

**BEFORE TITO**

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# **BEFORE TITO**

THE COMMUNIST PARTY  
OF YUGOSLAVIA DURING  
THE GREAT PURGE (1936–1940)

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Stefan Gužvica

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during the Great Purge (1936–1940)

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*For Kit*





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## ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

AVNOJ	Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, the umbrella organization of Yugoslav antifascist groups during the Second World War
BKP	Bulgarian Communist Party
CC	Central Committee
Cominform	The Communist Information Bureau, a group of leading European communist parties formed in 1947 as a quasi-successor to the Communist International
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International, the governing body of the Comintern
<i>Gorkićeveci</i>	Supporters of Milan Gorkić, the purged general secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia
GUGB	Main Directorate of State Security, the formal name of the Soviet secret police, 1934-1941. Colloquially, it was referred to, and still is, as the NKVD, even though that is the name of the entire People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, of which the GUGB was merely a subdivision. The acronyms GUGB and NKVD will be used interchangeably
HSS	Croatian Peasant Party
KIM	Young Communist International
KPH	Communist Party of Croatia, founded in 1937 as a subsection of the KPJ
KPJ	Communist Party of Yugoslavia
KPS	Communist Party of Slovenia, founded in 1937 as a subsection of the KPJ
KUNMZ	Communist University of the National Minorities of the West
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. See GUGB
MOPR	International Organization for Aid to Revolutionaries, also known as International Red Aid
NRPJ	Independent Workers' Party of Yugoslavia

OGPU	Joint State Political Directorate, the formal name of the Soviet secret police, 1923-1934
OMS	International Liaison Department, the intelligence service of the Comintern
PCE	Communist Party of Spain
PCF	French Communist Party
Profintern	The Red International of Labor Unions, a communist trade union organization created to unite the communist trade unions and coordinate communist activity among the reformist unions
SIM	Servicio de Investigación Militar (Military Investigation Service), the intelligence department of the International Brigades
SRN	The Party of the Working People, a legal and broad left-wing party led by communists in Yugoslavia from 1938 to 1940
SRPJ(k)	Socialist Workers' Party of Yugoslavia (communists), renamed the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1920
SKJ	League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the name of the KPJ from 1952
SKOJ	League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia
Ultra-left	An individual communist attitude or a communist party line characterized by perceived adventurism and sectarianism, such as individual acts of terror or refusal to engage in any cooperation with the non-communist left
VKP(b)	All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik)
<i>Yezhovshchina</i>	The colloquial name for the Great Purge in the Soviet Union

## PROLOGUE: THE LAST TRIP TO MOSCOW

On July 3, 1937, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), Milan Gorkić, informed his comrades in the Politburo that he had been summoned to Moscow by the Comintern. According to the subsequent recollections of those close to him, he was calm and optimistic about the journey; he expected to be back in Paris, where most of the Yugoslav communist leadership had been exiled, within ten days. His close friend, the Austrian-French communist writer Manès Sperber, asked him in private whether he was worried about the trip, given their shared knowledge of mass arrests in Moscow. Caring little for his own security, Gorkić merely reminded him that disobeying Comintern orders would amount to an act of treason and that it could be detrimental to his party.<sup>1</sup> This was the last time Sperber saw his friend alive. Following Gorkić's arrival in Moscow, the KPJ Politburo ceased receiving letters from him or the Third International. Soon after, Comintern financial aid was halted, without any explanation or prior notice.

The arrest and execution of Gorkić marked a turning point in the history of the KPJ. While hitherto the main targets of the Great Purge were members of the Yugoslav party who had opposed Stalin (a campaign that Gorkić wholeheartedly supported), from the summer of 1937, the NKVD turned against the KPJ leadership and other Yugoslav political émigrés. Communists, sympathizers and the non-affiliated were targeted with equal intensity. Furthermore, the Great Purge revived the factional struggles and created new ones, as

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Očak, *Gorkić: život, rad i pogibija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1988), 319-321. As a consequence of state repression, the party leadership was scattered throughout the continent, operating in several countries, with Paris as its primary headquarters at that particular time.

different groups fought for power and attempted to lift their party from the unpleasant situation it found itself in. Due to the mass repression by the NKVD, this renewed struggle was more volatile than any previous one. Some of the contenders for the party leadership would also fall prey to the Purge. On April 19, 1939, eleven top Yugoslav communists, including two former general secretaries, two secretaries of the Communist Youth (SKOJ), and three Spanish Civil War veterans, were executed together, most probably as a result of direct orders from Lavrentiy Beria, Andrey Vyshinsky, and the Politburo presided by Stalin.<sup>2</sup> This mass execution of some of the most prominent party figures has never before been a subject of historical research. The causes of their execution at a time when NKVD repression was subsiding remain a mystery. At this point, however, the power struggle within the KPJ was gradually subsiding. The remaining leading Yugoslav communists who aspired to the position of general secretary were expelled from the party that same year, following the establishment of a new leadership headed by Josip Broz Tito.

Before Tito received a mandate from the Comintern, however, the power grab affected all levels of the party and all areas of its activity, lasting for more than three years and taking place across four different countries. The international character of the conflict was not limited merely to KPJ activists abroad; other foreign communists also became heavily implicated in the Yugoslav intraparty struggles. The influence these parties had on the outcome of the KPJ's leadership competition raises the issue of transnational connections' impact on power dynamics within the Comintern. The factional struggle was never just an internal KPJ affair, even though it has always been presented as such.

The period of the Great Purge remains one of the most controversial and under-researched points in the history of the KPJ.

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<sup>2</sup> S.A. Melchin, A.S. Stepanov, V.N. Yakushev et al., "Сталинские списки – введение," Memorial, <http://stalin.memo.ru/images/intro.htm> (accessed March 27, 2017).

Although it marks the time of Tito's ascension to power, very few authors have examined the causes of his success, and fewer still have attempted to understand the alternative paths that the party could have taken. This research will help shed new light on the general history of the KPJ by uncovering new facts on one of the most chaotic and controversial moments in the party's existence. This work intends to go beyond what I call the "teleology of Tito," since all the currently existing works on the topic center around the character of Josip Broz and his rise to the position of general secretary of the KPJ. Such a perspective, wittingly or unwittingly, leads to a presumption that Tito was in some way predestined to become party leader, or, in the more orthodox accounts from the socialist period, that his rise to power presents the end goal and the culmination of the Yugoslav communist movement's development. My research will argue for a move away from this teleological approach, presenting Tito as just one of the actors who fought for power, rather than the central figure in the Yugoslav communist movement. Even though he undoubtedly became that by 1940, his position between 1936 and 1939 was no less precarious than that of his rivals. While I am doubtlessly interested in the question of how and why Tito became the general secretary, I am no less fascinated by his rivals. In spite of being overshadowed by the man who would go on to lead the party for forty years, they were far from insignificant. Although they eventually ended up on the dustbin of history, at the time of their activity, they presented significant intellectual and political currents within the Yugoslav communist movement in the interwar period. I will attempt to save these currents, and the people who represented them, from historical oblivion, because the history of the KPJ is incomplete without them.

Taking all this into consideration, my book will try to ascertain the origins of the KPJ's factional struggles which, as I will argue, first resurfaced in 1936, after being allegedly ended through Comintern intervention in the late 1920s. I will offer an answer to the question of how and why different factions emerged or dispersed in the period of the Great Purge, taking into account their respective

strategies, ideological views, and the reasons for their success or failure. In part, I will touch upon the impact of external institutions and organizations – such as the Comintern, the Soviet government, the NKVD, and other foreign communist parties – on the factional struggles within the KPJ. Finally, I will assess the long-term impact of the Great Purge on the KPJ itself, the formation of its policy, and the consequences it had for the subsequent split with Stalin in 1948.

I will argue that the victory of Tito's party line, which was firmly on the left of the Yugoslav communist movement, over its competitors, was a consequence of his proactive policy prescriptions and understanding of the expectations that the Comintern had of the KPJ. Although his rise was foreseeable in light of Comintern policy, it was by no means inevitable. However, the appointment of a new general secretary retrospectively became a key formative moment in the history of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. At this time, the "Titoist" party line was formulated, and it remained more or less unchanged until the first serious attempts to reform the Yugoslav system after 1948. As such, the roots of party policies in the 1940s, including those that led to the Tito-Stalin Split, can be traced back to the ideological intra-party struggles in the late 1930s.

## Historiography

There are only a handful of quality historical works about the KPJ in the late 1930s, and most of them do not treat the subject of the Great Purge in depth, in spite of its extraordinary significance for the overall development of the party. While the topic of the disappearance of Yugoslavs in the USSR was not particularly taboo in Yugoslav academic circles, the absence of sources presented a significant problem, and most researchers could rely only on fragmentary information, or on first-hand accounts of the few survivors of the gulag system. The brief explosion of works on the period in the last decade of Yugoslavia's existence stopped as the country began to collapse. These works,



although of high quality, have become dated and some of their findings require reassessment. Such is the case with Ivo Banac's *With Stalin against Tito*,<sup>3</sup> which provides a detailed overview of the factional struggles in the 1930s, but which overemphasized the importance of the national question in these struggles. Generally, the scholarship on the KPJ has tended to overly focus on the issues of nationality, which is something I also intend to move away from. The prolific Croatian historian Ivan Očak has written several biographies of famous Yugoslav victims of the Great Purge,<sup>4</sup> although at the time he was still unable to ascertain the exact circumstances of their downfalls and deaths. A journalist, Petar Požar, has succeeded in compiling a book on the more prominent Yugoslav victims of Stalinism,<sup>5</sup> and his account is very useful for gathering certain factual data on them, although it was written in the style of popular history.

More recently, there have been three works of great historiographical merit that have dealt with the topic to some extent: by Nikita Bondarev,<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Swain,<sup>7</sup> and Slavko and Ivo Goldstein.<sup>8</sup> Bondarev wrote a dissertation about Tito in Moscow in 1935 and

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<sup>3</sup> Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Aside from the already cited biography of Milan Gorkić in footnote 1, Očak published three more biographies of Yugoslavs killed in the Great Purge. The first was the biography of Danilo Srdić, the most prominent Yugoslav in the Red Army, a hero of the Russian Civil War who participated in the storming of the Winter Palace: Ivan Očak and Mihailo Marić, *Danilo Srdić, crveni general* (Belgrade: Sedma sila, 1965). A decade and a half later, he published a biography of Vladimir Čopić, another participant in the Bolshevik Revolution, a founder of the KPJ and the party's first organizational secretary, who was the commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War: Ivan Očak, *Vojnik revolucije: Život i rad Vladimira Čopića* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1980). Finally, he published a biography of Đuro and Stjepan Cvijić in 1982: Ivan Očak, *Braća Cvijići* (Zagreb: Spektar – Globus, 1982). Đuro was a one-time secretary of the KPJ between 1925 and 1926, while Stjepan, his younger brother, was the organizational secretary of the Young Communist International in 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Petar Požar, *Jugosloveni žrtve staljinskih čistki* (Belgrade: Nova knjiga, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Nikita Bondarev, *Misterija Tito: moskovske godine* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Swain, *Tito: A Biography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Slavko Goldstein and Ivo Goldstein, *Tito* (Zagreb: Profil, 2015).

1936, which helps shed light on the conditions within the KPJ at the very beginning of the Great Purge, and the start of new conflicts among the party leadership. Geoffrey Swain's excellent 2010 biography of Tito goes even further and covers the entire period of his rise to power, explaining his unique strategy in dealing with the Comintern. The book by the Goldsteins draws on a large variety of secondary sources and makes for the most comprehensive biography of Tito; his activity during the Great Purge is extremely well-covered. All three works, however, focus on the person of Tito and treat the KPJ as a mere background to the story. Even when contemporary biographies, such as those of Swain and Jože Pirjevec,<sup>9</sup> present Tito's rise as contingent and precarious, the story always revolves around him. This creates an incomplete picture of the KPJ, as all those who lost the factional struggle are brushed aside. The consequence of this is, at best, a misrepresentation of various marginalized ideological traditions within the KPJ,<sup>10</sup> and at worst, their complete oblivion.

Despite the opening of the archives in the 1990s, the Comintern as a whole remains under-researched, with plenty of room for researchers to find alternative approaches to understanding the history of international communism. The documents dealing with the KPJ are no exception, and thus much of the party's interwar history remains obscure. The very first "wave" of research in the early 1990s focused precisely on the Cominternians who became victims

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<sup>9</sup> Jože Pirjevec, *Tito i drugovi*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Laguna, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> The works that do address Tito's marginalized rivals in the KPJ usually present them through the lens of the official party line, describing them as having undermined party unity and weakened the revolutionary cause. For examples, see Ivan Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske 1937–1945*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Globus, 1981), 115–116, 223–238, and Sibe Kvesić, *Dalmacija u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi* (Zagreb: Lykos, 1960), 8–9, 21–23. The post-Yugoslav historiography has been markedly more sympathetic, although few works have actually presented Tito's rivals as the central figures that they were. An excellent biographical account that goes against this tendency is Jelena Kovačević, "Petko Miletić (1897–1943) – od revolucionara do "frakcionaša," *Tokovi istorije* 1/2017: 47–73.

of Stalinist repression.<sup>11</sup> In the Yugoslav case, however, this “first wave” consisted only of a single article by Ubavka Vujošević and Vera Mujbegović, listing the executed Yugoslavs that they managed to identify.<sup>12</sup> No comprehensive account exists on the fall of Milan Gorkić, although there have been attempts to explain it.<sup>13</sup> The most successful of these came from Ubavka Vujošević, who published Gorkić’s last autobiographical account, written just days before his arrest.<sup>14</sup> Vujošević is the only Yugoslav historian who relied extensively on the newly-available documents from the Comintern, although her own research into the KPJ in this period was cut short by her death. As such, even a thorough examination of the last year of Gorkić’s life is currently lacking. What Vujošević did manage to put together was finally published last year, essentially as a biographical dictionary of Yugoslavs arrested in the Soviet Union in the Stalin era.<sup>15</sup> However, the book still leaves out most of the details regarding the individual circumstances, except for the dates of arrest, release, execution and the formal charges.

The only book that has so far drawn from Vujošević’s compiled biographies is Kosta Nikolić’s *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu*.<sup>16</sup> Together with Banac’s aforementioned book, this work presents

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<sup>11</sup> Brigitte Studer and Berthold Unfried, “At the Beginning of a History: Visions of the Comintern After the Opening of the Archives,” *International Review of Social History* 42 (1997): 425-426.

<sup>12</sup> Ubavka Vujošević and Vera Mujbegović, “Die jugoslawischen Kommunisten in den stalinistischen ‘Säuberungen’ 1929 bis 1949,” in Richard Lorenz and Siegfried Bahne (eds.), *Kommunisten Verfolgen Kommunisten: Stalinistischer Terror und “Säuberungen” in Den Kommunistischen Parteien Europas Seit Den 30er Jahren* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1993): 157-173.

<sup>13</sup> For a pioneering work on the topic, see Swain, *Tito*, 17-20.

<sup>14</sup> Ubavka Vujošević, “Poslednja autobiografija Milana Gorkića, sekretara CK KPJ,” *Istorija 20. veka* 1/1997: 107-128. Writing autobiographies to the Cadres Department of the Comintern was a regular practice among the communists.

<sup>15</sup> Ubavka Vujošević Cica, *Nestajali netragom: Jugosloveni – žrtve političke represije i staljinističkih čistki u Sovjetskom Savezu 1927-1953*. (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Kosta Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2015), 96-183. Nikolić and Vujošević were colleagues from the same institute, so he had

the most comprehensive attempt to synthesize a history of the KPJ between 1936 and 1940, and is thus a valuable contribution to scholarship. Unfortunately, much like Banac, Nikolić shows a tendency to portray internal party politics as revolving primarily around the national question. While I do not intend to deny the importance of the issues of nationality for the communists, my book will argue that this is merely one of the facets of communist policy. I believe that, for the communists, the national question was a tactical question, meaning that they saw it primarily as a means to a socialist revolution, rather than an end in itself. Nikolić also uses the works of the journalist and amateur historian Pero Simić. Simić gathered and published an impressive amount of extremely useful primary source documents from the Russian archives.<sup>17</sup> Although Nikolić gives these works a more professional interpretation, it is necessary to note that Simić's methodological approach was highly questionable and his interpretation of documents tendentious, misinformed and misleading. In some cases, such as the joint publication with his Croatian colleague Zvonimir Despot, the two presented shockingly amateurish pseudo-historical theories.<sup>18</sup> I will cite the primary sources they gathered, whose quality is indisputable, even though the duo often misinterpreted them. Therefore, all of the citations of Simić and Despot in this work refer to printed primary sources published by them, unless otherwise stated.

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the good fortune of being able to use her manuscript even before its publication four years later.

<sup>17</sup> Pero Simić, *Tito: svetac i magle* (Belgrade: Službeni list SCG, 2005)

<sup>18</sup> The most striking example of that is their claim to have finally "proven" Tito's alleged Comintern activity in Spain. Their evidence is a report on a Yugoslav International Brigades volunteer by a certain "Sverčevski K.K. (Walter)." Despot and Simić then conclude that, not only have they proved Tito/Walter was in Spain, but that he had a hitherto unknown pseudonym there, K.K. Sverčevski. One does not need to have an in-depth knowledge of international communism to know that Karol Świerczewski, nicknamed Walter, was one of the most famous Polish communists in the interwar period, and a general in the Red Army and the International Brigades. This fairly obvious and easily verifiable fact somehow escaped the authors. Pero Simić and Zvonimir Despot, *Tito – strogo poverljivo: arhivski dokumenti* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2010), 69.