

A reply to a reader on the role of Stalinism in the former Yugoslavia

Mike Ingram
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The following is an exchange with a reader concerning the January 7 WSWs article "US hails new ruling coalition: Tudjman's ultra-nationalist party defeated in Croatian elections."

The reader writes:

Dear Comrades,

I would like to comment on the article [about the Croatian elections]; I don't intend to engage in a polemic but would just like to correct a simple fact.

Calling Mr. Racan a former Stalinist leader is quite absurd.

Firstly, Mr. Racan, born in 1944, was four years old when Josip Broz Tito broke with Stalin in 1948. After that time being a Stalinist in Yugoslavia could only get you jailed.

Now, I wouldn't really expect Mr. Ingram to distinguish Yugoslavia's self-management socialism from Stalinism if he was writing for a right-wing review. But writing for the WSWs, it wouldn't hurt him if he did.

Secondly, this type of socialism was quite attractive to left-wing intellectuals in the West (certainly more than to the people who lived under it).

So if Mr. Ingram was so worried about Croatian workers being sold to rotten Western capitalists as cheap labour, he could check up a bit on their history.

So to reiterate, Communist he was, but not a Stalinist.

JP

Zagreb, Croatia

Mike Ingram replies:

Dear JP,

The issue you raise is an important one. It is not surprising that, as someone living in Croatia, you find it strange that we should call Ivica Racan a Stalinist. As you point out, Tito did break with Stalin in 1948 and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) didn't engage in the type of hero-worship of Stalin as could be seen, for example, with the Chinese Stalinists.

It is necessary to understand that when we use the term "Stalinist" it is not intended as an epithet but as a political definition. Fundamentally, it defines the Soviet bureaucracy's anti-Marxist and anti-internationalist perspective of national socialism, summed up in Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country".

An examination of the history of Yugoslavia will show that whatever the conflicts between Tito and Stalin, the CPY never transcended the underlying nationalist perspective of Stalinism. In fact, the rejection of the perspective of world socialist revolution advanced by the Fourth International and its founder Leon Trotsky, in favour of various forms of national socialism, has been central to Yugoslavia's tortured history.

Within the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the emerging bureaucracy adopted Bukharin's slogan of "turn to the country" and increasingly sought to consolidate its power by resting on layers of wealthier peasants. Accompanying this was the Stalin-Bukharin faction's elaboration, in 1924, of the theory of "socialism in one country".

It is not the place here to go into the consequences of this policy for the USSR itself, but extended to Eastern Europe it proved disastrous for the international working class. Yugoslavia became one of the principal areas where Stalin urged, and ultimately imposed, on the local Communist parties an orientation towards the peasantry and toward ethnic nationalism.

In his theory of Permanent Revolution, Trotsky insisted that in countries with a belated bourgeois development the task of achieving democracy and national emancipation was conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat. This meant the working class had to lead the subjugated nation, and above all its peasant masses. While the national question assigns to the peasantry a critical place in the democratic revolution, Trotsky wrote, "without an alliance of the proletariat with the peasantry the tasks of the democratic revolution cannot be solved, nor even seriously posed."

In the attack upon this perspective, the Stalin faction put forward the anti-Marxist position that nationalism in the Balkans was inherently revolutionary, because it rested upon a peasant base. They sought to shift the CPY from its earlier proletarian internationalist stance towards one that encouraged national and ethnic separatist movements as a means of destroying the bourgeois Yugoslav state.

The then-leader of the CPY, Sima Markovic, opposed the line advanced by Stalin and upheld the demand for a socialist federation of the Balkans. While opposing the Yugoslav state, Markovic insisted that the only way to resolve national and ethnic grievances was to unite the South Slav working class in struggle. He called for political agitation on the issue of the constitution as a tactical means of mobilising the working class independently of the bourgeois parties and posing a socialist solution to the national question.

For this Stalin denounced Markovic as a "right-wing parliamentarian". With the subsequent jailing of Markovic and other CPY leaders, the party was eventually shifted towards support for national separatism.

In 1928 Moscow deposed the entire Yugoslav leadership including Markovic, who was put to death a decade later in Stalin's prison camps.

A more in-depth account of Stalinist policies in the Balkans, and their disastrous consequences, can be found in the 1994 statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, *Marxism, Opportunism & the Balkan Crisis*.^[1]

The Fourth International was founded by Leon Trotsky to oppose the Stalinist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Third (Communist) International. With the coming to power of Hitler in Germany—as a direct result of Stalin's policies—Trotsky concluded that the Third International was dead for the purpose of socialist revolution and a new Fourth International had to be founded.

Josip Broz-Tito rose to leadership in the CPY in the 1930s when it was reorganised by the Soviet bureaucracy. This was accompanied by the liquidation of large numbers of Yugoslav Communists in the purges that exterminated the revolutionary generation of October 1917 in the USSR,

culminating in Trotsky's assassination in 1940.

The CPY was reorganised to incorporate national separatism into the party's structure. Separate Communist parties were created in Croatia and Slovenia, which then sought allies within local sections of the bourgeoisie as part of the new "popular front" policy adopted by the Kremlin. Tito at first modelled himself on Stalin and attempted to recreate the bureaucratic state forms of the USSR within Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, he came into increasing conflict with Moscow and the post-war arrangements Stalin had made with world imperialism. In the new division of the world agreed between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin in 1944, Yugoslavia was split 50-50. It was agreed that a popular front government should be installed incorporating three members of an imperialist-backed exile regime in London. But with the Communist Party-led partisans enjoying mass support and holding all real power, the bourgeois representatives resigned, and in November 1945 the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed.

In the early years of the Yugoslav Republic, Tito opened negotiations on a Balkan Federation with Bulgaria and supported a revolutionary uprising in neighbouring Greece. Yugoslavia came into armed conflict with US military forces and the Tito leadership increasingly clashed with Stalin and the bureaucracy in Moscow. As you know, this led to an open break by 1948.

Thus, the source of the conflict between Tito and Stalin arose from a very real dilemma faced by the Yugoslav revolution. Tito had come to power on the revolutionary wave that had swept the Balkans after World War II. Though this provided the possibility of a future socialist development, the success or failure of this would not be determined so much on the soil of Yugoslavia, but on the world arena.

In their determined effort to crush the unfolding Yugoslav revolution, the US and British ruling classes received the active collaboration of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow. But there was nothing preordained about the outcome of events in the Balkans in the late 1940s.

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The significance of the Yugoslav revolution was understood by the Fourth International at the time, and was seen as providing the possibility for a political reckoning with Stalinism. To this end, the Trotskyists sought to intervene in the Stalin-Tito crisis to outline a progressive, socialist direction for Yugoslavia's development.

In 1948 the Fourth International addressed a letter to the membership of the CPY warning that the Yugoslav revolution was at a critical juncture and could take one of three possible directions. The first two—an adaptation to either Stalinism or imperialism—would signify the betrayal of the revolution. The third road was to base the fate of Yugoslavia upon the strength of the working class, fighting to extend the revolution internationally by adopting the perspective of world socialist revolution. (This letter and the contemporary analysis of the Trotskyist movement are quoted extensively in *The Heritage We Defend—A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International* by David North.)[2]

The CPY ignored these warnings and sought to balance between the first two possibilities that had been outlined by the FI. Its turn to building "socialism in one country" as a supposedly more realistic alternative to the perspective of world socialist revolution was to prove no less disastrous for Yugoslavia than it had for the Soviet Union.

Under pressure from Moscow, Tito abandoned the call for a Balkan socialist federation and instead attempted to cultivate a new, Yugoslav nationalism. At the same time, faced with growing economic problems and ever more belligerent threats from Moscow, the Tito leadership first sought to accommodate itself to imperialism, and later to manoeuvre between the two Cold War superpowers. In 1950 they supported US imperialism in the Korean War. Six years later, the CPY formed a bloc with Moscow against the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Having rejected a principled struggle to unite the working class on a genuinely socialist basis, Tito presided over a system of separate republics, balancing between the various national and regional forces as a Bonapartist-type figure.

While Tito was alive, the federal state that he headed served to provide each of the ethnic groups in Yugoslavia with some security against fratricidal war and the atrocities of the past. Soon after his death, however, the unresolved national problems and economic backwardness of the country broke out into the open.

The slogans of "decentralised socialism" and "workers' self-management," which you refer to as a "type of socialism," became the means by which the bureaucracy began a turn towards capitalism—albeit initially in the context of the nationalisations and state regulation imposed in Yugoslavia after the Second World War. In devolving power to local enterprises, the leadership made a definite shift towards market policies. At the same time, there was an increasing integration of Yugoslavia into the world capitalist market, resulting in massive debts to the International Monetary Fund.

Within the context of a perspective of world revolution, a tactical adoption of certain features of a market economy would have been entirely permissible. After all, in the Soviet Union Lenin's proposal for the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1920s did allow for a limited development of the market. This was necessitated by the severe economic problems the country faced in the aftermath of the civil war and the defeat of socialist revolutions in Europe.

The central question, however, is that of the underlying perspective of the Yugoslav regime. The policies pursued by the CPY in the 1970s were not temporary measures to buy time for the consolidation and extension of the revolution. They represented a further retreat into the national soil and an accelerated orientation to Western imperialism.

This unleashed economic and political forces that the bureaucracy proved incapable of dealing with. The equalising tendencies, diverting wealth from the better-off republics to subsidise the development of more impoverished regions, led to resentment within the party leadership, the managers of enterprises and the intelligentsia over their share of privileges. The decentralisation of planning placed greater power in the hands of local enterprises and the Communist parties of the different republics. The disparities between one republic and another emerged more openly. It is no accident that provincial nationalism emerged most strongly in the wealthiest republics of Croatia and Slovenia.

These developments were the direct expression of the bankruptcy of a national perspective. In Yugoslavia, no less than the Soviet Union, the prerequisite for the successful building of socialism was the extension of the revolution beyond the boundaries of Yugoslavia, in the struggle for the socialist federation of the Balkans and in unity with the working class in the advanced capitalist countries.

In conclusion, you say of Racan, "Communist he was, but not a Stalinist". I hope that from this brief presentation of the recent political history of Yugoslavia it becomes clear that what is responsible for the present tragedy in the Balkans is the politics of Stalinism, not genuine communism. It is from the camp of party officials trained in the anti-Marxist school of Stalinism that the present-day nationalist politicians such as Racan have emerged. Conversely, if a progressive solution to the present crisis is to be found, it will only be to the extent that the working class is able to distinguish genuine socialism from its Stalinist falsification in all its guises.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Ingram

Notes:

Marxism, Opportunism and The Balkan Crisis is available on the WSWs at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/apr1999/balk-m07.shtml>

The Heritage We Defend can be purchased on line from Mehring Books

at: <http://www.mehring.com>



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