



Before Tito. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge (1936–1940)

Stefan Gužvica, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2020, 224pp., €19.80 p/b.

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of the locals, practices in the borderland, and entanglements of local communities with the wider world' (p. 13) are two factors he describes as particularly challenging. As a human geographer, I wish Urbansky had drawn more on oral history methodology towards the end of his border biography, to give the reader a better feel for his observational skills and his ability to engender confidence in his interlocutors in the field. These minor flaws aside, Urbansky's book is persuasive proof of the indispensable value added by in-depth historical research to the interdisciplinary field of border studies. It will surely find an enthusiastic audience among, and increase the dialogue between, a broad range of border scholars: historians, social anthropologists, political scientists and human geographers alike.

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MOST ACADEMIC WORKS THAT DEAL WITH THE HISTORY OF YUGOSLAV communism focus almost exclusively on WWII and the post-WWII era. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) during the interwar period is thus poorly served, to the detriment of our understanding of what came later. Stefan Gužvica's monograph seeks to fill this gap. Originating from his master's thesis, *Before Tito. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Great Purge (1936–1940)* deals succinctly with the history of the CPY from 1936 to 1940.

The book has six parts: a prologue that explains the methodological approach and deals with the prehistory of the factional struggles in the CPY from 1919 to 1936; four chronological chapters following the history of the party from 1936 to 1940; and the conclusion. In this ambitious work, the author re-evaluates some critical questions. Was Tito's rise to party leadership inevitable? What were the main issues in internal party conflicts? What were the role and the aims of the Comintern and the USSR, and how did the Great Purge (1936–1938) affect the CPY?

Gužvica seeks to place his study in the broader context of international and Soviet communism. While the most comprehensive works on the topic focus on national issues concerning the history of the CPY, Gužvica offers a different, more 'European' perspective, although he does not deny the importance of the national aspect of factional struggles. He presents the history of the party during the 1930s through two major and interconnected phenomena: the Stalinist purges of that time and the internal struggles among factions in the party.

The author convincingly shows that, aside from local characteristics, the factions essentially reflected divisions that were present in communist parties throughout Europe. In this sense, he analyses the external influences on factional struggles within the CPY and the impact of the purges on it. This perspective proves quite beneficial. Connecting these struggles with the Comintern's resolutions, Gužvica demonstrates that the latter was the 'battlefield' of the conflicts. It is this struggle between sectarian revolutionaries, who supported the Comintern's 'third period', and moderate popular front advocates that marked the internal discussion and not their attitude towards national issues.

Hence, Gužvica presents a broad reassessment of the ‘camps’ within the CPY during the Great Purge. Describing in detail the composition and main political positions of the groups that fought for the leadership and their struggles in 1938–1939, Gužvica reveals the reasons for Tito’s victory. This narrative reveals previously unknown stories such as the rise and fall of Ivan Gržetić as Moscow’s most trusted person in Yugoslavia, or that of Kamilo Horvatin, whose agenda was similar to Tito’s. The author goes beyond the focus on Josip Broz Tito that dominates the existing literature and presents him as only one of many actors, whose success was neither guaranteed nor inevitable. Challenging this ‘teleology of Tito’ allows the author to focus on aspects not thoroughly examined in the current literature while reassessing Tito’s candidacy and the reasons for his final success. In this way, the book offers a comprehensive and unique analysis of the fall of Milan Gorkić, the general secretary of the CPY before Tito.

Gužvica’s research leads to another significant result. With his panoramic approach and his research in the Soviet archives, he provides a re-evaluation of the Comintern’s and Moscow’s policy towards the CPY and the factional struggles within it. He explains the intervention of foreign communists and their relations with each group within the CPY, broadening our perspective on intraparty conflict.

Against the existing historiographical perception, Gužvica argues that Moscow did not want to control the Yugoslav party completely but expected the CPY to prove itself capable of independent action—following Moscow’s directives, of course. Through his analysis, and without drawing straight lines from the 1948 Tito–Stalin split (as much of the literature does with regard to pre-1948 events that involve both men), Gužvica shows that these expectations were a crucial factor in Tito’s rise to power, since he seemed to fulfil them more than any other contenders. Heading the ‘temporary leadership’, Tito promoted a coherent programme and the need for intensive political work in Yugoslavia. He distanced himself from Gorkić’s circle, while the re-examination of the ‘people’s front’ policy within Comintern, after the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, was in line with Tito’s more sceptical approach to cooperation with non-communists. Eventually, at the end of 1939, he succeeded in gaining Moscow’s support and became the formal leader of the CPY.

Overall, Stefan Gužvica’s book is significant for the history of European interwar communism and the history of the Yugoslav labour movement in the *longue durée*. He employs a different perspective, diverging from the national issues and Tito as the main actor and thus provides a reassessment that both counters the existing understanding and fills a historiographical gap. Despite the complexity of the history and thanks to his thorough examination of the Soviet archives, he has produced a fascinating and highly readable narrative.

Gužvica’s analysis may not sufficiently consider the political situation in Yugoslavia in the interwar period, relying rather on Soviet archives as a source of information. However, as he adopts the Comintern’s point of view, it becomes clear that these are secondary issues that do not determine Moscow’s decisions; wider international debate over the popular fronts was far more important than the Croatian question, for example. Yet, the lack of attention to the Yugoslav context reveals the potential for further research, as this work challenges our certainties about Yugoslav communism and calls for a general reassessment of its history. Gužvica’s accomplishment in doing so is to be commended.

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