

Yugoslavia
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BURY TITO WITHOUT TEARS

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The compulsion to think the best of Tito and his works, which has afflicted left and right in this country for most of the war-time and post-war period, tells us more about ourselves than about Yugoslavia. As in the case of the Soviet Union, it derives less from skilled propaganda on the Communist part, than from our capacity for self-deception, a symptom of deep psychological inadequacies - as Orwell pointed out 35 years ago.

Among Socialists there was the desperate need to believe that some Marxist regime somewhere actually fulfilled its promises; they therefore avoided looking the horse too closely in the mouth. Yugoslavia was hailed as being "freer than the Soviet union" - correctly, because Tito found optimising terror more economic than maximising it - and hence, by syllogism, to being free. Tito's charade of "workers' control" and decentralisation, little more than ploys designed to differentiate his regime from the communist dictatorship on which it was modelled (of which more later) was accepted wholly uncritically.

Its economic collapse of the early 'seventies, which led to thirty percent of the registered labour force becoming unemployed (according to official statistics) and which obliged the regime to permit mass emigration to work in the capitalist West as an alternative to mass disorder at home, went unremarked among socialists in this country, apart from occasional references to the regime's liberalism in allowing them to leave at all.

The inflation, worse than ours, was ignored. Pace Lady Wooton and Professor Townsend, inflation and unemployment rates in the Socialist Third Of The World are worse than in the West. But only in Yugoslavia do they have honest statistics (dating back from 1950/1) which allow one to see the situation at a glance.

Non-socialist segments of our establishment have been equally remiss for other reasons: some simply considered that Tito's ambivalent relations with the Soviet bloc automatically put him above criticism, by the same naive realpolitik from which Mao benefited.

Much of the evidence now available throws doubt on the wisdom - even on war-time military grounds - of the decision to support Tito both against Mihailovich and, de facto, against the Monarchy which had entered the war as our ally. Were it not for these policies, the Monarchy would have had a good chance of regaining power, so that Yugoslavia (and hence also Albania) would have remained in the Western camp, and obviating the need for Tito's ambiguous defiance of the Soviet Union ab initio.

Gullibility springs eternal ... in a BBC interview after Tito's death, Edward Heath, who found him temperamentally congenial, argued that living standards had vastly improved under Tito, giving as sole evidence the dress of people he had seen in restaurants and Boulevards and what they ordered. That a one-time Prime Minister should believe himself capable of judging economic performance by impression of the smart centre of a capital city - and in a communist dictatorship at that - surely throws some light on the idiocyncracies of the

The ideological, political and economic bases of Yugoslavia's "separate path to socialism" are far weaker than generally realised. Historically, Titoism was a side-effect of the Tito-Stalin dispute, Tito, it will be remembered, came onto the scene as an arch-Stalinist, whose loyalty to Stalin earned him first the job of liquidating his Yugoslav communist colleagues in the Moscow purges of the 1930's, and then the succession. Both during and after the second world war, he outdid the other "new democracies" in brutality. He organised the systematic murder of men, women and children to secure absolute terrified submission. He wrecked the war-ravaged economy by applying doctrinaire Soviet methods with thoroughness not achieved among the satellites. (It may be recalled that this doctrinaire leftism was one of the accusations subsequently levelled against Tito and co by the Russians, with reference to their collectivisation and nationalisation with à l'outrance.) His cultural and academic policies were those of post-war Stalinism down to the smallest details. So was his "nationalities' policy", mutatis mutandis.

The 1948 split came over one issue alone: power. Though, soon after the war, Tito looked favourably on Yugoslavia's absorption into the USSR, bringing him into the politburo, he soon became aware of the dangers to him personally of being subordinated to the Soviet equivalent of the Ministry for Colonies, which was even then preparing its series of manic purges in the satellites - Rajk, Kostov, Slansky, etc.

For months, even, after the conflict with Stalin became open and irrevocable, Tito tried to remain a hundred percent Stalinist in word and deed. For example, he speeded up rural collectivization, and the nationalisation of small shops and other one-man businesses (without compensation). His first party congress since the war, held a month after the publication of the Cominform resolution, proudly highlighted Tito's role in the Moscow purges of the 30's, and was punctuated by paens to Stalin and unlimited commitment to the USSR, the Soviet bloc and the Soviet model.

Only when the tensions created by the clash between pro-Soviet feelings and loyalty to the Yugoslav Party leadership became apparent, did Tito revise his party's standard image of the USSR. Revision was based on the contention that if the USSR was waging an unscrupulous political war against Yugoslavia, it could not be truly socialist; it followed that Soviet society was not socialist. But that, in turn, cast doubts on Yugoslav communist society, which had been slavishly modelled on the USSR's. So he posited a special "Yugoslav way", to differentiate his regime from the "bureaucratic caste-dictatorship" in the USSR. (Unconsciously, he reproduced much of Trotsky's critique.) But in order to make this at all convincing, he found himself obliged to introduce reforms at home, however reluctantly and superficially. One welcome change was that people were no longer obliged to attend indoctrination and other spontaneous meetings, to the annoyance of the petty despots who loved to hear the sound of their own voices.

Arbitrary powers of the lower and middling party and state officials were curbed. The black market was accepted as a fact of life, and largely freed from harassment. Small businesses, which had been run into the ground under communist management, were allowed to return to private hands, collective farms spontaneously dissolved. Exodus from prisons and camps was speeded up - some places were needed for pro-Stalinists.

Ordinary Yugoslavs felt the relief of someone who takes off a pair of tight shoes. But party members needed a new faith in place of "Tito-Stalinism", if they were to stand up to isolation and intimidation. Naturally, the regime made great play of national independence. But this is a two-edged weapon. For one thing, it invited contrasts with the Soviet period 1941/8. Secondly, there is little in the way of pan-Yugoslav feeling, except in the upper reaches of the Communist hierarchy, while Serb, Croat and Macedonian national feeling is divisive. So patriotism was not enough. It was then that Djilas was given the task of thinking up imaginative ideological innovations to capture imagination at home and win sympathy abroad among the left. So decentralisation, workers' self-management and "socialist democracy" were adopted.

Decentralisation meant little in practice so long as real power was exercised by the Federal Politburo and the Ministry of defence in Belgrade, while the government apparatus, nominally decentralised and rendered in several languages, retained a Bageotian character.

Workers' control remained largely symbolic.

Like most other institutions, workers' committees, were in fact run and supervised by the Party.

In order to check on the impression I gained from sitting in on a number of workers' committees and then chatting privately with ordinary workers, I checked with American and West-German economic-aid representatives. At all their meetings with the Yugoslavs, at ministerial down to enterprise level, at which investment decisions decisive for the operation, and indeed existence, of the enterprises were taken, no workers' committee representative had ever attended.

When economic collapse came in the 'seventies and over a quarter of the labour force was made redundant with a speed which would be envied in this country, workers' committees had no say. British and French academics have written favourably of the system, but they relied on regulations and orders, not research into what actually happened. Their writings were reminiscent of the proceedings of the Sherlock Holmes Society: all the apparatus of scholarship, but no actual contact with reality.

"Socialist democracy" came to rest on two foundations. First, in matters of no direct political significance, scholars and journalists were free to write as they pleased, so long as they did not encroach on politics. Secondly, there was freedom to criticise Marxist regimes of which Belgrade disapproved at any given time. This was trickier than it seemed, owing to the rapid ideological tergiversations generated by relations between Belgrade and Moscow, the powerful ambivalence, bound together by a love-hate relationship.

Originally as Stalin's assault on Tito reached a climax of virulence, and no initiatives on Stalin's part could be ruled out, not even military intervention (remember Korea), Tito was obliged to increase his anti-Stalinism, and with it his domestic reforms and his increasingly close and dependent relationship with the West. This High Titoism turn alarmed increasing numbers of his own party members. The "lower cadres" resented it because it affected adversely their powers and privileges: they looked back nostalgically to the good old days before the 1948 "earthquake", when Stalin was Stalin, and the "unorganised" knew their place. This "new-class consciousness" reinforced ideological conservatism, generating new waves of "cominformism" not sparing the politburo itself.

In other words, in order to ward off Stalin for political and physical survival, Tito was obliged to jeopardise his own regime's stability and even legitimacy - et propter vitam.

Within two weeks of Stalin's death, almost before his body was cold, a Yugoslav mission was off sounding out Molotov, Malenkov and Beria. Within a month, they had come to terms. Mutual denunciation disappeared from the pages of the Soviet and Yugoslav press: hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil. This permitted an immediate halt to further Titoisation, then to its partial dismantling. The iron fist came out of the velvet glove. Reforms were halted and, where possible, reversed. "Proletarian internationalism" became respectable again. Praise for the West and social democracy - recognised as genuinely socialist during the High Titoite phase - was again outlawed. The secret police at home and hit-squads abroad were turned against dissidents other than pro-Soviet ones, too.

So Stalin's death . ushered in the first phases of re-Stalinisation in Yugoslavia, even before de-Stalinisation had begun in the Soviet bloc. But the balance of power did not permit de-Stalinisation to go all the way. The new Soviet leaders were glad to be rid of Stalin's personal vendetta against Tito, to live and let live, at least while he remained in the saddle. But they were in no way reconciled to Tito's claim to full independence and ideological sovereignty. This remained a threat to their own legitimacy at home as well as to their domination of the satellites and the world revolutionary movement.

For the legitimacy of communist dictatorship in the Soviet Union is based on its claim to a monopoly of wisdom, hence to embody the forward march of history. Whether this is embodied in The Leader or in Collective Leadership - an unnatural and unstable state of affairs - the dialectic can only be incarnate in one place at a time. But once Tito or Mao were recognised as sharing this mania, then it evaporates. If Mao can be right and Tito right - each in his own interpretation - then why not Ivan Ivanich? The Leader's infallibility remains essential to the whole communist power structure; any other claim to infallibility anywhere infringes his own. If two can be infallible while differing, why not twenty, two hundred, two thousand?

Hence Tito's continual tergiversations on this subject.

Tito on the one hand, demanded from the Communist world recognition of his monopoly of wisdom in Yugoslavia, and was willing in return to accord to each a monopoly in his own backyard. Contrary to what his admirers in the West deceived themselves into believing, wholly supported the principle of communist monopoly of power and ideas in each communist state, and preferably in as many states as possible.

Only by this doctrine could he maintain legitimacy for a one-party dictatorship obdurately and equally opposed to any encroachment - ideological or political - from the Soviet bloc or from the people of Yugoslavia, who are no more reconciled to communist rule than any other people. Indeed they are less so than some, given their strong links with Central Europe, where they can see that "bourgeois democracy" works far better than Balkan communist dictatorship. (After all, would SPECTATOR-readers like to live under Communist dictatorships?) Moscow could not agree, because they would face pressures for similar concessions to their other satellites.

Tito's non-aligned and third world circuses derive from this ambivalent relationship with the USSR. To be treated by Moscow as a partner - his overriding objective - he needed a dowry. He promised to bring them the third world: from its origins at the 1961 Belgrade Conference, non-alignment meant anti-Westernism at the price of accepting Tito as the broker.

The Russians monitored it in silence, sending their number two oriental, Bobijan Gafurov, noticed the broken reeds - Nehur, Nkrumah, Nasser, Sekou Toure - and decided that by using Castro, they could take it over without paying Tito much in the way of rent. The Chinese put their oar in and gave Tito nothing at all in return. The charade was given little credence in the West, outside of Britain, where willingness to take it at face value owed much to the compulsive suspension of disbelief regarding our own charade, the Commonwealth. Aficionados need only ask themselves: what did it all achieve? For whom? Against whom?

These inherent contradictions of inter-party relationships explain the twists and tergiverations in Yugoslav-Soviet relationships and in the Party line at home on the nature of Communism in general and of Soviet communism in particular. One cannot take Titoism at one particular stage of the cycle as representative of Titoism in general, since it is precisely the violent tergiverations and the insoluble contradictions from which they stem which are an integral element in Titoism. Its only consistent elements are opportunism and unpredictability. That is what "socialist democracy" has come to embody, however grand it sounds to visiting Labour and TU delegations. Hence, what is safe at one time can lead to arrest, imprisonment, dismissal on another occasion.

Tito's own personal predominance ensured that the Party as a whole marched in step through all the twists and turns, with a few unfortunates falling off the end at each about turn. His disappearance from the scene makes it much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to carry on walking the tightrope.

His party's collective leadership is a coalition of staff officers and time-servers, none of whom has shown the strength so far to take the party through these sudden turns and manoeuvres and to arbitrate between deep differences of interest and viewpoint. His war-time comrades have died or been purged. Like most dictators, he left no room for the spontaneous activity which provides the seed-bed for new leadership, as far as the eye can see.

These differences inter-act with deep national antagonisms. It has become fashionable to say that Tito overcame national rivalries and united Yugoslavia. Exactly the same was said of Kings Peter and Alexander, in their day, with as little truth.

Dictatorship has suppressed open expression of these antagonisms, as it did under Alexander, at the same time as it fed them. In many ways they are greater after thirty five years of centralised communist rule. For much of the conflict relates to the sharing out of what the state takes off the people. Under communist rule, even attenuated by a private sector, the state takes more than it did under the Monarchy, hence the fight is fiercer. (Early Serbian Socialists like Svetozar Marković regarded the Serbian state as the main exploiter. Not much has changed, since then, except for the worse.) The Croats, whose natural economic, political and cultural orientation has always been towards Central Europe, feel more cheated than ever, as Europe waxes while they wane. Tito's grandiose plans for reducing and eventually superseding economic inequalities between the regions, founded partly on geography, partly on differences of national temperament and culture.

Disaffection is expressed in Croatia at all levels, by peasant farmers, urban employees, and intellectuals. (The move to declare Croat a separate language and Serbo-Croat a fiction to hide Serbian domination, which was forcibly suppressed by Belgrade, was supported by most Croat intellectuals, though it has weak philological foundations.)

This disaffection places Croat party members in a cleft stick. If they loyally support the Belgrade line, they are rejected as Uncle Toms at home. If they try to accommodate the Croat view, they are at best looked at askance by the Federal power, at worst they risk purging or other reprisals. The matter is exacerbated by the militancy of the large Serbian minority in Croatia (particularly Lika and Kordun) and in adjacent parts of North Bosnia, who, under Monarchy and Communarchy alike, were not only the most enthusiastic centralists, but perpetually complained of being insufficiently rewarded for their loyalty, and lost no opportunity to inflame relationships between Croatia and Belgrade, the better to fish in troubled waters. (Parallels with Ireland are not fanciful.)

The continued support enjoyed by the Ustasi - one of the beastliest movements in Europe - on Croats abroad and inside Yugoslavia, can only be ascribed to the depth of the continued frustrations and resentments.

These face Belgrade with a quandary. Tito had long since decided that concessions to Croats would only raise more demands while antagonising the loyal South, or teaching it that awkwardness pays. But he could at least claim to be a Croat acting in Pan-Yugoslav interests, though many Croats regarded him as Kara George with a Croatian accent. His joint successors will be subjected to strong but conflicting pressures in opposite directions. (The loyalty of Macedonians and Albanians is problematic, but partly condition on what they get out of the Federal Republic.)

To sum up, Tito's successors inherit a poor country, further impoverished by Communist rule (just imagine Benn and Kitson having sole control of our economy) continued national conflict, suppressed but ready to erupt the moment pressures are relaxed, discontent with Communist dictatorship and its fruits, and deep disagreement between ideologists who would prefer closer ties with the Soviet Union and those who still hanker after Yugoslav especialism, between those who favour the non-aligned and third-world card and those who regard it as a waste of time and money, with a strong Soviet Union and a weak divided West.

(Tito's present successors showed full awareness of their insecurity by the panic way in which they reacted to his terminal illness. Only fear of the future could explain their gruesomely keeping his body artificially alive for four months after he had ceased to be as a human being, and until the tissues simply broke down.)

There may be little we can do about it, we can at least avoid self-deception. Our bien pensant press and establishment's apparent congenital inability to take the measure of communist and third world dictatorships remains a far more serious problem, one on which we need to do something.