

Hoodwinking Churchill

TITO'S GREAT CONFIDENCE TRICK

Peter Batty



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Introduction

MUCH NEW INFORMATION has come to light since Tito's death in 1980. What this reveals is a deception so successful that it surprised Stalin and is still largely accepted today. It led the staunchly anti-communist Winston Churchill in December 1943 to back the communist Tito wholeheartedly and to cease aiding completely the anti-communist resistance forces in the former Yugoslavia. The ruse is all the more shocking because of the evidence of British skulduggery – some of it in high places.

But for that decision, Tito would not have overcome his political opponents within Yugoslavia and emerged as its undisputed ruler. That Churchill was conned into so deciding cannot now be doubted. Tito misinformed him and played on the weaknesses and wanton ambitions of many of those British officers he came into contact with. He wilfully broke, too, the promises made regarding “free and unfettered elections” and the participation of non-communists in his government's affairs.

It was a decision our American allies had not favoured, nor everyone in the British Foreign Office – a decision that condemned the Yugoslavs to more than forty years of communist rule and encouraged Stalin in his aspirations to seek political and physical sway over the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Tito's success in securing power in Belgrade came within a hair's breadth of prompting a communist takeover in Greece. Had Greece gone communist, Italy's survival would have been that much more precarious – and had Italy succumbed to communism the momentum might well have affected the delicate political balance in France. Thus Britain's connivance in the imposition of communist rule in Yugoslavia very nearly led to its spread throughout much of continental Europe.

However it was a decision taken when Churchill was clearly under considerable stress – something his closest colleagues had begun to notice and to have grown alarmed at. Just two days later he was stricken with pneumonia and forced to convalesce for several weeks.

The conventional image of Tito is of the daring partisan leader – plucked from obscurity by Winston Churchill – who had fought the Germans continuously throughout the war and liberated his country virtually unaided, unlike the rest of occupied Europe. That he used most of the munitions received from the British and Americans not to kill Germans, as he had promised Churchill, but to eliminate his political rivals, has been glossed over by Tito's supporters in the West. More Yugoslavs were murdered by each other than were killed by Germans – a stunning fact! The Partisans' pestering of the Germans was at best merely peripheral and only occasional. Hitler's ability to utilise to the full the local abundance in oil and minerals so vital to his war machine was never truly hindered. His decision finally to withdraw from the Balkans was dictated not by the activities of Tito's Partisans but by events elsewhere. The German retreat was largely unharassed by the Partisans, to Churchill's intense chagrin. It was the Red Army which really freed Yugoslavia.

While Tito was accusing his political opponents of accepting weapons from the Italians, he was himself proposing joint action to the Germans to resist an Allied landing in the Balkans. This would undoubtedly have led to British and American casualties. He nearly went to war with the Western Allies in May 1945 over his ambition to annex Italian Trieste. In the months following the War's end he massacred in cold blood countless thousands of anti-communist Yugoslavs handed over to him by the British in good faith. By then Churchill bitterly regretted his decision of two years earlier. Tito, though, boasted to his cronies about how he had "outsmarted and deceived that old fox Churchill". Within weeks of his much-vaunted "difference of opinion" with Stalin in June 1948 Tito was keenly trying to rejoin the Soviet camp. He was less than helpful to the rebellious Hungarians in 1956 and to the dissident Czechs in 1968. Yugoslavia had its own gulags on barren islands in the Adriatic, where thousands of Tito's political foes were incarcerated and humiliated.

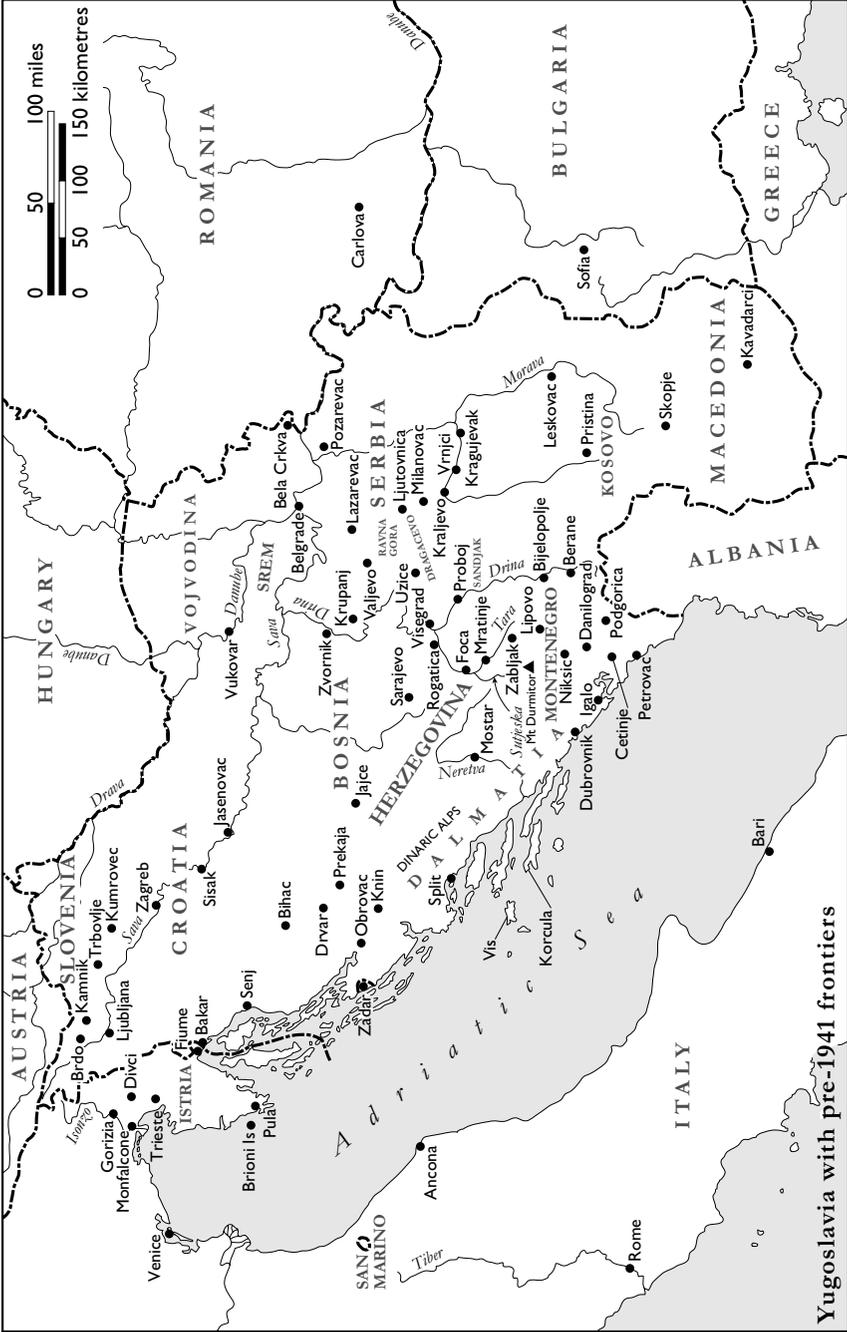
That it has taken so long for the full story to emerge suggests a concerted cover-up, connected maybe with a glittering generation having had a vested interest in sustaining the myths surrounding Tito that they had helped to beget – a generation which has only now passed away. In questioning Tito's rise to power it is not enough to look simply to the left-wing influences, to the communist moles within the secret services who clearly cooked the books. As one insider graphically put it to me, "It's not so much the reds under the bed that were the more influential, as the blues *in* the bed." Many of

Tito's most loyal and loquacious supporters were pillars of the British Establishment!

When Yugoslavia began breaking apart during the 1990s, some in the West rued Tito's passing. They recalled longingly how he had unified his unruly compatriots. Yet it was only his utter ruthlessness – aided by a brutal secret police abetted by a countrywide army of paid informers – which had kept the lid on Yugoslavia's competing minorities. This, however, merely delayed a more permanent solution of its ethnic problems.

Recent access to Soviet and Yugoslav files has thrown a clearer light on the 1948 contretemps between Tito and Stalin. It has also clarified the mystery of what Tito's communists were doing in the period between the August 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact and the Nazi invasion of Russia in June 1941 – most especially during the two months prior to that invasion when Yugoslavia was already occupied. That they were denigrating the British as warmongering imperialists was perhaps only to be expected from such hardline Stalinists. Less anticipated was that they had been eagerly denouncing to the Germans all those resisting the occupiers, in particular Serbs loyal to the Yugoslav government-in-exile in London, backed then of course by Churchill.

In making his fateful December 1943 decision in the heat of war, Churchill relied heavily on advice from close associates who depended largely on information passed their way by Tito. That they were duped by the Partisan leadership is now clear. How far they knew this, and allowed themselves to be so, is, to put it charitably, less obvious. That many of them promoted the Partisan myths for their own ends after the War – and benefited from the creation of a "Victor's History" – is less forgivable. Intriguingly, there are indications of a carefully orchestrated plot by well-placed Soviet sympathisers within the Cairo headquarters of the Special Operations Executive handling Yugoslav affairs, who played on the gullibility of some of those associates. Documents were doctored. Briefs from liaison officers in the field critical of Tito's Partisans did not find their way to Churchill and the other decision-makers. The BBC played a substantial and controversial role in the disinformation campaign – a role so far not fully revealed.



Yugoslavia with pre-1941 frontiers

CHAPTER ONE

Josip Broz, alias Tito

TITO'S FUNERAL in May 1980 was the pinnacle of his fame, witnessed as it was by hundreds of world leaders, more than had attended the obsequies of Winston Churchill or John F. Kennedy. The newspapers of the day listed the kings, princes, presidents and other VIPs from 122 different countries. Millions more watched it on TV beamed live to over fifty networks worldwide. It had been a stunning ascent for the grandson of a serf.

Little is known for certain of Tito's early life, save that he was born Josip Broz on 7 May 1892. Thereafter much depends on seeing through the more obvious exaggerations and omissions of his politically biased chroniclers. He himself was not averse to romanticising his past; he was forever loath to correct the myths that grew up about him. However we do know his place of birth was Kumrovec, a village in the area of Croatia known as Zagorje, close to the border with Slovenia, thirty miles or so north-west of Zagreb. It was in what was then Austria-Hungary. Although picturesque, with wooded hills and fast-flowing trout streams, the land itself was not particularly fertile.

He was the seventh child born to Franjo and Marija Broz. Franjo was a Croat and Marija a Slovene. They had fifteen children in all but only seven survived infancy; four had already died before Josip arrived. Of the seven just four were to reach adulthood. They were Catholics. Josip was confirmed and served for a time as an acolyte – until, it's said, the priest hit him for being slow in helping him change his vestments after a mass. He never again set foot in the local church. The name Broz was a shortened form of Ambroz or Ambrose. The family claimed the Brozes had migrated from the border region between Bosnia and Dalmatia. Before that they may have come from Montenegro.

Croatia had been part of the Roman Empire. The Croats were thought to be one of the tribes, like the Serbs, Slovenes, Bosnians and Montenegrins, that had come out of western Asia centuries

earlier. Because the Romans had converted to Christianity, Croatia remained Roman Catholic after the Empire fell, and even when the Eastern Orthodox Church based in Constantinople separated from the Pope's Church in Rome. The Serbs were to opt for the Eastern Orthodox Church and they were a dominant force over much of the Balkans until defeated by the Ottoman Turks in the fourteenth century. Thereafter they endured Ottoman suzerainty for almost five hundred years. Unlike the Bosnians and Albanians, who were pressured into becoming Moslems, the Serbs remained Orthodox Christian.

Croatia was conquered by Hungary in the early twelfth century, while Slovenia succumbed to a succession of German ducal families. Eventually it passed into the hands of the Habsburgs who held it for six centuries. When they became Archdukes of Austria, Slovenia became an Austrian province. Croatia, too, was to fall under Habsburg sway when they secured much of Hungary from the Ottoman Turks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Croatians formed a substantial part of the victorious army at Blenheim in 1704 when Winston Churchill's great ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, was allied with the Habsburgs. Croatian soldiers then had a terrible reputation for pillage and rape. For their part in helping defeat Napoleon in 1815, the Habsburgs were rewarded with the Venetian Adriatic province of Dalmatia. Fifty-two years later their Empire became the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary. In 1878 it acquired Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Turks through the Congress of Berlin, called to carve up the weakening Ottoman Empire. Serbia was allowed to become independent.

Josip's father owned fifteen acres of land. His house, inherited from his father, was one of the biggest in the village, with four rooms plus a kitchen and hall. It was shared with a cousin's family. Josip's paternal grandfather had been born a serf, though serfdom was to be abolished during his lifetime. Josip's father also ran a small cartage concern. But he was not business-minded and fell heavily into debt, taking to drink as a result. Nevertheless, he lived into his eighties. It was Josip's mother who brought up the family. She was the eldest of fourteen children of more prosperous peasants from across the border in Slovenia. To ease the family finances, Josip went to live with his maternal grandparents at an early age, returning to Kumrovec when he was eight years old to work on his father's farm and attend the recently opened school. Elementary education in Croatia had become compulsory.

Croatia's farmers then were finding it difficult to compete with imports of cheaper grain, mostly from America. There had been, too, a succession of poor harvests. Many were migrating to America or moving into the towns in search of work. Croatia had begun industrialising. Josip's elder brother Martin had already gone to Vienna as a railwayman. At the age of fifteen, through a cousin, Josip got a job as a skivvy in a regimental canteen in the garrison town of Sisak, sixty miles away, south-east of Zagreb.

Menial work was not to his liking. He wanted a skill. Within a short time he managed to become apprenticed to a local locksmith. This entailed attending evening classes at a technical school twice a week. He got on well with his teachers, and with his boss. Later he was to claim that the three years spent in Sisak were among the best of his life. Apparently it was where he got his taste for showy uniforms! In 1910, now eighteen, having qualified as a locksmith's assistant and general mechanic, Josip left for Zagreb. He found work in a small engineering factory and registered with the Metal Workers' Union. Zagreb, Croatia's capital, with more than 75,000 inhabitants, had doubled its population in twenty years. It was to double it again in far fewer years. As elsewhere then, trade unionists were interested mostly in securing higher wages and better working conditions but demands were also increasing for a wider suffrage. In Kumrovec, for instance, there were only three voters among nearly two hundred families.

Croatia then was administered from Budapest as part of Hungary. Those speaking Hungarian rather than Serbo-Croat tended to get the best jobs. Dissatisfaction with this brought Serbs and Croats together; not only Serbs living in Croatia but also those of independent Serbia. It was the beginning of the so-called South – in Serbo-Croat *Yugo* – Slav movement pressing for a single state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. As the Serbs were the most politically active, the Austro-Hungarian authorities were always suspicious of them. At the turn of the twentieth century Serbs were a quarter of Croatia's population. The Habsburgs played Croats off against Serbs, exploiting their cultural disparities and religious differences – Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity.

Josip went home to help his mother towards the end of 1910 but soon left to seek jobs, without success, in Slovenia's capital Ljubljana and in the Austrian port of Trieste. In March 1911 he returned to Zagreb, where he found work repairing bicycles, motor cars and small machines. There he experienced his first strike – for

a shorter working day and higher pay – which was partly successful. Within months he was off again to Ljubljana, and then to nearby Kamnik in Slovenia, where he got a job at a metal-goods factory employing 150 workers. He was there barely a year before it went bankrupt. Declared redundant, he and his fellow workers were given a month's wages in advance and sent to a larger factory in southern Bohemia. When faced with violence from frustrated strikers, they realised they had been recruited as blackleg labour. Luckily Josip found temporary employment nearby, at the Skoda arms works in Pilsen. He was soon on the move to Germany, taking jobs here and there, even as far afield as the Ruhr. While working in Mannheim he seriously considered migrating to America. Instead he joined his elder brother Martin, the railwayman who was living near Vienna, and procured a job at Daimler in Wiener-Neustadt thirty miles away.

Having reached his twenty-first birthday, Josip had to return to Croatia in the autumn of 1913 to undertake two years' compulsory military service. Sent to an infantry regiment based in Zagreb, he was quickly promoted to corporal, and then to sergeant – on account, he said later, of his skill at skiing and fencing. When Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia in July 1914, following the assassination at Sarajevo of the Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand, allegedly on Serbian orders, he was sent to fight the Serbs. Communist historians later tried to conceal this. His party colleague Milovan Djilas admits it was “hushed up because the Serbs were sensitive on the subject.”^{1*} At the beginning of 1915, he was transferred to Galicia in the Carpathian Mountains to face the Russians, who had joined in the war against Austria-Hungary and Germany.

Later he would claim to have disliked the war, participating only to end the rule of the hated Habsburgs, but eventually he admitted to Djilas that he had enjoyed army life and had not been politically minded at that time. Clearly he must have been more of a conformist than a rebel or his military bosses would not have promoted him so speedily.

When the Russians struck in the spring of 1915, Josip was part of a reconnaissance group operating behind enemy lines. His apologists were to claim that he had been unwilling to spy on the Russians, and had readily surrendered to them, but researchers after his death discovered that he had frequently been praised by his superiors for

* Sources for references can be found in Notes on pages 349-58.

bravery and resourcefulness while reconnoitering. He had taken so many Russian prisoners that he had been recommended for a gallantry award. In March 1915 he was seriously wounded and captured when Russian cavalry surprised his unit near the little town of Okno. It took him more than a year to recover from his injuries. Much of the time was spent in a military hospital, deep inside Russia, where he learned Russian and soon became fluent. Thereafter his native Serbo-Croat was so peppered with Russian nuances and phrases that he was often thought a Russian who had learnt Serbo-Croat rather than the reverse!

Unlike many of his fellow Croat prisoners-of-war, Josip did not switch sides and join the Russian army. Instead he chose to work as a mechanic in a mill near the prison camp, before, in the autumn of 1916, being transferred further east, to Kungur in the foothills of the Urals. Here he helped maintain the railway lines and rolling stock. Surveillance was evidently lax after the February 1917 Revolution, so he was able to escape that June and make his way to St Petersburg, already called Petrograd – not to join the Bolsheviks, but to find better work. He later told Milovan Djilas he had not expected the Revolution to succeed! He tried to cross into Finland but was caught and sent back to prison in Petrograd. Returned to Kungur, he was soon on his way to Omsk in western Siberia, once more working on the railways.

When the Tsarist White Guards drove the Bolsheviks out of Omsk in July 1918, Josip sought sanctuary in a Kirghiz village twenty-five miles away, where he worked in a flour mill. He claimed to have joined the Communist Party at this time. His party card says he registered with the Omsk section on 19 January 1919 yet the Reds did not recapture Omsk until the autumn. Most Serb historians maintain he did not join the Party until October 1920 at the earliest. But by 1919 the Great War was over. Austria-Hungary was no more. The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes had already been proclaimed – Yugoslavia for short, meaning “land of the southern Slavs”, though it was not officially called this until 1929. Serbia’s Belgrade was its capital and Serbia’s King Peter its monarch.

Serbia had been on the winning side; Croatia and Slovenia had not. Serb losses had been appalling. More than a million were thought to have died, almost a quarter of Serbia’s pre-war population. Also the country had been wrecked by the retreating German and Austrian troops. The Serbs’ heroism in resisting the Austrians and Germans had won the admiration of the British and French.

When the victorious Allies came to carve up the Habsburg Empire it was clear they would favour Serbia.

The Serbians had dropped a strong hint in September 1914 that when the war was won they would expect the Allies to “create out of Serbia a powerful south-western Slavic State; all the Serbs, all the Croats and all the Slovenes would enter its composition”. Yugoslavia, which came into existence on 1 December 1918, was created out of the Austro-Hungarian provinces of Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dalmatia and Vojvodina, together with the independent states of Serbia and Montenegro. The Montenegrin king, fleeing to Italy, had surrendered his country to the Austrians in late 1915, leaving his subjects in the lurch. They had deposed him on 26 November 1918 and proclaimed union with the Serbian dynasty. The United States recognised Yugoslavia fairly speedily, in February 1919, as did the other Allied powers. Italy was the last of the victors to do so, in November 1920, following a dispute over its borders.

It was perhaps inevitable that the Serbs would dominate Yugoslavia. Between the wars, two out of three cabinet ministers were Serbs, as were two out of three top civil servants. Only Serbia had had an army at the end of the First World War. The victorious Allies had disbanded the Croat and Slovene militias. Although officers and men from those were later allowed to join the Yugoslav army, few did. Officers from the former Imperial Russian army, who had taken sanctuary in Serbia, were encouraged to join. Many did. On the eve of the Second World War just 10 per cent of the Yugoslav Army's officer corps was Croat while 70 per cent was Serb. There were 21 Croat and 10 Slovene generals compared with 199 Serb generals.

Consequently the army was associated with Serbian hegemony. It became an instrument for widening the gulf between the various national groups rather than uniting the country. Nor had the Allied leaders imposed on the rulers of the new kingdom any constitutional safeguards for minorities, as they had elsewhere. That this might be storing up trouble for the future – as the Croats in particular would not willingly accept Serb domination – was something the Allied leaders had plainly not contemplated – or, more likely, had chosen to ignore. Most Croats did not identify with Yugoslavia. The Serbs, being the most numerous of the southern slavs, saw Yugoslav identity as simply an extension of their own. For many of them Yugoslavia was *Serboslovakia*. Therein lay the rub in their relations

with their fellow Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians and Montenegrins.

Those Croats absconding to the Allied side before the war's denouement had evidently been led to believe the proposed south slav kingdom would be a federation of national groups, each with a certain amount of autonomy and all considered equal, not a centralised, unitary state dominated by Serbians. The attention of those same Croats had been diverted into trying to prevent the equally victorious Italians from taking over the Croatian provinces of Istria and Dalmatia. The Italians claimed, with some justification, that they had been promised them as a reward for joining the Allies. The city of Trieste and much of Istria was eventually given to Italy, as were Zadar on the Dalmatian coast and a few small islands.

The Serbians thought the Croats ungrateful for being liberated from the harsh Habsburgs. The Croats viewed the Serb kings as equally loathsome, and with a less illustrious pedigree. The Serbian dynasty owed its accession to a bloody coup as recently as 1903. Hence Serbs and Croats were suspicious of each other from the outset. Thus was set in train the tussle between Serbian centralism and Croat regionalism that was to dominate Yugoslav politics between the wars.

The Croats, with their greater mixture of Western influences and traditions, considered themselves culturally a cut above the Serbs. They wrote in Roman script like most Europeans; the Serbs used Cyrillic, thought less civilised. In many ways the difference between the two was epitomised by their capitals. Whereas Zagreb resembled a European city, Belgrade remained an eastern stronghold.

The Italians, aggrieved at being denied all their promised spoils, continued to cast envious eyes towards Yugoslavia. This set them at loggerheads with the government there. When the Italian dictator Mussolini came to power during the 1920s, he encouraged militant anti-Serb organisations, such as the Ustasha of Croatia. He financed them and granted them sanctuary when they were banned in their own country. Hungary and Bulgaria had also conceded territory to Yugoslavia, and both looked for opportunities to regain it. A disagreement between Yugoslavia and Albania over borders came to blows. It was not until the summer of 1926 that Yugoslav troops withdrew from the disputed area.

The new Yugoslavia was slightly bigger than the United Kingdom. But almost 90 per cent of it was mountainous or forested. Of its twelve million inhabitants, 40 per cent were Serb, 23 per cent Croat,

9 per cent Slovene and 6 per cent Bosnian Muslim. The rest included about half a million each of Germans, Hungarians, and Albanians, as well as 150,000 Turks, 64,000 Jews and 20,000 Russian émigrés. Quite a mixture! Fourteen languages were recognised. Whereas Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins were Orthodox Christian, Croats and Slovenes were Roman Catholic, and Bosnians mainly Muslim.

As the political parties ran largely on lines of nationality, the discontent of minorities was destined to be exploited by the more extreme politicians. The Croat problem, and to an extent the Macedonian wish for some form of autonomy, dominated Yugoslav politics between the wars, in the same way as the Irish question had dominated British politics before 1914. There was the same fanaticism, violence and religious rivalry.

Although Croatia brought a coastline, and hence ports from which to trade, as well as some industry, four out of five citizens of the new Yugoslavia earned their living from the land. By and large a country of peasants, it was desperately poor. Crop yields were low and animal husbandry primitive. Illiteracy was high and the country's financial institutions antiquated.

Sadly, once they had established Yugoslavia, the victorious Allies seemed to lose interest in it. Apart from the French, who had assisted Serbia during the war. A French general had commanded the largely Serbian force that eventually liberated the country. To the British there appeared little to be gained from a close association with Yugoslavia. For them it was just another of those far away countries likely to prove problematic. It had the misfortune to be in a part of the world most British people considered beyond the pale. The Balkans were associated with assassinations, blood feuds, boundary disputes, *coups d'état*, religious wars and other unspeakable horrors. The region was seemingly in perpetual turmoil; violence and intrigue were part of everyday life. The age-old cry of "trouble in the Balkans" still sent shivers down British spines. To diplomats of the British Foreign Office, "typically Balkan" meant something peculiarly shady and devious. In their book the Balkans were best avoided like the plague!

Josip married during the summer of 1919, in an Orthodox church in Omsk, a Russian girl, Pelagija Belousova, twelve years his junior. The daughter of a local peasant, she was said to have been uncommonly beautiful. Not tempted to stay and be part of the first Communist

Revolution, he immediately began the long trek home, taking her back with him to Kumrovec. They arrived in October 1920.

He had been away six years and was now twenty-eight. His mother had died two years earlier and his father had moved to another village. They spent some time with him before going on to Zagreb, because Josip urgently needed paid employment. He did not see his father again. Pelagija gave birth to a child who died within days. At least three more were to follow. Only a son, Zarko, born in 1924, would survive through infancy. Josip had a number of temporary jobs in Zagreb, then a city of 120,000 souls. In early 1921 he found a more permanent position, helping to run a flour mill in a prosperous village, Veliko Trojstvo, about sixty miles east of Zagreb. Here they stayed four years.

Like many of his contemporaries, participating in the War had been the making of Josip Broz. His harsh experiences were to have a lasting effect on him. Importantly, it had brought him into contact with dedicated communists, which was to change his life decisively. His die had effectively been cast. Clearly he was a survivor, as his disease-ridden childhood had shown. Equally clearly, he was now under suspicion from the authorities of his new country, indicated by the opening of a police file on him. But the file does not reveal that he had sought contact with those of his countrymen who had already become communist, as he was later to claim. Nor does it show any overt militancy on his part, although these were violent times in Yugoslavia. He rejoined his trade union, no doubt more as a means of obtaining employment as a metal worker than for deeper political reasons.

The Bolsheviks had expected communism to sweep the world after their success in Russia. When it did not, they established, in early 1919, the Communist International – or Comintern, as it came to be known. It was meant to maintain the revolutionary momentum outside the Soviet Union through agitation and propaganda (agit-prop). Later that year, when British and French troops intervened in the civil strife following the Russian Revolution, the Comintern called upon workers throughout Europe to strike in protest. Winston Churchill had enthusiastically advocated intervention against the Bolsheviks.

A Yugoslav Communist Party of sorts had been formed in Russia in the spring of 1918 by a group of Croat and Slovene former prisoners-of-war. They returned home soon after the November 1918 Armistice. Together with the more radical, militant wing of the

pre-war Serbian Social-Democratic Party, they established in Belgrade, in April 1919, the "Socialist Workers Party of Yugoslavia (Communists)". The call for a general strike in Yugoslavia three months later, at the Comintern's behest, met with scant success. Many of the strikers were imprisoned and foreign citizens suspected of subversive activities expelled from the country. The Yugoslav authorities had been more perturbed over a mutiny close to the Hungarian border by two Serb units of the newly formed Yugoslav Army that had coincided with the general strike. Eight soldiers had been killed. Led by some of the newly returned prisoners-of-war from Russia, the mutiny had occurred during the Bolshevik takeover of Budapest. Although brief, it had alarmed Belgrade.

The abortive general strike was followed in April 1920 by an initially much more successful transport strike, again organised by the communists. It was broken by the authorities conscripting the strikers into the army after thirteen of them had been killed by soldiers summoned to tackle the expected disorder. Furious with their leaders for meekly obeying the conscription call, rank-and-file communists convoked a congress for June 1920. The leadership was changed. So was also the Party's name, to the simpler "Communist Party of Yugoslavia".

Able to exploit the economic discontent, and with the Russian Revolution still fresh in working people's minds, the Party did well in the municipal elections that summer. Emerging as the strongest political grouping in both Zagreb and Belgrade, they went on to win 12 per cent of the votes in the first nationwide elections held in November 1920. This made them the third largest party in the Assembly that was to draw up a constitution.

But power through the ballot box was never going to be achievable. The control they sought must come through revolution as in Russia (though this was something the new Yugoslavia was not yet ready for) or as a result of existing institutions being destroyed (which the authorities were not prepared to countenance). When more strikes called by the communists the following month threatened to disrupt coal supplies, the authorities took tough measures to thwart them. Troops were sent to intimidate the miners in Bosnia and Slovenia. The Party's offices and newspapers were shut down. A young Serb communist tried to assassinate the Prince Regent in June 1921. A few weeks later a Bosnian communist killed the minister responsible for repressing the Party. All communist propaganda was forbidden on pain of death. Communist deputies were expelled from

parliament. The Party's leaders were arrested and imprisoned, thus effectively banning it.

Support and sympathy for the Party faded away. Its numbers soon dwindled to a mere handful. Many activists went into exile, mostly in Moscow. Those remaining became a prey to police informers. The regime sought to neutralise left-wing influence among the village folk by distributing land formerly owned by the Austrian, Hungarian and Ottoman aristocracies. By the end of the decade almost 90 per cent of peasant households owned some land.

With the Yugoslav Party in such disarray, the Comintern stepped in. A former Croat officer prisoner-of-war, Stevo Sabic, was sent to reorganise it. He had joined the Bolsheviks during his captivity and had participated in the Russian Revolution, even serving in the Red Army. From this time onwards Moscow was always in control, dictating the Party's policies and appointing its leaders.

Yugoslavia was seen as part of the *cordon sanitaire* the Versailles victors had established to shield the western world from what they considered the Bolshevik bacillus. The Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924 advocated Yugoslavia's breakup into its separate ethnic communities, believing this would facilitate their becoming Bolshevik republics. Croat and Macedonian dissidents were encouraged to greater militancy. Seeking secession from the Yugoslav state of all non-Serbs was official communist policy for the next decade.

During 1923 Sabic persuaded Josip to distribute leaflets among his workers and other trade unionists encouraging militancy. No doubt Josip was paid for this. Having a young family, he needed money from whatever source. Bettering himself was clearly a driving force in his life. For someone of his background, with little formal education, communism presented a way forward. Although the Party was banned, the trade unions, many of which the communists had infiltrated, remained legal.

Economic conditions were bad. Some employers sought to reduce wages. Josip's political activities had obviously been noticed. When his employer died in 1925, the new owner of the mill demanded he give them up and, when he refused, fired him. In future his choice of jobs was to be influenced more by political than personal economic needs, as he came to rely on Sabic's subsidies. He worked first in the Kraljevica shipyards near Bakar on the north Adriatic coast, becoming a shop steward. Sacked for organising a strike, he managed in October 1926 to obtain a job in the railway-carriage works at Smederevska Palanka, near Belgrade. Fired in March 1927 for

criticising conditions there in a trade union journal, he moved back to Zagreb where he found employment in a large engineering factory. Drawn increasingly into Party affairs, he became a full-time functionary. His cover was his appointment as secretary of the Metal Workers' Union of Croatia, one of the country's biggest trade unions. His wife was now working for the Party too.

But the Party was still in the doldrums. From about fifty thousand in 1920, its membership had dropped to a few hundred by 1927. It had little influence on national politics within Yugoslavia. Still proscribed, it had to operate in secret. Its headquarters had been moved from Belgrade to Zagreb because it had more members there. Zagreb was Yugoslavia's most industrialised area, with more than four thousand metal workers alone. Nearly a third of them were unemployed, due to the recession.

The move suited Josip and helped him succeed within the Party hierarchy. Because of the paucity of members he probably had little competition. He was gaining a reputation for loyalty to his party superiors and proving a diligent organiser. The Party at that time was split. Some wanted a revolution within Yugoslavia on the lines of the Russian one but had no clear idea of how to achieve this, other than with the help of Moscow, which had enough problems of its own at the time. Others, mainly Croats, were more interested in local autonomy. Josip spoke out against these disputes and appealed for unity. To that end he wrote to the Comintern, which brought him to Moscow's notice.

In early 1928, as a result of Comintern pressure, he became secretary of the Party committee for Zagreb. Arrested for distributing illegal literature, he was sentenced to seven months' imprisonment, reduced to five on appeal. Meanwhile he had gone into hiding. When caught, he was tried on the more serious charges of plotting sedition and of being a member of a banned organisation, namely the Communist Party. His sentence was increased to five years.

That same year the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party and two of his colleagues were assassinated in parliament by a Serb deputy. For many Croatian nationalists this was the last straw. Most were reluctant to resort to terrorism personally, but they became increasingly willing to condone others subverting the hated Serbian-dominated state. The more fanatical of them fled to Hungary and Italy to form the Ustasha ('Uprising') terrorist movement under a lawyer and former member of the Yugoslav parliament, Ante Pavelic.

The Ustashi were prepared to use terror and violence, however extreme, to achieve Croatian independence. They spoke as much of racial and religious identity as of Croat nationalism. They were willing to accept the Italian dictator Mussolini's money to those ends. Pavelic modelled his Ustashi on the Italian Fascists, with their blood oaths and pseudo-military organisation. Mussolini had his eyes on Yugoslav territory. Anything undermining the Yugoslav state was grist to his mill. Hungarians, keen to recover land lost to Yugoslavia in 1918, also had a reason to stir up trouble for their neighbour. An Ustasha training camp founded near the Slovenian border was soon attracting hundreds of recruits, particularly unemployed Croat workers. Other camps were located in Italy.

Sharing the wish to break up their country, the Yugoslav communists maintained close links with the Ustashi. Milovan Djilas confirms this in his *Memoir of a Revolutionary*: "We instinctively felt that the Ustashi action could only help further our own aim: the destruction of Yugoslavia." *Proleter*, the official organ of the Party's Central Committee, declared in December 1932 that it was "the duty of all Communist organisations and of every Communist to help" the Ustasha movement. Pavelic had often defended communists in the courts. Communists and Ustashi on occasion found themselves in the same prisons. Friendships resulted.

Josip was incarcerated at Lepoglava, in his native Zagorje, where many other communists were held. Unlike ordinary convicts, they were allowed to socialise with each other and to receive and exchange political literature. They even created Party cells and studied Marxism openly. The rules were probably relaxed because the guards were Croats, not Serbs. Less sympathetic commentators claim the guards were bribed with Moscow money. Josip would later liken Lepoglava to a university, saying it was "where I learned most". In 1931, after trying to escape, he was transferred to the stricter Maribor prison in Slovenia and then, in late 1933, to Ogulin, before being freed in March 1934.

His time in prison coincided with the autocratic regime of King Alexander, who had succeeded to the Yugoslav throne on the death of his father in August 1921. A military man with little enthusiasm for politics – but with an obsession for Packard cars of which he owned twenty-three – he decided, on 6 January 1929, after four general elections and twenty governments, that he had had enough of democracy. He was prompted by the assassination of the Croat leaders, and student riots in Zagreb the previous month that had

resulted in a dozen deaths. Dispensing with parliament, he suspended the constitution and thereafter governed by decree. It was a royal dictatorship. All parties were dissolved and political publications, including those Communist-related, were banned. Press censorship was imposed, as were restrictions on the right of assembly and to demonstrate.

Most ordinary people appeared to be sickening of politics too. There was little opposition to the King's coup. Working folk were concerned more with the dire economic climate. Yugoslavia was to be hit hard by the world slump following the Wall Street Crash of October 1929. The prices of her exports – mainly agricultural produce and raw materials – fell faster than those of the manufactured goods she imported. This reduced the purchasing power of the population as a whole. Unemployment soared. What little revolt the communists attempted was firmly suppressed. Many were killed or arrested. The Party became almost extinct as its leaders fled abroad. The authorities were unrelenting in their repression of anything communist. It was the Croats and the other “troublesome minorities” who were their biggest bugbear during the 1930s.

To the disgust of the Croatian nationalists, Alexander now chose officially to name his realm Yugoslavia. The formation of a national, albeit largely Serbian, identity was aided by a new flag which replaced the old Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian ones flown hitherto in the separate “tribal” areas. Now only the Yugoslav flag was permitted for public display. He forbade, too, the use of the old regional names such as Serbia and Bosnia. The country was divided into nine provinces named after the rivers running through them – save for Dalmatia, which was renamed Littoral. He tried, unsuccessfully, to abolish the Cyrillic script. It was all meant to make a break with the past – a way, perhaps, of curbing nationalism, especially of the Croat sort. The opportunity was taken to crack down on non-Serb dissidents, whether politicians or intellectuals.

Pressed by the French, who were dangling the offer of a substantial loan, Alexander restored a modicum of constitutional rule in 1931. It made little difference and he became a bitterly hated figure. It was no surprise when, at the start of a state visit to France on 9 October 1934, Alexander was assassinated in Marseilles. A Macedonian agent of the Croatian Ustasha movement, based then in Italy, was the culprit. Alexander's son became King Peter II. Only eleven years old, he required a regent until his “majority” was reached in

September 1941. Alexander in his will had named his cousin Prince Paul as regent.

Ironically, Alexander's visit to France had been to shore up Yugoslavia's alliance with Czechoslovakia and Romania. France had promoted this so-called "Little Entente" as part of the *cordon sanitaire* to protect Western Europe from the Bolshevik pestilence, and then as a possible containment of Germany. Its members had more immediate worries. Hungary hungered to restore the Habsburgs and to recover lost territory. Alexander had been hoping for a military alliance with France. His host on that visit, the French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou, also died in the assassination. Barthou, like Winston Churchill, had recognised Hitler's aggressive ambitions early on. He was determined France should withstand them, possibly by allying with the Soviets as well as with the British. Thereafter France was cursed with weak, appeasing foreign ministers. Barthou's immediate successor was the infamous collaborationist Vichy wartime leader, Pierre Laval. Yugoslavia's attempts to seek redress for the assassination from Italy, through the League of Nations, were blocked by France and Britain, anxious not to embarrass Mussolini. Surprisingly to us today, Mussolini was looked upon then as a potential counterweight to the rising power of Hitler.

On his release, Josip was required to live in his native Kumrovec and to report daily to the police. But he again went into hiding in Zagreb, resuming his place in the Party hierarchy, living under assumed names and adopting disguises. He grew a moustache and dyed his hair red. It was now that he became Tito, the most lasting of his many aliases. Some have suggested that it was an acronym of "Third International Terrorist Organisation" (which has the same initials in Serbo-Croat). Others that Ti-to was Serbo-Croat for "do this – do that". His own explanation was more mundane: it was a common nickname in his native area, from the Latin Titus. He now became a full-time paid official of the Comintern. In late July 1934 he was sent to Vienna, where the Yugoslav Party had located its headquarters. Two years earlier the Comintern had put a Czech, Milan Gorkic, in charge of the Party. Under him it was beginning to recover. Gorkic had been given large funds for the task.

Tito's family life had ended with his imprisonment. His wife Pelagija had spent some time in custody herself during 1928. She had then been sent by the Party, with Zarko their son, to Moscow. There she worked for the Comintern before being posted to Kazakhstan as a teacher. Zarko was left behind in a children's home in the Soviet

capital. She divorced Tito in 1936, remarried and had a daughter by her second husband. Caught up in the purges, she was exiled to Siberia in 1938. Rehabilitated in 1957, she returned to Moscow in 1966 and died there two years later. Zarko, after a peripatetic childhood, joined the Red Army and lost an arm early in the war.

The continuing economic depression of the 1930s led to much dissatisfaction among urban and agricultural workers. This helped the communists in their agitation and brought new audiences for their propaganda, especially among the young. They were aided, too, by the easing of restrictions on political activity by the more liberal regime that followed Alexander's assassination. The Yugoslav Party was thought to have sufficiently recovered to consider holding regional conferences inside the country, concluding with a national gathering. All of this Tito helped arrange. He already had a reputation in communist circles for hard work and obedience. His trial and imprisonment had now given him a suitable revolutionary pedigree.

The secret national gathering held in Ljubljana in late December 1934 elected a new leadership. Tito was included for the first time. In line with Moscow's wishes, it agreed to work towards weakening Yugoslavia's ruling classes by setting them against each other. Croatian and Macedonian separatism were to be encouraged. The troublesome minorities were to blame their miseries on the Serb monarchy. To these ends separate communist parties were established in Croatia, Slovenia and Macedonia. The Party leadership strengthened its links with the Ustashi, seeing them as natural allies in the revolutionary struggle. Leaflets were distributed praising them as "national revolutionaries" and "Croat patriots", and promising them "solidarity in their struggle".

Moscow sought to exploit the rebellious potential of the resentful non-Serbs. This was why Croats, Slovenes and Montenegrins came to dominate the Party, which suited Tito. It was why there was an anti-Serb element in the Party's policies. Apart from a few intellectuals in Belgrade, the Party had little support in Serbia and was non-existent in the countryside. Ivan Avakumovic, in his *History of the Communist Party in Yugoslavia*, maintains that in 1939 Belgrade University had fewer Communist Party members than Cambridge, despite having many more students than the English university!

Gorkic sent Tito to Moscow in early 1935 to be the Party's representative in the Comintern's Balkan Secretariat. His arrival coincided with the start of Stalin's ruthless purges and the notorious

“Treason Trials” that were to see the wholesale extermination of Stalin’s former colleagues. Tito lodged at the infamous Hotel Lux, where all Comintern’s foreign visitors stayed. It was a hotbed of informers and Soviet secret police. He attended the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress that summer as a Yugoslav delegate, seeing Stalin for the first time. The personality cult of the Soviet leader was reaching its peak. Obeisance to him was obligatory in the most obsequious terms. Tito was to recall that every time Stalin’s name was mentioned it was greeted with thunderous and prolonged applause.

Fearing the consequences for international communism of German rearmament and Italy’s growing strength, the Congress called for alliances with other political parties opposing fascism throughout the world – so-called “Popular Fronts”. The Soviets had made military pacts with France and Czechoslovakia the previous year, as well as joining the League of Nations.

The line on Yugoslavia changed too. Moscow now considered the West’s *cordon sanitaire* a useful protection against the eastward ambitions of Hitler and Mussolini! The Party was to cease agitating for Yugoslavia’s ruin – a *volte-face* it did not find easy to perform and which did not appeal to its Croat and Macedonian members. No agreements were reached with any other Yugoslav party and it relapsed into internal squabbling. It was further weakened by a fear-some crackdown by the authorities that included the arrest of many party activists. While in Moscow, Tito met an Austrian communist, Lucia Bauer, whom he married in October 1936, a few days before his return to the Yugoslav Party’s headquarters in Vienna. He was to go through four marriages in his time.

The Comintern made him Gorkic’s deputy. He was given the additional task of recruiting volunteers to fight alongside the Republican Army against Franco in the Spanish Civil War. All the communist parties around the world were being asked to provide such volunteers for what came to be known as the “International Brigades”. The Yugoslav Party moved its headquarters to Paris to escape the attention of the Austrian secret police, now strongly anti-communist. Many Yugoslav communists living in Vienna had already been arrested.

Paris was Tito’s first taste of the West. It was also the first time he had handled big money. The Comintern had given him lavish funds to recruit volunteers. He was responsible for finding more than a thousand. Several hundred were to make their way from Yugoslavia

where a French merchant ship was chartered for the journey. The authorities got wind of this and most of the recruits were seized before embarking. Tito managed to escape blame for the fiasco which, in Moscow's eyes, fell on Gorkic. Of the seventeen hundred or so Yugoslav communists who eventually made it to Spain, more than half were to die there, not always in battle. Of those who survived, twenty-four became generals in Tito's Partisans during the Second World War.

Tito did little later to settle the mystery of whether or not he had gone to Spain himself, preferring to be deliberately vague. Most Serb historians are now convinced he must have gone. Also that the Comintern had given him the task of supervising the liquidation there of dissident communists, especially so-called Trotskyists, in line with the long reach of Stalin's paranoiac purges. Some have specifically accused him of managing a prison ship in Barcelona harbour used by Stalin's secret police for their nefarious purposes.

I found buried away in the British Foreign Office files a letter from an Edith Wedderburn dated 20 May 1944 to the then Secretary of State, Anthony Eden, in which she wrote:

I should like to remind you that there are in this country, émigrés who fought for the Republican cause in the Civil War in Spain, and who were tried by the Military Courts set up by Tito, who was a member of the Yugoslav Comintern in Spain, to try "Trotskyists" and other rebels who refused to submit to the GPU [Stalin's secret police] Dictatorship set up in Spain in 1936-37. One man who was brought to this country, through the good offices of a professor in Cambridge University, was imprisoned for many months, with many other members of the International Brigade, in a GPU prison ship anchored off Barcelona. It was "Marshal" Tito, and the GPU agent Hans Kahle, now in this country, who were responsible for these methods of terrorisation in the Civil War in Spain.

The Foreign Office official deputed to answer the letter minuted: "As far as I know Tito did take part in the Spanish Civil War but I have not so far heard that he committed atrocities."²

The British historian Hugh Thomas, in his seminal *The Spanish Civil War*, says:

Tito denies having ever been in Spain but, in view of the surprising number of people who claimed to have seen him there, it seems possible that he at least visited the [International] Brigades' headquarters for one reason or another.

The Oxford historian Richard Crampton, commenting in his *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After* on how Tito was able to escape the Stalin purges of the 1930s, considers it “primarily because he spent much of the time in Spain”.

Tito had by now learned how to survive in the communist world – doing what he was told and keeping his mouth shut when required. Outwardly charming, he was clearly ambitious, single-minded, determined, and, when necessary, a ruthless opportunist. He needed nerves of steel to have eluded so far the traps and tripwires of the Comintern. No intellectual and no bourgeois, he shunned philosophical squabbles, unlike many of his peers who relished political debate. Their eagerness for it often led to their downfall. Tito left ideology to others.

Milovan Djilas was to complain later that Tito was “lacking in original ideas”.³ Maybe this was his salvation, as was a strong instinct for self-preservation! From the start he had been prepared to toe the party line, unthinkingly and unquestioningly: the perfect *apparatchik*; no theoretician, but a simple, reliable Stalinist field-worker. Once he had decided to become a communist he knew he needed to be seen to be intensely loyal to Moscow, in particular to the Comintern where power over his life and death lay. He appreciated, too, very early, that he must be prepared to report on his comrades in detail and, if necessary, to denounce them. How much he knew of the gulags and of the millions of innocent deaths from forced collectivisation he never disclosed. Perhaps to him they were, as Stalin insisted, simply rumours put about by wicked imperialists!

Gorkic was ordered to Moscow in July 1937, where he promptly disappeared, a casualty of Stalin’s continuing reign of terror. Hundreds of Yugoslav communists living in Moscow had been arrested and charged with deviation, fractionalism and treason. Few were ever released. Djilas says Tito put it about that Gorkic had been a British spy, but this was thought to be a Stalinist fabrication.

Tito was asked temporarily to take over the Yugoslav Party. Not all the members approved. For a while there was a rival leadership located in Paris, but by the middle of 1938 he had moved the Party headquarters back to Yugoslavia. It was a time of great anxiety for Yugoslavs. Hitler’s takeover of Austria earlier that year had brought the Nazis to Yugoslavia’s northern borders. The fascist Italians were already at its western borders. Within the year they would also be at its southern borders when Mussolini occupied Albania.

Researchers at the British Foreign Office, when asked by Churchill in May 1945 "for the fullest possible dossier on Tito", revealed that he had in 1937 worked at Adriatic Shipyards Limited at Split, owned then by the British firm Yarrows. They also discovered that, at this time,

he quickly organised strong Communist cells in the industrial centres of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slovenia; that widespread strikes followed, that he seemed to make a special target of British and American concerns, that he seemed to be financed from a centre in Vienna.

He had started a big strike in the Shell refinery at Caprag during August 1937 and other strikes in partly British owned spinning and weaving mills in Slovenia.⁴

In the summer of 1938 Tito put together his first politburo, though it was not called such until two years later. It included the Slovenian Edvard Kardelj, a schoolmaster, who became his chief ideologue. The Montenegrin Milovan Djilas, a perpetual student, looked after propaganda, and the Serbian Aleksandar Rankovic, a journeyman tailor, was charged with party discipline. He would later head Tito's secret police. The three were to remain his closest lieutenants until the mid-1950s. Djilas had first met Tito in 1937. The Comintern chiefs were not yet convinced Tito was up to the job, although he had sought their approval for his every move. They worried about the frictions within the Party and evidently considered disbanding it, as they had recently done with the Polish party.

He was summoned to Moscow in August 1938 to discover his wife Lucia Bauer had been arrested on suspicion of being anti-Stalinist. He managed to secure her release, but little mention is made of her thereafter. He never took her to Yugoslavia. Staying inevitably at the Lux, he again spent much time compiling copious reports on his colleagues and being questioned on their contents. He also helped produce a Serbo-Croat translation of Stalin's *Short History of the Bolshevik Party*. It was only after he undertook to liquidate the remaining "alien and vacillating elements" within the Yugoslav Party without delay that his leadership of it was finally confirmed in January 1939. He returned to Yugoslavia almost immediately. His official biographer, Vladimir Dedijer, maintains that about eight hundred Yugoslav Communists were purged at this time, including at least twenty former members of the Party's Central Committee. Tito never spoke about it. Ironically, he was more successful than the Yugoslav authorities at killing communists!

Djilas maintains Tito could not have been appointed leader unless

his loyalty to the Soviet leadership [had been] tested, or, rather, his disloyalty to the factionalists within his own party [been] confirmed. Many other Communists had been checked out in that same fashion and they had not survived. Later, Tito said of that time: "I made no friends among the factionalists, I minded my business, and I was careful about what I said, particularly in rooms with telephones."

In pondering whether Tito betrayed or slandered his comrades, Djilas reminds his readers that for Communists, especially pre-Second World War ones, collaboration with Soviet intelligence was "regarded as an honour worthy of recognition". Tito, he says, was certainly loyal to Stalin. Otherwise "how could he have survived". Hence he "energetically purged his own party".⁵ It was as a result of the purging that Djilas himself – nineteen years younger than Tito – rose to power within the Party having, presumably, successfully shown *his* loyalty to Tito.

Evidently Tito was to report back to the Comintern in person in the summer of 1939. He appeared to be in no hurry to do so, taking a roundabout route to Moscow via Genoa and Paris (where inevitably a woman had caught his eye), then by sea from Le Havre to Leningrad, bypassing Germany. By the time he arrived in early September the infamous Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact had been signed and Britain and France were at war with Nazi Germany, following the latter's attack on Poland. Although applauded in the Moscow press as a great victory for peace, and a defeat for those French and British imperialists anxious to embroil the Soviet Union in a war with Germany, the Pact shocked many communists in the West. Drove left the Party.

Not so Tito and his comrades. They praised the Pact enthusiastically and accepted unquestioningly Stalin's explanation that it was a war between bourgeois powers which the Soviet Union would do well to stay out of. They issued a manifesto in September 1939 claiming:

the Soviet Union, led by the Bolshevik Party and Comrade Stalin, the leader of genius of all progressive humanity, have unmasked the imperialist warmongers' foul trap. German fascism has been compelled to capitulate before the strength of victorious socialism, the USSR, and to conclude a non-aggression pact with it.

The manifesto ended: "Through the Non-Aggression Pact with Germany, the Soviet Union has won a great victory and limited the

range of the present war.”⁶ By contrast, the French and British communist parties immediately pledged loyalty to their respective countries and denounced the Germans as aggressors.

When, in line with the unpublished clauses of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Red Army occupied its agreed share of defeated Poland, Tito's comrades loyally welcomed it. Djilas says they “were thrilled by the partition of Poland”. In their opinion, “the Soviet Union had taken the field and was broadening the territory of socialism”.⁷ The 30 November 1939 edition of the German newspaper *Die Welt* quoted Tito as declaring:

The Pact for Mutual Aid between the Soviet Union and Germany, and the entry of Soviet troops into western White Russia [Tito's euphemism for what had been eastern Poland!], have aroused great enthusiasm amongst the broad masses of the Yugoslav population.

An aide of Tito's, Lola Ribar, wrote in the Communist youth monthly *Mladost*: “Thanks to this pact the peoples of Yugoslavia will be spared a new slaughter, a slaughter in which they have nothing to gain, and in which they would only fight for foreign interests.”⁸

Nor did Tito complain when the Soviets attacked Finland that same month, although innocent lives were lost in the bombing of Helsinki. He hailed the Russian successes as nailing “once and for all the foul lie about the weakness of the Red Army... The bourgeois dogs must now acknowledge the power and might of the Red Army and the Soviet Union and its peace-loving policy.”⁹ One of his lieutenants dismissed Finnish resistance to the Soviets as an “instructive example of how not to defend the independence and sovereignty of a small nation”. It was blamed on more powerful states behind the scenes urging, in “their own interests”, the Finns to fight.¹⁰ Another maintained:

the Finnish war was provoked by English imperialist agents with the aim of bringing the Soviet Union into the war and using Finland as a base for operations against Russia, as they did twenty years ago.

Earlier, in September 1939, Tito's communists had provoked a Croat infantry regiment to mutiny by spreading rumours that it was being sent to France to man the Maginot Line! Tito's colleagues agitated against any military preparedness by Yugoslavia. Call-up was opposed and recruitment discouraged. Soldiers were urged to disobey orders. Djilas admits they “stood against mobilisation” because “mobilisation had an anti-German character”.¹¹ Strikes were

organised in ordnance plants and aircraft factories. One, the longest then in Yugoslav history, lasted almost three months. The strike organisers were in cahoots with the German-speaking community. A Party leaflet distributed that autumn declared: "Hitler at the moment presents no danger whatsoever to the independence of Yugoslavia." It protested against the "decrees of mobilisation and evacuation of the civil population, etc., which are clearly designed preliminaries to dragging the country into the war."¹²

Tito's official biographer, Vladimir Dedijer, mentions in his *War Diaries* that they organised an anti-war demonstration in Belgrade on 14 December 1939. Banners and slogans attacked the British and French premiers, but none berated Hitler. Similar rallies were held in Zagreb and elsewhere, in which Croat Ustashi and other extreme nationalists participated. In May 1940 Tito's politburo branded the Anglo-French war against Germany "unjust" and "imperialistic". Similarly, when Hitler attacked Scandinavia and the Low Countries, the misfortunes of people there were blamed on "the imperialists of London and Paris". Tito and his comrades claimed that:

The crude violation of the Scandinavian countries by England and France forced Germany to move troops into Denmark and to occupy strategic positions in Norway... Thanks to the obstinate efforts of the English and French imperialists to drag small nations into the war on their side, four independent states, Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium, have been occupied.

And after the fall of France: "Only the imperialists of London and Paris and their social democratic and bourgeois democratic allies are to blame for the continuation of the war." Not a mention of the invading Germans!

Again, later in the year, when the aerial Battle of Britain was at its height:

The English imperialist bourgeoisie continues the war. It still announces that this war is "for democracy", "for freedom", "for the independence" of the English people. Nothing is more shameful than this lie. The English imperialist bourgeoisie is saving its imperialist booty.

German propaganda, like Moscow's, was never questioned:

The most recent revelations of the *German White Book* eloquently unmask the shameful and perfidious game of the Anglo-French imperialists and of their "democratic" and "social democratic"

lackeys... The Communists were therefore completely in the right when they attacked from the first day of the imperialist war the Anglo-French imperialists as aggressors.¹³

Ljubo Sirc, who was a student in Slovenia at this time and would later join the Partisans, recalled in his memoirs, *Between Hitler and Tito*, how his communist colleagues

had been taxing our patience for some time. We had had running battles with them because they were always denigrating the Army, protesting against the partial mobilization of the reserve and resisting measures everybody knew were needed to withstand the mounting German pressure on Yugoslavia... At the beginning of 1941, the underground Communist Party of Yugoslavia had issued a resolution attacking the English and French imperialists who "had helped to kindle the new war conflagration, not in order to defend freedom, democracy and independence of small peoples, but in order to defend their colonial empires and hegemony". In the very same resolution, the Soviet invasion of Poland and the Baltic States in alliance with Hitler's Germany had been hailed as the "liberation of 23 million working people from the national and capitalist yoke".

Hugh Seton-Watson, a respected historian of the Balkans, says that "during the period of alliance between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich the Yugoslav Communists had directed their main hatred against Britain".¹⁴ Djilas reveals in his *Memoir of a Revolutionary* how Tito went to great lengths after the war to conceal this anti-British and pro-German stance on the grounds that "it was 'embarrassing today'".

Although these were dramatic times, Tito did not hurry home. The Comintern kept him in Moscow until the end of 1939. He went on to Istanbul, where he stayed four months, ostensibly awaiting forged travel documents. He had become infatuated with a 26-year-old Slovenian, Herta Haas, whom he had met in Paris in 1937. He was enjoying the ritzy lifestyle, staying in luxury hotels, eating at expensive restaurants and wearing fashionable clothes, which his high salary from the Comintern now allowed. He was never to lose his taste for "good living"! Herta returned with him to Zagreb in April 1940 when, at the Comintern's behest, he purged yet more dissidents within the Party. Those unwilling to back the Germans wholeheartedly, or who even faintly favoured the British stance, were included. As most of the older members had by now been eliminated, it was a much younger party. Tito, 48 in 1940, had become a sort of father figure to many of his comrades.

The Yugoslav Party was undoubtedly stronger than before. Its numbers, though, about 6,600 in October 1940, were still miniscule. They were mostly townspeople and intellectuals, with very few peasants or workers. At least half were Croats. Crucially Tito had given it cohesion by establishing party cells throughout most of the country. It was now poised to take advantage of whatever the coming war would bring. Even so, it could never have attained national power if that war, and more particularly the brutal German occupation, had not wrecked the country's social and political framework, thereby creating an administrative vacuum.