1991, p.150). The ubiquitous threat of death had proven itself a more immediate motivation for revolutionary actions than the injustices of the class system, but even when the opportunity presented itself, Tito insisted on the plurality of the movement, not his vanguard status. While this certainly constituted a breach of Leninist orthodoxy, what had really been revealed by the later-victorious CPY were its credentials for realism and pragmatism; in matters of survival, they would not be blinkered by dogma. As will be demonstrated, this was an unwritten trait of fundamental importance to Leninism.

This in itself explains Tito's commitment to a federal Yugoslavia. Keen to not repeat the mistakes of the bygone Kingdom, the rights of nations to self-determination—a policy decried as "outmoded" and "subordin[ate] to the principles of socialism" by Stalin (Smith, 2005, pp.47-48)—was a foundational commitment of the new regime (Ferdinand, 1991, p.201). Tito's Yugoslavia would take the form of Lenin's "highly centralised one-party state," but unlike Stalin's would not be explicitly Russian (or Serbian, as the Kingdom had been) (Wilson, 1979, p.38; Smith, 2005, p.53).

Tito had even chosen his chief lieutenants by nationality to include a Croat, Serb, Slovene, and Montenegrin (Wilson, 1979, p.40). While in Russia a single nationality could—with adequate force—rule the multitudes of the old empire, in Yugoslavia, to those who sought stability, a re-emergence of Serb domination was unthinkable. Far from calling Tito's Leninism into question, a closer study reveals how far Stalin had diverged from Lenin's writings, which had since 1913 called for a federal Balkan state (Lenin, 1913). Indeed, Lenin had only contempt for the "Great Russian chauvinism" now championed by Stalin, he saw secession as unlikely, and in his mind the provision of national rights would "speed the rise of the new socialist man […] capable of ridding himself of national prejudices" (Lenin, 1916, Ch.9; D'Encausse, 1978, p.47); a view privately harboured by Tito (Djilas, 1991, p.165).

With the end of the war, following a brief façade of democratic gestures, the Communist Party went about fulfilling its Leninist responsibilities. The remaining strength of the middle classes (the bourgeoisie) was broken via a number of

reforms, among them: currency reconstitution, the nationalisation of property, a strict control on rents, and the forcible confiscation of assets belong to whom Wilson refers to as the "widely extensible category" of "former collaborators" (Wilson, 1979, p.38). All other political parties were subsequently banned, and the erstwhile leader of the Četniks, Draža Mihailović was tried and executed to demonstrate the fate that would otherwise have been afforded the Partisans (Djilas, 1991, p.152; Wilson, 1979, p.40). Enforcing these sanctions was an "energetic and highly developed secret police apparatus," the OZNA (later UBDA) under Ranković, cast in the mould of Lenin's Cheka (later NKVD) which had been essential throughout the turbulence of the civil war (Wilson, 1979, p.45). This was in every sense Lenin's Dictatorship of the Proletariat: a repressive force once held by the bourgeoisie now employed in their repression by the proletariat. As party theorist Kardelj writes "so long as the proletariat uses the state, it does not use it in the interests of freedom but in order to hold down its adversaries" during the "period of struggle between dying capitalism and nascent communism;" that which has "been born but is still very feeble" (Kardelj, 1978, p.92; Lenin, 1917, p.282; Lenin, 1919, Para.1).

Tito's communism, however, was not feeble and in fact enjoyed "plenty of genuine enthusiasm, particularly among the younger generation" (Wilson, 1979, p.38). Yugoslavia's first adherents to communism had been students and skilled workers, something the administration was well aware of and saw the need to correct by establishing trade unions "to look after the general education of organised workers" (Avakumovic, 1969, p.1; Wilson, 1979, p.45). In addition to the policy of rapid industrialisation (to which these workers were indispensable), it was hoped that this "new caste of industrial and 'politically conscious' workers" would help bring Yugoslavia back into line with the Leninist infatuation with the proletariat (Wilson, 1979, pp.44-45). It is worth remembering, however, that unlike many emerging regimes, Yugoslavia had *opted* for communism, and though the Red Army had been present, Tito's party was not 'ushered in' like so many others and enjoyed considerable public support—a fact he proudly clung to (Wilson, 1979, p.32; p.35). Most importantly, Yugoslavia was not occupied by the Red Army, and to that extent at least, their allegiance to Moscow could not be taken for granted indefinitely.

**A Clash of Ideologies**

The first trying of this fact emerged in the Soviet policy towards Yugoslavia that followed the war, when the CPY's Stalinist pursuit of industrialisation and self-sufficiency met with unexpected difficulties. Firstly, it had caused serious hardships, but also had—to their great surprise—jarred with Soviet policy, one which had demanded ever more exploitative trade deals and opposed Yugoslav industrialisation as a threat to their own (Ulam, 1952, p.62; Wilson, 1979, p.49). When Stalin's threats were met with surprise and defiance from Tito, he resolved to replace him, as he had done with Tito's predecessor, Gorkić, during the Great Purge (McVicker, 1957, p.21; Banac, 1988, p.64). The Socialist Information Bureau (like the Cominform, an instrument of Soviet foreign policy [Ulam, 1952, p.40]) soon stated its doubtlessness "that *inside* the CPY there are sufficient healthy elements, loyal to Marxism-Leninism," [italics added] but the leadership itself was broadly criticised as a "Menshevik heresy," recalling Lenin's populist adversaries during the revolution (Wilson, 1979, p.59; p.55). It was too "submerged in the People's Front, rather than acting as the chief leading force," a criticism during the war it might have admitted to, but not in the regime following when so much had been done to repent (Wilson, 1979, p.55).

Tito's support, however, did not crumble as others' had done when met with Soviet scrutiny. On the contrary it rallied against the Soviet blockade that, for an economy still reliant on Russian money, caused widespread hardship (Wilson, 1979, pp.62-63). While Djilas recalls the non-existence of 'Stalinism' as a term, for "it would have implied a separation of Stalin and Lenin," for those who had their suspicions about Stalin's orthodoxy, they were no longer compelled to keep them private (Djilas, 1973, pp.275-276). As Adam Ulam writes, Tito himself was a "Stalinist in every respect save in his unwillingness to put his head into a noose when so requested by Moscow" (Ulam, 1952, p.137). And from this point onwards—the initiative having been seized—Stalinism was "branded as bureaucratic and un-Marxian," the "highest and most reprehensible form of capitalism," and above all, guilty of "*revising Leninism*" [italics original] (McVicker, 1957, p.21; Wilson, 1979, p.65). Stalin's dictatorship was not *for*, but *over* the proletariat, and, as Tito himself said of this oppressive state, it showed "not the slightest trace of withering away," as Lenin had taught it must (Neal, 1954, p.228; Wilson, 1979, p.70). For this trait, Stalin's USSR was accused of being *worse* than capitalism, for it had become the "private owner of the means of production and exploited the workers in an even more systemic fashion" (McVicker, 1957, p.21). This turned out to be a shrewd position, for as well as being

courageous, it was also valuable, since it opened a destitute Yugoslavia to the possibility of Western aid (Wilson, 1979, p.69). With alternative international support secured, there remained few reasons for cordial relations with Stalin.

**The Leninist Renaissance**

Nevertheless, economic circumstance in Yugoslavia meant that they "had to adapt their system of government in order to prevent economic breakdown" (Wilson, 1979, p.68). Secondary to this was the desire to put conceptual space between themselves and Stalin, but fundamental was the need for a Communist state—having now accepted Western aid (Wilson, 1979, p.68)—to remain ideologically so. Yugoslavia was in a precarious place, for as most observers agreed, "Tito's dictatorship [had] aped the Soviet Union […] with vigour and completeness," but clearly this could no longer continue (Neal, 1954, p.227). Whatever changes were made had to be presented not as deviations, but as a "return to basic Marxism-Leninism, *from which the Soviet Union has strayed"* [italics added] (Neal, 1954, p.230). Fortunately for Tito there was an authoritative precedent for such changes— one which would accommodate for each of his requirements—for it came from Lenin himself.

Faced in 1921 with a disastrous harvest, following the ravages of a five year civil war under 'War Communism' (an extreme doctrine of industrial and agricultural centralisation), Lenin saw the only way to preserve his life's work in a series of liberalising economic reforms known broadly as the New Economic Policy (Richman, 1981, p.92; p.94). He bluntly accepted them as a "retreat" from the socialism Russia was in no way ready for, and though they upended his strong state, they—like War Communism before them—were temporary, and would be disbanded once the country was healthy again (Richman, 1981, p.94). The reforms grew out of one another, beginning with the most pressing issues—agriculture and the supply of food—and expanding to encompass decentralising industry, and the promotion of trade and exchange (Richman, 1981, p.93). It is important to note here that following Lenin's death much of the NEP was destroyed, primarily by Stalin, whose aggressive collectivisation of agriculture immediately replaced it (Rosefielde, 2007, p.47). As Rosefielde writes, Stalin had won the day by his "ability to package his totalitarianism as Leninist orthodoxy," and it was under *this* influence that the CPY would adopt the Stalinist tenets of centralisation when they took power (Rosefielde, 2007, p.47). Only after the split, and the trying times it entailed, would they divest themselves of these adulterations. Indeed, Lenin had retreated from War Communism for a bad harvest and the ravages of a five-year civil war; Tito, for the artificial ravages of a Soviet blockade and a similarly disastrous harvest in 1950 (Wilson, 1979, p.68). If the "essential feature" of Lenin's NEP was "the*negation or reversal of the policies of war communism*" [italics original], then that of Titoism was the negation or reversal of the policies of Stalinism (Richman, 1981, p.93).

Lenin's War Communism came to an end under pressure from those at Kronstadt calling for democratic workers' control, and in 1950, under somewhat less dire circumstances, Tito would administer this via his Basic Law on Workers' Self-Management (Rosefielde, 2007, p.39; Wilson, 1979, pp.70-71). Like the NEP, further laws would grow out of this, and in January of 1951, a law was passed allowed for the free price formation of non-rationed goods, successfully ending consumer rationing by the end of the year (Wilson, 1979, p.72). Each and every law can be evaluated on two accounts: that it aided in Yugoslavia's recovery, *and* that it reversed the most basic facets of Stalinist totalitarianism. The zealous nationalisation of industry of the post-war period that had put 80% of factories under state control was partially reversed (Wilson, 1979, p.45); the collectivisation of agriculture so 'successful' in Yugoslavia (and pursued so piously to curry favour with the Comintern [Wilson, 1979, p.67]) was lessened where resistance was greatest, then made voluntary (Wilson, 1979, p.73); finally, as low as at the village level People's Committees were established and elected to determine their own budget and social plan (Wilson, 1979, p.82). Tito had thrown ideology to the wind, when it had meant the survival of the CPY, most famously stating "We are not concerned about […] whether they are called socialist or not. What we need is more agricultural production—more bread. We are trying to find means of getting it" (Neal, 1954, p.236). Though it had evolved "mainly as the result of compelling economic circumstances," its Leninist credentials were sound: the state would still regulate the economy and prevent 'anarchy' (a common euphemism for capitalism), but most importantly these changes would facilitate the withering away of the state (Wilson, 1979, p.82; p.72; Neal, 1954, p.237).

Despite the temporary nature of the NEP, Lenin had characterised it regularly as a "long-term strategy to remain in

operation for an indefinite period," and had defended it to his last breath (Dowlah and Elliott, 1997, p.41). This, in Yugoslavia, was how the new policy was presented—a continuation of Lenin's legacy, Djilas reflected both the CPY's Leninism (for he was paraphrasing, his own statement appended to Lenin's), but also its individuality when he said: "all peoples will arrive at Socialism—this is inevitable. But they will not all arrive there by exactly the same road" (Wilson, 1979, p.64). Further changes to the Yugoslav system of self-management would occur, just as further reforms had grown from the NEP; the greatest of all differences between Lenin's policy and Tito's being that the latter was allowed time to evolve, while the former was rapidly dismembered along with those who still supported it (Rosefielde, 2007, p.47).

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia had taken many forms. In the interwar period it had aped Lenin's Soviet Republic, and idolised its protagonists. When swept to power not by Red Army battalions, but by their own popular support this idolatry took an implicit form. The policies of Stalin's Soviet Union were pursued with a mixture of vigour and muted dissatisfaction, and were only deviated from when circumstances dictated. Only when they became too exacting did the proudly independent Yugoslav communists show their dissatisfaction, the slightest dissent being enough to trigger Stalin's instinct to purge. The ensuing split could have been catastrophic if it were not for Western aid; this accounted for, it brought the CPY into staunch opposition to the USSR, into repudiation of Stalin's heretically adulterated Leninism, and drove Tito's communists into pursuing a new path, an individualist road to socialism grounded in Leninist theory, but dictated by the pragmatism in adversity that so defined Lenin's legacy.

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