

Terror or Errors?: From the Socialist Narrative to the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract

During the Second World War, the Yugoslav National Liberation Movement was one of the most successful resistance movements in Europe. However, it had to overcome various obstacles and its direction was not clear. In the first year of fascist occupation, the Partisans and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia confronted a practical dilemma, the potential solution to which could alter the course of the Liberation Movement's struggle: popular anti-fascism or socialist revolution? According to the existing literature, the latter outweighed the former from late 1941 to mid-1942, but its catastrophic consequences and Comintern's intervention resulted in the abandonment of this radical approach. The 'leftist errors' as this period is known, marked a cycle of serious defeats, setbacks, and failures for the Partisan Army, especially in Montenegro and Herzegovina. The confiscation of properties, burning of villages, and execution of existing or potential enemies were the manifestations of this policy which aimed for the socialist transformation of Yugoslavia as part of the liberation struggle. This paper will investigate how the existing literature has approached this controversial topic.

Keywords

Yugoslavia, Second World War, history, socialism, partisans

Introduction

The Axis invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941 resulted in one of the swiftest military victories for Hitler's alliance during the Second World War. After 11 days, the Yugoslav army had capitulated, the government and King Peter had left for London, and the country had been split between Berlin's allies, with the fascist Independent State of Croatia (NDH – Nezavisna Država Hrvatska) formed as a result. However, controlling the occupied territories proved to be a Sisyphean task; the people's uprising in the early summer of 1941, the emergence of the organised Resistance, and the Partisans' successes over the following years led to the liberation of massive zones long before D- Day or even the Allied Italian campaign in the summer of 1943. By this time, Tito's fighters had already survived significant Axis military operations, which were often accompanied by the Chetniks, the Serbian nationalist organisation of Draza Mihailovich. The Partisans liberated Belgrade in October 1944 alongside the Red Army, and at Yalta the Allies officially recognised their dominance over post-war Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, the Partisans' road to victory was anything but straightforward. The Yugoslav National Liberation Movement had to overcome various obstacles, while its direction was inconsistent from its founding until 1944. Despite their popular front policy, for which the Yugoslav Partisans became the most successful example of communist- led resistance in Europe, during the first year of fascist occupation, questions about the movement's ideological orientation emerged. Long before the country became the "besieged fortress" of which the Partisans dreamed,¹ the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) confronted a practical dilemma, each potential solution to which might have altered the course of the Liberation Movement's struggle: popular anti-fascism or socialist revolution? According to the existing literature, the latter outweighed the former from late 1941 to mid-1942, but its catastrophic consequences and Comintern's intervention resulted in the abandonment of this radical approach. The 'leftist errors' as this period is known, marked a cycle of serious defeats, setbacks, and failures for the Partisan Army, especially in Montenegro and Herzegovina. The confiscation of properties, burning of villages, and execution of existing or potential enemies were the manifestations of this policy which aimed for the socialist transformation of Yugoslavia as part of the liberation struggle, in contrast to the inclusive popular front policy.

In historiography, the period of the 'leftist errors' — also known as the 'leftist deviation,' 'left turn,' or 'red terror' — was considered to be "the most sensitive, most complex and most taboo historical period in the eyes of the Yugoslav (...) socialist regime."² However, the successes of the communists in the years to come, the Tito- Stalin split, and the road followed by the Yugoslavs thereafter all overshadowed the former and resulted in a lack of academic study of the period in the West. Even in Yugoslavia and its successor states, it has been

¹ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije* (henceforth *Zbornik*) 15 vols (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut Jugoslavenske Armije, 1949), I.I, doc. 2.

² Dino Mujadžević, 'O Rasimu Huremu i njegovoj monografiji o Drugom svjetskom ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini,' in, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu 1941-1945*, ed. by Rasim Hurem (Zagreb – Sarajevo: Plejada – BNZG – University Press, 2016) 357–364 (p. 360).

minimally examined. Nonetheless, references to the ‘leftist errors,’ although limited to brief outlines, are made in almost every historical work about the Second World War in Yugoslavia. At the same time, both the significance and ideological nucleus of this topic have generated different interpretations. Hence, quite paradoxically, all historians engaged in relevant research writing on, debating about, and offering their explanation for the ‘errors,’ yet most do not properly address the topic, rarely providing an in-depth analysis and only a few dealing exclusively with it.

As a result of various political and social circumstances spanning from the dominance of particular narratives in socialist Yugoslavia to the rise of nationalism and the wars of the 1990s, which have all had an undeniable ideological impact on the relevant scholarship, it is crucial to provide an in-depth review of the most significant publications on the topic. Using Socialist Yugoslavia as our starting point, we will arrive at a review of contemporary works from former Yugoslavian countries, the West, and Russia. Our primary focus will be on works that deal exclusively with the issue. However, since the presence of the topic in influential history books has played a crucial role in the formulation of wider audiences’ understandings of the issue, it is vital to treat the approaches employed in these works as well.

The Socialist Narrative

The first attempt to write a historical overview of the Partisan struggle was published in 1957 and 1958 by the Military History Institute of the Yugoslav Army.³ The work has a clear focus on the military history of the Resistance, and it offers a unique outline of what transpired in Yugoslavia on an almost day-to-day basis. However, this account presents a unified, undivided image of the CPY, and thus, the ‘leftist errors’ are not mentioned, let alone analysed. The issue appears indirectly within the context of comparisons drawn between developments in Serbia and Montenegro. In this regard, even though they are not named at all, the ‘errors’ are afforded a purely military significance.

For the first year of the occupation, the movement’s direction in Serbia was outstanding and military defeats were due to the superiority of the enemies’ forces.⁴ When the work provides an account of the movement of the Serbian uprising’s core westward to Bosnia, ultimately becoming the Partisan Army that would triumph in the following years, there is an attempt to distance the struggle from the military and — most importantly — political actions that did not align with the work’s narrative. This is evidenced by the author’s silence on the policies introduced in the Užice Republic during the autumn of 1941, when the Politburo of the CPY oversaw a Sovietisation attempt to organise the liberated city.

At the same time, in Montenegro, the ‘military-political leadership of the uprising could not cope well enough’ and sowed the seeds for the defeats that followed.⁵ The subsequent

³ *Oslobodilacki rat naroda Jugoslavije, 1941-1945* (Belgrade: Vojni istoriski Institut Jugoslovenske narodne armije, 1957).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 67–9, 81–2, 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 69–74.

critique is advanced not on ideological grounds, but on military ones: the leadership in Montenegro was concerned with the preservation of established fronts, in contrast to the guerrilla warfare that the Partisans ‘correctly’ pursued in Serbia and Bosnia.⁶ Milovan Djilas — the CPY’s representative in Montenegro — belonged to the ‘left’ faction of the Central Committee (CC) and was a dissident at the time the work was published. He is accused of advocating the ‘leftist errors’ and this figures as ground for rendering the Serbo-Montenegrin comparison reasonable. This forged duality has some merits, especially when evaluating the early months of the occupation. However, the omitted fact is that the core of the ‘errors’ i.e. the class struggle approach, was adopted by the CC of the CPY as the official party line in the winter of 1941.⁷

Beyond the book’s shortcomings, the history of the resistance is presented thoroughly. Additionally, the author’s problematic, binary approach to issues concerning the Chetniks and the collaboration more broadly can be accounted for by the fact that the work was published only ten years following the end of World War Two. As a result, it predictably presents the official state narrative. Most importantly, there is no mention of intra-party disagreements and how these influenced the adoption of this radical approach. Tito appears to be an undisputed leader — something that he was not at the time — while Djilas, one of the many ‘Wahhabites’ during the interwar period, is depicted as a lone member of the party. With the Montenegrins as the scapegoats, the military errors at the forefront, and the picture of a united and always correct Politburo, the text fails to properly tackle this controversial issue. This narrative would dominate the historiography of Socialist Yugoslavia for more than one decade.

The Pioneers

Once a taboo subject, the ‘leftist errors’ soon emerged as a legitimate research topic. While the binary approach introduced by the Military History Institute persisted as the dominant analytical framework, the state encouraged an environment of support for historical research, leading to the copious production of monographs concerning the World War Two period, also sustained by the publication of archives. The development of an increasingly nuanced understanding of the occupation laid the foundation for the two most influential works about the ‘leftist errors’ and the only major works to exclusively tackle this issue, those of Branko Petranović and Rasim Hurem.⁸ These authors wrote about the ‘leftist errors’ during a period of decentralisation, liberal reforms, and deepening self-governance when the ‘idea of socialist Yugoslav patriotism (...) was losing ground’.⁹

⁶ Ibid., pp. 82, 89, 147–8. ⁷ Ibid., pp. 163–70.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 163–70.

⁸ Branko Petranović, ‘O levim skretanjima KPJ krajem 1941. i u prvoj polovini 1942. godine.’, in *Istoriografija i revolucija*, ed. by Branko Petranović (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1984), pp. 427–89, first published in *Matica srpska, Zbornik za istoriju* 4, (1971), 39–80. Rasim Hurem, *Kriza Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Bosni i Hercegovini krajem 1941, i početkom 1942, godine*, (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1972).

⁹ Dino Mujadžević, ‘O Rasimu Huremu’, p. 359.

Petranović and Hurem present thorough studies of the topic, revisiting all the key decisions made by the CPY and generating elaborate analyses based on different points of views, albeit sharing an anti-fascist perspective. The authors' main disagreement is rooted in causality: Petranović maintains that the 'errors' exacerbated the Partisans' already tough position;¹⁰ Hurem, in contrast, argues that the 'errors' constituted the fundamental factor that led to this circumstance.¹¹ Petranović's work, focused on the Politburo, provides an outline of every party decision from the winter of 1941 onwards, making extensive use of party archives. The article has an apologetic tone, describing the party line as "premature" and based on "misunderstandings".¹² By contrast, Hurem adopts a more critical approach to the CPY's decisions, condemning the agreements between the Partisans and the Chetniks before the winter of 1941.¹³ His work is concerned with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it significantly contributes to scholarship on the region with its ground-breaking arguments, such as equating the Chetniks' persecution of the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Ustasha's oppression of Serbs in the rest of the NDH.¹⁴ However, his focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina leads to misrepresentations when seeking to describe the 'errors' in other regions.¹⁵

Nonetheless, both authors seem to agree upon the reasons as to why the CPY pursued this approach, with the German defeat in Moscow playing a central role. This event caused the Yugoslav communists to think that the end of the war was near, as did the "reactionary elements" in Yugoslavia and abroad. The cooperation of the Chetniks (as "the hand" of the Serbian upper class) with the occupation forces, and the support that the former received from the government-in-exile and the British, substantiates the authors' shared findings that the "old regime" around the world had united to prevent socialist takeovers.¹⁶ However, the authors' different focuses leads Hurem to assert that the change in the party line led to a narrowing of its audience, while Petranović categorically disagrees with this claim.¹⁷ Petranović's party perspective allows him to make the argument that there was "neither a permanent nor a radical" change in the general line of the CPY. Rather, the "errors" were the outcome of the distortion of the party line by the Montenegrin and Herzegovin communists and Partisans.¹⁸ In regard to mass killings, Petranović's affinity for the socialist regime informs his critique that the former should have been better justified, while Hurem finds that 'killing these people, for the most part, was unjustified and unconvincing'.¹⁹

¹⁰ Petranović, 'O levim', pp. 430-1.

¹¹ Hurem, *Kriza*, p. 281.

¹² Petranović, 'O levim', pp. 429-30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁴ Hurem, *Kriza*, pp. 77-107.

¹⁵ France Škerl, 'Review of *Kriza Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Bosni i Hercegovini krajem 1941. i početkom 1942. godine*, by Rasim Hurem', *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 13, 1-2 (1973), 362-3.

¹⁶ Hurem, *Kriza*, pp. 105, 171. Petranović, 'O levim', pp. 432-3.

¹⁷ Hurem, *Kriza*, p. 155.

¹⁸ Petranović, 'O levim', pp. 428-30, 454.

¹⁹ Hurem, *Kriza*, p. 151.

Hurem further analyses varying opinions within the party. While he neither examines them thoroughly nor in their historical context, he argues that Tito and Pijade did not share the same opinions about the expediency of the class struggle line. Regarding the ‘errors’ in Montenegro, Hurem identifies Pijade as the theorist behind the leftist deviation.²⁰ This contrasts the dominant narrative according to which Djilas was the main exponent, a position Petranović maintains without, however, attributing all the blame to the Montenegrin communist.²¹ Both historians fail to treat the period of the ‘leftist errors’ more deeply since their works lack an adequate analysis of the different opinions within the CPY, as well as the differences between the party and the Partisan army. These, in conjunction with the authors’ minimal association of this change of line with the different preconditions in each region, impede a sufficient understanding of why the terror reached higher levels in some areas, or why this line was introduced even earlier in places like Montenegro.

Nonetheless, these works provide a valuable skeletal outline of a previously unstudied topic. As Hurem writes, the literature dealing with the issue at the time was non-existent.²² The publication of Hurem’s monograph, particularly since he does not pursue an apologist approach, resulted in vigorous debate. In Yugoslavia, the self-government reforms continued, however there existed a shared belief among many dogmatists that liberalism had gone too far,²³ and the party leadership followed a stricter approach.²⁴ The criticism that Hurem faced specifically concerns the causal impact that the ‘errors’ had over the course of the movement.²⁵ These criticisms, however, did not lead to a deeper analysis of the subject, nor did they even highlight existing limitations. Interestingly, Petranović did not participate in these critiques, despite being a vocal supporter of the communist regime and one of the few who had addressed this topic.

In the following years, the rise of nationalism and the centralism-versus-federalism debate dominated not only public discourse but also historical production. This conceptual and theoretical vacillation saw the Yugoslavian nations take the party’s place as the ‘bearers’ of a historic mission.²⁶ This deep reassessment was further fuelled by the ethnic cleansing and fratricidal wars of the 1990s. In this atmosphere, studies of the World War Two period focused on the notion of ‘historical guilt’ specifically in relation to Croatia and Serbia, while the status of the CPY as an historical agent was downgraded. As a result, there was no further discussion of the ‘leftist errors,’ with Hurem and Petranović’s analyses remaining the only full studies. At the same time, western academia became increasingly interested in the history of Yugoslavia.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 140-1.

²¹ Petranović, ‘O levim’, pp. 466-9.

²² Ibid., p. 11.

²³ Husnija Kamberović, “Najnoviji pogledi na Drugi svjetski rat u Bosni i Hercegovini,” in *60 godina od završetka Drugog svjetskog rata – kako se sjećati 1945. godine*, (Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju, 2006) 25–35 (p. 27).

²⁴ Dino Mujadžević, ‘O Rasimu Huremu’, pp. 360-1.

²⁵ *AVNOJ i Narodnooslobodilačka borba u Bosni i Hercegovini (1942-1943)*, (Beograd: Rad, 1974), pp. 710-73

²⁶ Ivo Banac, ‘Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia,’ *American Historical Review* 97, 4 (1992), 1084-104.

Beyond Yugoslavia

The opening of Britain and the United States' World War Two archives in the early 1970s prompted a substantial increase in historical output in the West about the period. However, the 'errors' were hardly mentioned, since the historiography focuses more on British relations with the Chetniks and the Partisans.²⁷ The publication of Jozo Tomasevich's *The Chetniks* in 1972 marked a significant moment in the development of the historiography of Yugoslavia.²⁸ Tomasevich's examination of the German archives saw his book become an instant classic. Alongside a wide-ranging overview of the occupation regimes which he eventually published in 2001,²⁹ Tomasevich offers an in-depth study of the situation in Yugoslavia during World War Two and the differences between the Italians and Germans.³⁰

Tomasevich's examination of Mihailovich's Chetniks is regarded as his most groundbreaking achievement. In addition to analysing their ideological identity and goal of an ethnically-cleansed Greater Serbia within a restored Kingdom of Yugoslavia, he blames the Western Allies for ignoring the Partisans,³¹ arguing that their open support of the Chetniks enabled Mihailovich to pursue his tactics of collaboration with the occupiers.³² On this matter, Tomasevich is particularly clear: Mihailovich had sought to collaborate early — from the summer of 1941³³— and it was only Germany's refusal that prevented a large-scale collaboration.³⁴ However, the Nedić regime in Serbia and Rome did not share these doubts. Many Chetnik detachments followed the road of 'legalization', becoming the Quislings' armed hand,³⁵ while the core of the organisation found shelter with the Italians.³⁶ The 'leftist errors' are only mentioned as a strategy that weakened the Partisans and afforded manpower to the Chetniks. Tomasevich does not offer a deeper analysis, instead adopting a perspective akin to that of Petranovic; namely, that the errors worsened an already deteriorating situation.³⁷

Tomasevich's work became the primary reference for most Western historiographies of Yugoslavia. Inter alia, Sabrina Ramet's influential overview of the history of Yugoslavia is heavily based on Tomasevich's work.³⁸ However, she does not follow a binary approach in

²⁷ Walter Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović, and the Allies, 1941-1945* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1973); Phyllis Auty and Richard Clogg (eds), *British Policy Towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1975).

²⁸ Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks. War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

²⁹ Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

³⁰ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, pp. 102-4, 211; Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, pp. 139-42.

³¹ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, pp. 144.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 197-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-201.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-12; Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, p. 144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143; Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, p. 210-1.

³⁸ Sabrina Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State building and legitimation, 1918-2005* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

regard to the Chetniks and the Axis power. Not all Chetniks cooperated with the enemy³⁹ and the Italians pursued a more compromising policy of ‘pacifying’ the occupied lands compared to the Germans.⁴⁰ Additionally, Ramet emphasises the anti-liberal, collaborative, and genocidal character of Mihailovich’s organisation.⁴¹ Like Tomasevich, however, she does not analyse the ‘leftist errors,’ only noting that ‘sovietization damaged the Partisans’ reputation’ and led to Serbian peasants joining the Chetniks.⁴² Ramet’s focus on the Chetniks is not unusual; as nationalism came to the fore after the catastrophic events of the 1990s in Yugoslavia, the historiographical debate began to centre on ‘historical guilt’ and whether the Serbs or the Croats were to blame for their confrontations. The role of the NDH was clear (at least internationally), however the idea of sanctifying the Chetniks’ image was gaining popularity.

While Tomasevich’s arguments were generally accepted,⁴³ Stevan Pavlowitch enters the opposite pole of the debate and severely criticises Tomasevich’s study.⁴⁴ An émigré who left Serbia after World War Two, Pavlowitch was related to Slobodan Jovanović, the prime minister who marked the period of pro-Chetnik and Serbian dominance in the Yugoslav government-in-exile during the war.⁴⁵ In his book, *Hitler’s New Disorder*, Pavlowitch presents his views on World War Two in Yugoslavia.⁴⁶ He argues that it was Nedić who ‘may have tried to neutralize’ the Chetniks, and while this idea “was put to Mihailovich,” Nedić ‘did, however reluctantly, come to a meeting’ with the Germans.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, it was Mihailovich who had been seeking these contacts, as Tomasevich evidences with his perusal of the German archives. At the time, the Chetniks, as Pavlowitch claims, were ‘forced’ to ‘camouflage as collaborators’ with the Axis counter-attack in late 1941, proving that Mihailovich’s original plan of biding his time was right.⁴⁸ Pavlowitch’s work provides much insight regarding the occupation regimes, however this is marred by a lack of references to primary sources and

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 143, 147

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 141–144, 147.

⁴¹ Ibid., 143–6.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 152.

⁴³ Phyllis Auty, ‘Review of *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: The Chetniks*, by Jozo Tomasevich’, *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 51, 4 (1975) 638-41; Richard Crampton, ‘Review of *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration*, by Jozo Tomasevich’, *The International History Review*, 24, 4 (2002) 931-933; Eric Gordy, ‘Review of *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration*, by Jozo Tomasevich’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34, 3 (2004) 466-468.

⁴⁴ Stevan Pavlowitch, “‘War and Revolution in Yugoslavia,” Review of *The Chetniks*, by Jozo Tomasevich’, in *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance*, ed. by Matteo J. Milazzo, (=Armed Forces & Society 2, 4 (1976)) 604-609.

⁴⁵ Pavlowitch’s father, who was a diplomat of the Yugoslav state, was Jovanović’s cousin.

⁴⁶ Stevan Pavlowitch, *Hitler’s New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). First published in 2008 by Columbia University Press

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 65

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

disregard of existing literature.⁴⁹ The 'leftist errors' are referenced marginally and presented without any discussion of the reasons for or even the logic of this 'reign of terror'.⁵⁰

Pavlowitch was not the first influential historian to use the term 'terror' to describe the period of the 'errors.' John Lampe also did so in his historical overview, *Yugoslavia as History*, adding, however, that the occupation regimes and the Chetniks killed more civilians than the Partisans.⁵¹ Employing a Cold War vocabulary, he emphasises the Partisans' 'brutal treatment' of and intolerance towards the Montenegrins. He also writes that Yugoslavia experienced 'the most rapid seizure of power by any communist regime'.⁵² While Lampe asserts that the Ustasha started the civil war, he adopts a more cautious approach to the Chetniks and Mihailovich, especially in relation to the latter's dealings with the Germans to whom he 'perhaps' passed 'assurances'.⁵³ Pavlowitch characterises Mihailovich's conclusion that he could not survive against the Germans as 'understandable' and writes that Mihailovich 'initiated talks with them' in November 1941.⁵⁴

The wars of the 1990s and the deep social divisions within the former Yugoslavia saw a devaluation during this period of the CPY as a historical agent, with the effect that the 'leftist errors' are minimally referenced, let alone explained. The lack of scholarship concerning the intra-party prehistory and balance of power in the CPY might be a reason advanced in justification for this absence, however Ivo Banac's 1988 monograph unequivocally opened this field to Western audiences.⁵⁵ Banac analyses the divisions that followed the Tito-Stalin split of 1948, also presenting an extensive outline of the history of the CPY long before that period. The relations between the CPY and Moscow forms the backbone of his latter examination. Banac draws causal lines between these events and those of 1948, formulating a narrative of an ever-deteriorating relationship.⁵⁶ In doing so, Banac fails to even acknowledge Stalin's meeting with the CPY delegation in Moscow in the spring of 1944, a major omission given that he otherwise relates every minor comment made about Stalin in Tito's and Djilas' biographies and memoirs.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, Banac provides a brief and unique, contemporary insight into the pre-war history of the CPY, the different factions of the internal struggle, and Tito's eventual rise to power. According to Banac, Tito's platform was a 'compromise with the various models of

⁴⁹ He was strongly criticized because of this, being accused that he has turned his hand to historical journalism, Sabrina Ramet, 'Review of *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia*, by Stevan Pavlowitch', *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, 1 (2010) 187-188

⁵⁰ Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, pp. 77-8, 104-6.

⁵¹ John Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 210.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 214, 201.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 217.

⁵⁵ Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-13

leftism'.⁵⁸ He contradicts himself, however, when claiming that Tito created 'a tightly knit and fully Bolshevized' party, before finally acknowledging that after 1941, 'a strategic conflict was brewing in the CPY's own ranks' and noting that the ultra-left in the party was aiming to 'sovietise' Yugoslavia.⁵⁹ In this way, he interprets the 'leftist errors' as a result of this internal discussion which nevertheless gives new dimension to the topic. However, it seems that Banac detaches analyses of the 'errors' and the CPY from considerations of the occupation regimes and their actions, as well as the way in which the alternative approach pursued by the Italians contributed to the rise of the 'errors.' His work's greatest flaw is its lack of primary sources, since it references only Tito's collected works and some memoirs. Regardless, Banac's contribution remains notable and introduced the topic of the CPY's history to the West.

Current Trends

The rise of nationalism, the collapse of the federation and the wars of the 1990s had a catalytic effect on historiography in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The dominance of narratives asserting capitalism to be the only feasible socio-economic model,⁶⁰ saw these societies cut off from their past of socialist '[u]nity and Brotherhood'. Anti-Yugoslavism and anti-communism prevailed.⁶¹ Counting bodies took the place of historical analysis, and since Tito's regime became the target of all sides, investigating its victims became a trend. The almost 50-year-long history of socialism in Yugoslavia meant that the short period of 'leftist errors' continued to receive little attention. Despite the fact that knowledge about the number of victims during the period improved, this did little to enrich a deeper understanding of the period.⁶²

Veselin Pavličević's 2012 contribution is an exception to this tendency.⁶³ Focusing on Djilas' role in the 'leftist errors' in Montenegro, Pavličević affirms the view that not only did Djilas initially oppose the 'errors' during the summer of 1941, but he was also chosen by Tito to be sent for a second time to Montenegro in the spring of 1942 to 'correct' the regional party's direction.⁶⁴ Pavličević attributes Djilas' dismissal from Montenegro in October 1941 to his poor

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 68-71

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 78-80.

⁶⁰ Todor Kuljić, 'Klasno društvo bez klasne borbe', in *Preispitivanje prošlosti i istorijski revizionizam*, ed. by Milo Petrović, (Belgrade: Udruženje Španski borci, 2014), pp. 71-81.

⁶¹ ⁶¹ Srđan Milošević, 'Istorijski revizionizam i tranzicija: evropski kontekst i lokalne varijacije', *Reč* 85, 31 (2015) 173-4. We are talking about much of the literature that has dominated the public discourse. Of course, there are significant works that have an anti-fascist approach, and which have asked and explored questions without an apologetic stance towards the Chetniks or the issue of collaboration. For a historiographical overview of the historical production of the post-1990s era see Nevenka Troha, 'Slovenia. Occupation, Repression, Partisan Movement, Collaboration, and Civil War in Historical Research', *Südosteuropa* 65, 2 (2007) 334-63; Γιώργος Μιχαηλίδης, Δόμνα Κόφφα, 'Η επιχείρηση αντιδραστικής αναθεώρησης της ιστορίας του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου στα Βαλκάνια: οι περιπτώσεις Σερβίας και Κροατίας.' *Κρίση* 7 (2020/21) 129-48.

⁶² Milos K Vojinovic, Bozidar Sekularac, *Komunisticki zlocini u Crnoj Goeri I Hercegovini, 1941-1942. Godine*, (Podgorica: Kolashin, 2017).

⁶³ Veselin Pavličević, *"Lijeva greška" Milovana Đilasa ili partijski silogizam* (Podgorica: HKS, 2012).

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 20-1, 37.

relations with other communists and the influence they had on Tito.⁶⁵ Despite Pavličević's failure to explain other aspects of the class struggle line, his analysis of Djilas' role counters much of the existing literature whose narratives resulted from the Socialist regime's effort to place the blame for the 'errors' on Djilas after he became a dissident in 1954.⁶⁶

In the West, Marko Attila Hoare's 2006 work offers a new perspective on the topic.⁶⁷ Focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, he highlights the chauvinism that characterised much of the Serbian masses who dominated the Partisan detachments in 1941, which resulted in the alienation of other groups, namely the Croat and Muslim populations.⁶⁸ In this regard, the 'leftist errors' policy introduced by the CC aimed to emphasise the class character of the struggle in contrast to the national character and thus to overcome the latter.⁶⁹ However, when these directives arrived on the ground, they were interpreted differently; instead of unifying national and ethnic groups, the new line provoked more violence. Overall, Hoare asserts that the general direction of the party line was beneficial, especially following the Partisans' departure for eastern Bosnia.⁷⁰ However, a lack of political success, outbursts of violence and the Chetniks' self-interested involvement in the situation led to the destruction of the movement during the first half of 1942.

During the 2010s, further notable works were published in which the CPY came to the fore once again. Leonid Gibianskii, a long-serving scholar at the Institute of Slavic Studies in Moscow and an expert on Yugoslav history, produced a significant outline of the World War Two period in Yugoslavia.⁷¹ For him, the 'leftist errors' represented the CPY's effort to "strengthen its class base", a policy that accompanied the formation of the Volunteer Detachments.⁷² This duality, however, lost its meaning when the new party line was interpreted differently on the ground by members and units 'predisposed to revolutionary radicalism'.⁷³ These 'errors' led to destruction. Geoffrey Swain's biography of Tito offers much insight on the CPY leader's perspective, as well as his relations with his Yugoslav comrades and Moscow.⁷⁴ Swain highlights the manifestations of sectarianism in Montenegro from July 1941 onward and underlines the CC's efforts to overcome it.⁷⁵ As a biography, however, the work does not represent a step forward since, like Gibianskii, Swain approaches the topic superficially. Both historians treat the issue as a series of 'errors' in the form of the Politburo's miscalculations and the misinterpretations of members and units.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 28-9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 48-51

⁶⁷ Marko Attila Hoare, *Genocide and resistance in Hitler's Bosnia: The Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941-1943*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 196.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.188.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 142.

⁷¹ Leonid Gibianskii, 'Iugoslaviia v period, Vtoroi mirovoi voiny', in *Iugoslaviia v XX veke: Ocherki Politicheskoi istorii*, (Moscow: Indrik), pp. 305-522.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 421-2.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 423.

⁷⁴ Geoff Swain, *Tito: A Biography* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 41-3.

In the contemporary context, Stefan Gužvica and Hilde Katrine Haug's monographs, despite their lack of concern with the 'errors' themselves, provide an essential framework for examining the issue.⁷⁶ Uniquely, Gužvica describes the intra-party struggle before the war and Comintern's role in Tito's rise to power, countering 'Tito's teleology' and presenting him as merely one of several possible leaders at the time. Gužvica's analysis of the various camps within the CPY establishes a necessary understanding of the divisions that existed during the war. Haug's study of the CPY's response to Yugoslavia's national question provides a vital sketch of the party's ideological manoeuvres in relation to broader strategic and tactical issues. Haug affords primary focus to the higher echelons of the party by collating all existing literature in the field.

Historiographical Remarks

Despite several significant contributions, the insufficiency of existing historiography concerning the 'leftist errors' is clear. Due to the limitations of historical research, the political environments in which historians live, their personal inclinations, and the various debates which have dominated the field of Yugoslav history over the decades, the topic remains a controversial one. The binary approach that was dominant during the early period of Socialist Yugoslavia, the rise of nationalism in the federation since the 1970s, the effects of the Cold War in the West, and the integration of most post-1989 literature within a national narrative, have all substantially conditioned scholarship on this issue.

The main problem encountered in much existing literature lies in the essence of the party line of the CC in the CPY. The popular interpretation of what transpired in each region as a reflection of central directives annuls the role of the receiver. Denying the agency of each regional party organization or Partisan detachment leads to a gross distortion, as the CC, the party members, and the Partisans are consequently presented as thinking in a unitary mode. In light of this interpretation, it appears contradictory that the CC issued the class struggle line in December 1941, then criticized the sectarianism of the Montenegrins or the slaughter in Herzegovina. This methodological error leads to further shortcomings, rendering it reasonable to disassociate the 'errors' from the pre-war history of the party, intra-party disagreements, and on many occasions, the contingent circumstances of the occupation.

At the same time, an openness to a gamut of interpretations by the Politburo, the members, and the Partisans both calls for an explanation of what this line meant to the party leadership and for an analysis of the distinct ways in which regional organizations and Partisan detachments perceived it and why. Tackling this requires access to sources which have been unavailable for many years, thus analyses based purely on directives from the 'top' of the party have formed a body of opinions and interpretations which fail to differentiate between the CC, the party members, and the Partisans. While it may seem suitable to adopt a simplified approach, its phenomenological merit comes at the expense of deeper historical

⁷⁶ Stefan Gužvica, *Before Tito: The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge (1936-1940)*, (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2020); Hilde Katrine Haug, *Creating a Socialist Yugoslavia: Tito, Communist Leadership and the National Question*, (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

analysis. The absence of a truly comprehensive study or even literature review on the historiography of the subject has led to the aforementioned shortcomings, which we may now rectify with the publication of new scholarship that fully and properly examines the subject in its historical context.

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