

The Fourth International and Yugoslavia (1948–50)

1 THE BACKGROUND

By Bob Pitt

THE PUBLICATION, on June 28, 1948, of the Cominform statement excommunicating the Yugoslav Communist Party came as a bolt from the blue. Neither bourgeois political commentators nor Western diplomats had foreseen this dramatic fracture in the Stalinist bloc. For until then, the YCP leaders had appeared the most faithful followers of Stalin, Josip Tito himself having come to the head of the party in the 1930s after the previous leadership had perished in Stalin's purges. It was a measure of the Titoites' loyalty that, when the Cominform itself was formed in 1947, Belgrade had been chosen as its headquarters.

The YCP was, however, distinguished from other Eastern European Stalinist parties (apart from that of Albania) in that it had come to power not primarily through the intervention of the Soviet armed forces, but as a result of an indigenous peasant-based partisan war against the German occupation. From an early stage of this struggle, tensions had arisen between the YCP and Moscow. They came to a head early in 1948 when the Yugoslav and Bulgarian governments proposed to form a federation of 'people's democracies', a plan angrily vetoed by Stalin, who saw this as a move towards independence from the Kremlin. It was the Titoites' resistance to the great-power bullying of the USSR which led to the public declaration of a split in June.

The Fourth International should have been theoretically prepared for this eventuality, given the Trotskyist understanding of Stalinism as a nationalist perversion of Marxism. Trotsky himself had considered it possible that the centrifugal tendencies inherent in Stalinism would lead the Comintern to fragment along national lines. How much more likely was such a development in the case of the YCP, whose possession of state power gave it an independent base from which to oppose the Kremlin. At the FI's Second World Congress in April 1948, however, non-Soviet Stalinist parties had been defined as 'organisations whose only function is to serve the diplomatic manoeuvres of the Soviet bureaucracy'.¹ From this standpoint, the rupture between the YCP and the Kremlin could only appear as a break by the Titoites from Stalinism.

This, and the Cominform's accusation that the YCP was spreading 'propaganda about the degeneration of the CPSU . . . borrowed from the arsenal of counter-revolutionary Trotskyism',² seems to have persuaded the FI's Paris-based International Secretariat, headed by Michel Pablo, that there was a real possibility of winning the Titoites to Trotskyism. With the FI marginalised by the post-war strengthening of both Stalinism and social democracy, Pablo saw in the Stalin-Tito split an opportunity for the Trotskyist movement to break out of its isolation, and political principles were accordingly thrown overboard.

Three days after the publication of the Cominform statement, the IS dashed off an 'open letter' to the YCP, declaring that the party was now 'in a position to understand . . . the real meaning of . . . the whole Stalinist struggle against Trotskyism'. The fact that the YCP leaders themselves had been enthusiastic participants in this struggle was conveniently overlooked. 'We wish rather,' the IS assured the Titoites, 'to take note of the promise of your resistance – the promise of victorious resistance by a revolutionary workers' party against . . . the Kremlin machine . . . Long Live the Yugoslav Revolution!'³

A second, much longer, open letter was despatched by the IS on July 13. This explained to the YCP in a fraternal, not to say fawning, manner the origins of the Stalinist degeneration of the CPSU, and its disastrous consequences within the Communist International. Ignoring the small matter of the YCP's own Stalinisation, the letter urged the Titoites to establish soviet democracy at home and pursue a revolutionary internationalist policy abroad. 'Comrades,' the IS wrote, 'we address this letter to you because we are conscious of the terrible dilemma in which you find yourselves; because we understand exactly the tremendous responsibility weighing upon you, and because we consider it our communist duty to assist you in resolving the present crisis in communism along proletarian and Leninist lines.'⁴ After requesting permission to send a delegation to the forthcoming YCP congress, the letter concluded with

the call: 'Yugoslav communists, let us unite our efforts for a new Leninist International for the world victory of socialism.'⁵

The International Secretariat's 'turn to Tito' flew in the face of the political line adopted by the Second World Congress only three months earlier. The Congress had rejected an amendment by the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain, which recognised that throughout Eastern Europe the bourgeoisie had been, or was in the process of being, expropriated both politically and economically.⁶ Unwilling to accept that Stalinism could accomplish such social overturns, the Congress endorsed an IS-sponsored resolution asserting that these remained capitalist states, under 'an extreme form of Bonapartism'. It was impermissible, the resolution insisted, to demand anti-capitalist measures from such 'completely reactionary' regimes.⁷ Yet the IS now implicitly junked this whole analysis, treating Yugoslavia as some form of embryonic workers' state, and appealing to the Tito regime to adopt a revolutionary socialist programme. And this the IS did on its own initiative, without even bothering to consult the international movement in whose name it spoke.



Tito and the Bulgarian Stalinist leader Georgi Dimitrov, Summer 1947

The one section of the world Trotskyist movement with the authority to challenge the political course of the IS was the US Socialist Workers Party, whose initial reaction to the Belgrade-Moscow rift was very different. The SWP paper, *The Militant*, stated bluntly that the cause of the schism was that 'a group of hitherto trusted Kremlin agents have demanded a say in determining Yugoslavia's policies . . . All that Tito and his clique are striving to defend are their own material interests, their power and privileges. All they ask is to be permitted to rule in Yugoslavia as Stalin rules in Russia'. SWP theoretician John G. Wright characterised Tito as a hardened Stalinist who had risen to the top as 'an unquestioning and willing tool of the GPU', whose hands were stained with 'the blood of hundreds of Yugoslav Trotskyists and other militants'.⁸ 'Tito and Stalin want the workers to choose between them . . . he wrote. "The workers will surely reject this trap . . ."⁹

But when the IS carried out its opportunist lurch towards Titoism, the SWP leaders failed to raise any objection. *The Militant* carried the first open letter without comment as an official statement by the FI. And the second letter was published in the party's theoretical journal, *Fourth International*, again without criticism. The politically explosive appeal at the end of the letter, proposing a fusion between Trotskyists and Titoites, was defused by dishonestly tinkering with the translation.¹⁰

By contrast, the RCP's response to the Yugoslav crisis, while avoiding sectarian abstention, firmly upheld Trotskyist principles. Unlike the SWP, which had not even defended Yugoslavia's right to self-determination, the RCP paper, *Socialist Appeal*, stated clearly that 'any Leninist must support the right of any small country to national liberation and freedom if it so desires. All socialists will give critical support to the movement in Yugoslavia . . . to gain freedom from direct Moscow domination. At the same time, the workers in Yugoslavia . . . will fight for the installation of genuine workers' democracy'. This, the RCP emphasised, was

'impossible under the present Tito regime'.¹¹

In their pamphlet *Behind the Stalin-Tito Clash*, RCP leaders Jock Haston and Ted Grant argued that the conflict 'must be the means of educating the working class as to the fundamental differences in method between Stalinism and Leninism'. With such an approach, they wrote, 'this crack in the international Stalinist front can mark a stage in the long struggle of Trotsky and the Fourth International to expose Stalinism . . . It will mark a stage in the advance towards the building of a genuine Communist International, the Fourth International, which can lead to the establishment of a world system of freely federated Communist republics'.¹²

Nor did the RCP shirk its revolutionary duty to fight for its position within the International. 'Whereas the SWP quietly adjusted its line and covered up for the IS, the British section produced a lengthy critique of the FI leadership's line on Yugoslavia. The RCP Central Committee's letter to the International Executive Committee of the FI, published here for the first time, still stands up as a politically principled and theoretically coherent analysis.'¹³ So far as we know, it never received a reply.¹⁴

sections were even instructed to act as unofficial distributors of Yugoslav government propaganda.²⁰

The YCP leadership, however, kept the FI politically at arm's length. Indeed, in November 1949 the Yugoslav ambassador to the USA attacked Trotskyists as 'suspect types' who belonged in the same category as imperialist spies.²¹ But such snubs did not deter the FI leaders. In April 1950 the IEC Eighth Plenum decided that Yugoslavia was no longer a capitalist state but a 'workers' state' with 'bureaucratic deformations' – the same formula used by Lenin to describe the Soviet state of the early 1920s. The deformations themselves were evidently quite minor ones. For the political evolution of the YCP – attributed by the IEC to the 'remarkable qualities' of the Titoite leadership – was said to exemplify the 'struggle against bureaucratic degeneration' which constituted the 'democratic essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat'.

The IEC went on to outline a scenario in which the YCP would 'rediscover the organic connection between the Yugoslav revolution and the world revolution' and thus become the focus for 'the regroupment of revolutionary forces on an international scale'. Such an outcome would favour 'the organisation of the new Communist opposition which is arising in the Stalinist parties and with which it is permissible to envisage the construction in the near future of revolutionary Marxist formations for a whole series of countries'.²² This conception of the Tito regime's international role was quickly revealed as the purest fantasy. With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the Yugoslav government promptly capitulated to imperialism, condemning North Korea and giving its backing to the United Nations.

The FI's Third World Congress of 1951, which endorsed the programmatic revisions of the IS, was thus not the beginning but the end result of a process of political disorientation on the part of the International's leadership. Nor was this process opposed by any of the sections which formed the International Committee in 1953 and who later boasted of their part in the struggle against 'Pabloite revisionism'. The SWP's response has already been referred to. Their British protege Healy played an even more despicable role, transforming his organisation into what Ted Grant contemptuously described as 'an exculpatory tourist agency for Yugoslavia'.²³ As for the French Trotskyists, who came into conflict with Pablo during 1951–2; they were the most enthusiastic proponents of the 'turn to Tito'. In 1950, for example, Gerard Bloch eagerly promoted the official line that 'the Yugoslav Revolution could become the springboard from which the Fourth International leaps forward to the conquest of the masses'.²⁴

Trotskyists today still live with the consequences of the FI's post-war political collapse. In order to overcome this, and proceed towards the rebuilding of the FI, it is essential to break with the apologetics and myth-making with which various 'Trotskyist' tendencies justify their bogus claims to represent the continuity of revolutionary communism. At the same time, it is necessary to build on past struggles, such as that waged by the RCP in 1948, to defend the Trotskyist programme against its liquidators.

NOTES

1. *Fourth International*, June 1948.
2. A. Westoby, *Communism Since World War II*, Harvester, 1981, p. 69.
3. *The Militant*, July 26, 1948.
4. *Fourth International*, August 1948.
5. S. Bornstein and A. Richardson, *War and the International*, Socialist Platform, 1986, p. 219.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
7. *Fourth International*, June 1948.
8. *The Militant*, July 5, 1948.
9. *Ibid.*, July 19, 1948.
10. The original reads: 'Communistes yougoslaves, unissons nos efforts pour une nouvelle internationale leniniste' (R. Prager, ed., *Les Congres de la Quatrieme Internationale*, vol. 3, La Breche, 1988, p. 394). The SWP translated this as 'Yugoslav Communists unite for a new Leninist International'.
11. *Socialist Appeal*, July 1948.
12. J. Haston and E. Grant, *Behind the Stalin-Tito Clash*, RCP, 1948, p. 21.
13. The letter is undated, but must have been written in the summer of 1948.
14. In 1949 the RCP was still complaining that the letter remained unanswered: RCP Political Bureau, letter to IS, February 21, 1949.
15. *Socialist Appeal*, July 1949.
16. Westoby, op. cit., p. 70.
17. Prager, op. cit., pp. 395–9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 421.
19. *Class, Party and State in the Eastern European Revolution*, SWP, 1969, p. 15.
20. IS Circular, October 5, 1949.
21. For the IS letter of complaint to the YCP, see Prager, op. cit., pp. 401–9.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 446–7, 451.
23. Anon (E. Grant), Statement to the BSFI, 1950.
24. Quoted in *Revolutionary History*, Summer 1990.

The Fourth International and Yugoslavia (1948-50)

2 LETTER ON YUGOSLAVIA To the IEC of the Fourth International from the Revolutionary Communist Party (Britain)

Dear Comrades,

The Yugoslav-Cominform dispute offers the Fourth International great opportunities to expose to rank-and-file Stalinist militants the bureaucratic methods of Stalinism. It is possible to underline the way in which the Stalinist leaderships suppress any genuine discussion on the conflict by distorting the facts and withholding the replies of the YCP leadership from their rank and file. By stressing such aspects of the Yugoslav expulsion we can have a profound effect on militants in the Communist Parties.

However, our approach to this major event must be a principled one. We cannot lend credence, by silence on aspects of YCP policy and regime, to any impression that Tito or the leaders of the YCP are Trotskyist, and that great obstacles do not separate them from Trotskyism. Our exposure of the bureaucratic manner of the expulsion of the YCP must not mean that we become lawyers for the YCP leadership, or create even the least illusion that they do not still remain, despite the break with Stalin, *Stalinists in method and training*.

In our opinion, the Open Letters of the IS to the YCP Congress failed to fulfil these absolutely essential conditions. They failed to pose directly and clearly what is wrong, not only with the CPSU, but with the YCP. The whole approach and the general tone of the letters are such as to create the illusion that the YCP leadership are communists, mistaken in the past, and discovering for the first time the evils of the bureaucratic methods of Moscow; instead of leaders who have actively participated in aiding the bureaucracy and acting as its agents in the past.

The letters appear to be based on the perspective that the leaders of the YCP can be won over to the Fourth International. Under the stress of events, strange transformations of individuals have taken place, but it is exceedingly unlikely, to say the least, that Tito and other leaders of the YCP can again become Bolshevik-Leninists. Tremendous obstacles stand in the way of that eventuality: past traditions and training in Stalinism, and the fact that they themselves rest on a Stalinist bureaucratic regime in Yugoslavia. The letters failed to point out the nature of these obstacles, fail to underline that for the leadership of the YCP to become communists, it is necessary for them not only to break with Stalinism, but to repudiate *their own past*, their present Stalinist methods, and to openly recognise that they themselves bear a responsibility for the building of the machine now being used to crush them. Here it is not a question of communists facing 'a terrible dilemma', with an 'enormous responsibility' weighing on them, to whom we offer modest advice: it is a question of Stalinist bureaucrats *becoming* communists.

The aim of such Open Letters can only be limited. By placing on record a correct and principled analysis of the role of the Stalinist bureaucracy and that of the YCP leadership, by offering aid to the YCP in a clearly defined communist struggle, the Open Letters could be useful propaganda, aiding the approach to the rank and file seeking for a communist lead.

As they stand, however, by their silence on fundamental aspects of the regime in Yugoslavia and YCP policy, the letters strike an opportunist note.

It is not our experience that the most courageous and most independent communist militants 'are today stimulated by your (the YCP) action'. The Cominform crisis has rather sown confusion in the CP ranks and disorientated its supporters. That is to our advantage. But although it is a relatively easy task to expose the Cominform manoeuvres, there is sufficient truth in some of their accusations against Tito - particularly with regard to the internal regime, the National Front - to cause among Stalinist rank-and-filers an uneasiness with regard to the leaders of the YCP. That gives us an opportunity to win these militants not to the cause of Tito, but to Trotskyism.

Tito is attempting, and will attempt, to follow an independent course between Moscow and Washington, *without altering the bureaucratic machine or turning to proletarian internationalism*. A bureaucratic regime, resting as it does mainly on the peasantry, can have no independent perspective be-

tween the Soviet Union and American imperialism. The *main* emphasis of the letters should have been to show the necessity for a radical break with the present policy of the YCP, the introduction of soviet democracy within the party and the country, coupled with a policy of proletarian internationalism. The position must be posed to Yugoslav militants, not as a choice between three alternatives - the Russian bureaucracy, American imperialism, proletarian internationalism - but, first and foremost, as a choice between proletarian democracy within the regime and party, proletarian internationalism; and the present bureaucratic set-up which must inevitably succumb before the Russian bureaucracy or American imperialism.

The IS letters analyse the dispute solely on the plane of the 'interference' of the CPSU leaders, as if it were here solely a question of that leadership seeking to impose its will without consideration for the 'traditions, the experience and the feelings' of militants. But the dispute is not simply one of a struggle of a Communist Party for independence from the decrees of Moscow. It is a struggle of a *section of the bureaucratic apparatus* for such independence. The stand of Tito represents, it is true, on the one hand the pressure of the masses against the exactions of the Russian bureaucracy, against the 'organic unity' demanded by Moscow, discontent at the standards of the Russian specialists, pressure of the peasantry against too rapid collectivisation. But on the other hand, there is the desire of the Yugoslav leaders to maintain an independent bureaucratic position and further aspirations of their own.

It is not sufficient to lay the crimes of international Stalinism at the door of the leadership of the CPSU. Not only in respect to Yugoslavia, but also in respect to other countries, the Open Letter gives the entirely false impression that it is the Russian leadership which is *solely* responsible. To pose the relations in the international Stalinist movement in the manner of the IS letter - that the leadership of the CPSU 'forced Thorez to disarm the French partisans', 'forced the Spanish communists to declare . . . that the seizure of the factories . . . was a treason', 'completely prohibits the leaderships of the Communist Parties in the capitalist countries from speaking of revolution' - can create illusions that the leaders of the national Stalinist parties could be good revolutionists, if only Moscow would let them. It is true that the degeneration of the CPs flowed basically from the degeneration in the Soviet Union. But the sickness of the Stalinist movement is also accountable by the utter corruption of the national leaderships who are bound up in the bureaucratic machine. These leaders actively participate in the preparation of the crimes. So also for Tito, it was not a matter of having been 'forced' to carry out the wishes of Moscow in the past.

It is impermissible to slur over the nature of the YCP, its identity on fundamental points with other Stalinist parties. Such a slurring over can only disorientate Stalinist workers. Yet every attempt is made by the IS to *narrow the gulf* that separates the policy of the YCP from Bolshevik-Leninism. What other conclusions can we draw from statements such as the following:

' . . . the Cominform accuse you of misunderstanding "proletarian internationalism" and of following a nationalist policy. This is said by that same Russian leadership whose chauvinist propaganda during the war . . . is largely responsible for the absence of a revolution in Germany, whereas (our emphasis) in Yugoslavia the partisan movement was able to draw to its ranks thousands of proletarian soldiers from the armies of occupation. This is said by Togliatti who has not hesitated to throw himself alongside the real fascists of the MSI, in their chauvinistic campaign for the return to the capitalist fatherland of its former colonies. This is said by Thorez, whose nationalist hysteria on the question of reparations for imperialist France delights the souls of the bourgeois heirs of Poincaré.'

It is true that the Yugoslav Stalinists settled, with some success, the national problem inside their own country. It was their programme with regard to this question that enabled them to win over members of the quisling armies. But the comrades must



Tito (centre) and the leadership of the Yugoslav partisans, Summer 1944

be aware that the propaganda of the YCP towards Germany was of the same chauvinistic character as that of the Russian and other Stalinist parties. The IS letter deals with the necessity for proletarian internationalism *in the abstract*, without taking up the concrete question of YCP policy today and in the past. It was surely necessary to point out concretely what this proletarian internationalism means, by dealing with the past and present policy of the YCP, which has been no whit less chauvinistic than that of other Stalinist parties. The IS mentions Togliatti's chauvinism, and Thorez's nationalist hysteria, and leaves the impression of a *favourable comparison* between the policy of other Stalinist parties and that of the YCP. We cannot be silent on the YCP's chauvinistic campaign around Trieste, their attitude towards reparations, their *uncritical support* for the Russian bureaucracy's demand for reparations from the German people. It is necessary to take up these questions so that it shall be clear precisely what the gulf is between a nationalist and an internationalist policy, and precisely what it is that Yugoslav militants must struggle against.

But there is another aspect of the IS letters which cannot pass by without the IEC adopting an attitude and expressing an opinion.

The World Congress majority adopted a position that the buffer countries, including Yugoslavia, were *capitalist* countries. It rejected the resolution of the RCP that these economies were being brought into line with that of the Soviet Union and could not be characterised as capitalist. The amendment of the British Party to the section 'USSR and Stalinism' was defeated. But it is evident from these letters that the IS has been forced by events to proceed from the standpoint of the British Party, *that the productive and political relations in Yugoslavia are basically identical with those of the Soviet Union*.

If indeed there exists in Yugoslavia a capitalist state, then the IS letters can only be characterised as outright opportunist. For the IS does not pose the tasks in Yugoslavia which would follow if bourgeois relations existed there as the dominant form. The letters are based on conclusions which can only flow from the premise that the basic overturn of capitalism and landlordism has taken place.

The second Open Letter gives several conditions necessary if Yugoslavia is to go forward with true revolutionary and communist progress. Yet nowhere does it call for the destruction of bourgeois relations in the economy and the overturn in the bourgeois system and regime. The tasks laid down in the letter are:

'That the Committees of the Front . . . must be organs of Soviet democracy';
'To revise the present Constitution' (based on

that of the Soviet Union);
'To admit in principle the right of the workers to organise other working class parties, on condition that these latter place themselves in the framework of Soviet legality';
'To procure the broadest participation of the masses in the sphere of planning';
'To establish the full sovereignty of the factory committees . . . to set up a real workers' control of production'.

And so on. Nowhere did the IS deem it necessary to call on the Yugoslav workers to overthrow capitalism. Had the IS been able to base itself on the World Congress document, that would have been their foremost, principled, demand. The comrades will remember that the Congress document gives as its first reason why 'the capitalist nature of the buffer zone is apparent', that 'Nowhere has the bourgeoisie as such been destroyed or expropriated'. Why no mention of this in the Open Letters? Of all the seven conditions given in the Congress document as making 'apparent' the capitalist nature of Yugoslavia and other buffer countries, the IS letter mentions *only one* - the nationalisation of the land. But even here, the question of the failure to nationalise the land is raised, not from the point of view of proving the capitalist nature of Yugoslavia. It is raised to point out, correctly, that the nationalisation of the land is necessary in order to combat the concentration of income and of land in the hands of the kulaks. The question is raised in the general context of the letter, as an aid to the socialist development of agriculture in a country where capitalism and landlordism have been overthrown, but the danger of a *new* exploitation is still present in the countryside.

Not only are the main tasks posed in the Open Letter identical to those to be carried out to cleanse a state similar in productive and political relations in the Soviet Union; but, we must add, that the impression given is that these relations are a great deal healthier than in Russia.

The articles appearing in our international press revealed one thing: *the thesis adopted by the World Congress failed to provide a clear guide to the problems that arose from the Cominform-Yugoslav split and the tasks of the revolutionaries in connection with the regime and its economic base*.

We appeal to the IEC to reject the orientation in the Open Letter and to correct and repair the damage which has been done, by re-opening the discussion on the buffer zones and bringing our position into correspondence with the real economic and political developments of these countries.

With fraternal greetings,
Yours,
J. Haston
On behalf of the Central Committee, RCP