

# 16 Colonies in Interwar Europe?

## The Balkan Communist Parties as Precursors of Anticolonialism

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### Introduction

Writing a critique of the Comintern Program passed at its Sixth Congress in 1928, the exiled communist oppositionist Vladimir Smirnov (2011) concluded:

the matter under these conditions lies not with the class struggle of the proletariat of the advanced countries, but in the defence of backward countries from exploitation by the advanced ... Not a socialist revolution in the advanced countries, but war of liberation of the “global countryside” against the “world city” (see draft program) with the USSR at the head of this “global village” – this is what Bukharin dangles for.

Those who did not share the outlook of the Left Opposition looked at the matter more favourably. Today, the Comintern’s activity in the “Third Period” from 1928 until 1935 is considered one of the fundamental formative moments in the development of Third-Worldism and anticolonial struggles (Prashad 2008: 16–30). Sometimes, the Third-Worldists of the Cold War era would directly resurrect Comintern slogans and policies (Rodriguez-Morazzani 1998: 41). In general, communist activity in anticolonial struggles has been well-covered by historiography in the past several decades (Pennybacker 2009; Boittin 2010; Petersson 2013; Louro *et al.* 2020). However, one space occasionally identified by the Comintern as colonial has escaped the attention of historians. That is because we do not usually think of looking for colonies on the European continent. Nevertheless, there was a period when the Balkans were seen by the Third International as a region of colonies, or at least “semi-colonies”. Moreover, the communist analysis of the Balkans in the 1920s and 1930s shows a certain overlap with the school of thought in contemporary academia known as “decoloniality”. This chapter will show how the Balkans came to be defined as (semi-)colonial spaces in Marxist analyses, and what insights decolonial thought can gain from such interpretations. Moreover, it will argue against an anti-Marxist conception of decoloniality, which sees Marx’s thought as yet another expression of Eurocentrism. Instead, I will show how it was precisely Marxism that gave the European periphery the tools to articulate its subaltern position.

Maria Todorova has recently argued that the development of Marxism in agrarian countries of the Balkans was analogous to its advent in the countries of the so-called Third World. She noted the similarity of analyses articulated by the Bulgarian socialists she researched and later postcolonial theory, but noted that “[t]his is not to minimise the fundamental contribution of postcolonial theory as a critique of Marxist teleological developmentalism” (Todorova 2020: 76). This chapter will further elaborate on her perspective by looking at the theoretical debates within the communist movement in the 1920s. I will begin by briefly explaining decoloniality, and examining the perception of the Balkans as a colonized space in the era of the Second International. From there, I will present the political strategy of the Balkan communists, developed in the early 1920s around the tripartite alliance of workers, peasants, and oppressed nations. By the late 1920s, this strategy would evolve into debates on whether or not the Balkan Peninsula was a colonial space. This culminated in debates on “stagism”, when the Balkan communists argued whether their incoming revolution would be socialist or bourgeois-democratic.

The reverberations of these interwar policies and theories were substantial: Socialist Yugoslavia would go on to play a significant role in supporting many anticolonial movements, as well as establishing the Non-Aligned Movement alongside the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa; Ceausescu’s Romania would claim that it was colonized until 1945 to secure its international status as a “developing country;” and the Balkan communists of the 1920s would build solidarity with the far-away anticolonial movements in China and Africa. Moreover, the analysis of “colonialism” would play an important role in the nation-building projects of the Balkans, frequently undertaken by the communists and their affiliates.

### **Marxism and decoloniality in the periphery**

When Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, the Serbian Social Democratic Party submitted a memorandum to the Socialist International denouncing this as an act of colonialism (Pijade 1950b: 85). These were not mere nationalist antics of the kind that the Second International would become famous for in 1914: the Serbian socialists also actively fought against their own country’s militarism, and openly stated that the solution for Bosnia was not its conquest by the Serbian monarchy, but revolution (Britovšek 1965: 96). The socialists’ proclaimed ultimate goal was the creation of a Balkan federation, which would simultaneously neutralize both local nationalisms and external ambitions of the great powers. In 1910, the opening of the Resolution of the First Balkan Social Democratic Conference described the situation in the peninsula as one of the divisions artificially created by the European powers, “which hinder the modern economic and cultural development of the peoples, and are most sharply opposed to their interests and their needs” (Plavšić and Živković 2003: 164–165). The authors of the resolution, signed by Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian, and Slovenian social democrats, as well as representatives for Istanbul and Romania, had clearly been familiar with the theories of imperialism which were

gaining traction at the time. The reason for Great Power involvement, according to the resolution, was the diminishing amount of uncolonized land to be carved up by empires, because of which,

in order to invest the surplus from the exploitation of the proletariat at home, [European capitalism] covetously attacked agrarian countries that were industrially backward and politically submissive. By way of interest payments on loans and superprofits from capital invested in enterprises enjoying unlimited concessions, trade agreements and a web of customs tariffs, European capitalism drew the Balkans and the countries and peoples of south-eastern Europe into the scope of its capitalist exploitation, exhausting their economic forces and preventing their development and progress, and imperilling their very survival. (Plavšić and Živković 2003: 165)

The resolution of the Balkan Marxists, however, did not have a label for the situation that their countries had found themselves in. However, there were some exceptions. Dimitrije Tucović, the Serbian party theoretician who also penned the 1908 Memorandum, called it a “colonial economic relationship”, and Leon Trotsky, who was well-acquainted with the region, considered it a colonized space (Plavšić and Živković 2003: 170; Trockij 2011: 21–22). Yet, a more profound study of the position of the Balkan states in the global economic system did not take place before First World War. Perhaps the closest equivalent was a book by the Romanian theoretician Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, called “Neo-Serfdom”, published in 1910. Gherea’s book dealt with how the arrival of capitalism had served to reinforce or restore feudal social structures in the Romanian countryside, and is considered to have been a forerunner of the theory of uneven and combined development (Boatcă 2005: 3–14). However, Gherea did not entertain the possibility that his country might have been a colony.

The paradigm shift came with First World War and the advent of communism. In April 1917, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin published his *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which would become the authoritative theoretical piece on the topic for Balkan social democrats, most of whom would end up forming the parties of the Communist International. In it, Lenin first introduced the term “semi-colony”. It was used to describe underdeveloped countries which were nominally independent but became practically subjected to the financial capital of the imperialist powers. They were not colonized by the imperialist country, but were effectively gradually losing their sovereignty, and their prospects for independent development were, in Lenin’s view, rather grim:

“semicolonial” states ... provide an example of the transitional forms which are to be found in all spheres of nature and society. Finance capital is such a great, such a decisive, you might say, force in all economic and in all international relations, that it is capable of subjecting, and actually does subject to itself even states enjoying the fullest political independence; we shall shortly see examples of this. Of course, finance capital finds most “convenient,” and

derives the greatest profit from, a form of subjection which involves the loss of the political independence of the subjected countries and peoples. In this respect, the semicolonial countries provide a typical example of the “middle stage”. It is natural that the struggle for these semi-dependent countries should have become particularly bitter in the epoch of finance capital, when the rest of the world has already been divided up.

(Lenin 1999: 86)

In 1916, Lenin used the examples of Persia, China, and Turkey as semi-colonies, claiming that the former “is already almost completely a colony”, while the second and third were on the way to becoming them (Lenin 1999: 85). Moreover, he distinguished other forms of dependence of nominally independent states, which, like semi-colonies, are neither imperialist nor colonized. There, he mentions Argentina and Portugal as examples of the dominance of the British capital. He points out that Argentina’s dependence is more commercial, whereas Portugal’s is geopolitical, but he does not come up with explicit new categorizations of such states (Lenin 1999: 89).

The theoretical framework articulated by Lenin would subsequently have a major impact on the Balkan communists, who would come to define their states as semi-colonies: entities that had gained independence in the nineteenth century, but whose sovereignty had since been effectively overruled by the dominance of financial capital. Rather than being a passive admission of an idea from Russia, the concept of semi-colonies was merely Lenin’s naming of a phenomenon that had already been observed by Balkan Marxists. The fact that their analyses converged certainly helped the spread of Bolshevism in the Balkans, but the articulation of communism in the region was not a one-way process of imposition: as we have seen, certain Balkan thinkers and political parties already described their countries’ positions as colonial even before Lenin had written his seminal work.

More significantly for this study, the analysis made by Balkan Marxists in the early twentieth century shows complementarity with the contemporary idea of decoloniality. This is not to say that their approach was decolonial in the epistemological sense. The Balkan Marxists did not, like Walter Mignolo, consider Marxism a “secular imperial ideology” (Mignolo 2011: 63). Instead, it is complementary to decoloniality as an emancipatory project, one which focuses not only on the superstructure but also on the base: not on the episteme, but on the material conditions of dependence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ndlovu 2022: 20). Here, decoloniality’s insights about the persisting structures of oppression are crucial: they show that legal, internationally recognized political independence does not equal sovereignty – a conclusion that the Balkan Marxists had reached through the immediate experience of societies they inhabited in the early twentieth century. Likewise, Lenin’s conception of the semi-colony should be read as a crucial theoretical contribution to understanding persistent structures of dependence under conditions of capitalism and imperialism. However, Lenin’s analysis was quite rudimentary, and he did not elaborate on semi-colonies much in his subsequent works. The elaboration, which

was the work of other Bolshevik theoreticians, as well as Balkan communists, would be the subject of the following sections.

Granted, the peripheral Balkan countries in the nineteenth century were liberated from feudalism, rather than colonialism; but at the end of this “liberation”, they found structural dependence on foreign capital which seemed to them very much akin to colonialism. The Serbian Social Democratic Party (SSDP) is perhaps the best example of this awareness, because of its ambiguity towards historical processes conventionally understood by Marxism as antifeudal. In 1912, when Serbia, in an alliance with other Balkan countries, invaded and occupied the remaining European territories of the Ottoman Empire, the Marxist response should have been to welcome this as a liberatory act. After all, the Balkan states were ending the reign of a feudal empire on the peninsula. However, the SSDP showed a profound ambiguity towards the “liberation” of Macedonia and Kosovo by the Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Montenegrin troops. Even while seeing the Ottoman Empire as feudal, they could not but notice that the alliance was the product of Russian imperial ambitions, and they eventually decided to take a stance against the war (Dimitrijević 1982: 204–208). In their view, antifeudalism had already become inextricably linked to imperialist interests in the case of the Balkans.

In his speeches to the National Assembly criticizing the war, the leading theoretician of the SSDP, Dragiša Lapčević, drew explicit distinctions between “the Balkans” and “Europe”, and identified the intentions of the latter towards the former as colonial (Dimitrijević 1982: 205–206). Rather than being an expression of supposedly Eurocentric tendencies, Marxism had provided the Balkan socialists with a language that enabled them to articulate and criticize continued dependence on Europe, and to propose an alternative emancipatory project, that of Balkan federalism. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Morgan Ndlovu have described this kind of thinking as “a well-thought-out move by colonised and peripheralized people to engage their time in their own terms, and even European thought in their own terms, yet drawing on diverse traditions of knowledge including Marxism” (2022: 20). In fact, by opposing the First Balkan War, the Serbian socialists showed the ability to read Marx in a non-dogmatic way, and to question the simplistic linear idea of progress characteristic of the Enlightenment and many of Marx’s followers, although criticized by Marx himself (Postone 1993: 36). From the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the conquest of Kosovo and Macedonia, they questioned not only the jingoism of their own ruling class but also the imperialist and colonial apologia of Marxists in the countries of the capitalist centre.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the concept of “coloniality” as “the historical, structural, and heterogeneous modern totality governing all aspects and dimensions of human social existence” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ndlovu 2022: 21) shows remarkable similarities with how Balkan Marxists perceived their societies in the early twentieth century. Compare the definition of coloniality with Gherea’s claim that

Backward countries enter into the orbit of advanced capitalist countries, they move in the orbit of these countries, and their whole life, development, and

social evolution are determined by the life and movement of advanced countries and the historical epoch in which they exist – by the era of bourgeois capitalism. (Kitch 1977: 74)

For Gherea, as an Orthodox Marxist, the solution was to embrace this condition, and to work towards bringing about capitalist modernity which ought to resolve the problems of underdevelopment. However, the break of the October Revolution ushered in the potential of an alternative modernity – one that is Marxist, but not Eurocentric, and for which decolonization and breaking with semi-colonial dependence were among the fundamental political goals.

### **The triple alliance**

How was this alternative modernity to be brought about? The answer of the Balkan Marxists was not to presume a straight teleological path leading to capitalism and then to communism, as was the case with the Orthodox interpretations such as the one championed by Dobrogeanu-Gherea. In fact, the Orthodox Marxist analysis, articulated by the theoreticians of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), turned out to be rather inapplicable in the periphery. The SPD and the leading “Western” theoreticians of Marxism, in general, did not have to deal with majority-peasant countries. While Marx and Engels did have certain remarks on the topic, they saw the proletariat as the class destined to be the driving force of progress towards communism. There was no elaborate answer about what to do in countries that did not have a proletarian majority, aside from waiting for them to reach advanced capitalism, as Gherea had also argued.

In some parties, the Orthodoxy on this topic was so strong that they actively refused cooperation with the peasantry. When the SSDP entered the Serbian Parliament in the 1912 election, they felt their success was tainted by the fact that most of their votes came from the peasants, rather than the workers in urban centres (Bogdanović 1989: 43). Others, however, embraced the peasantry as a significant and potentially progressive political force in the periphery. A pioneer in this matter was a little-known Romanian Marxist called Eugen Rozvan (Jenő Rozvány). In 1907, he called upon the social democrats to collaborate with the peasantry, and to work with the national minority parties as the representatives of the peasants’ class interests. His essay was so controversial that the party leadership in Budapest prefaced it with a disclaimer distancing themselves from the author’s views, and going as far as to call them class collaboration, despite considering Rozvan’s work a valuable theoretical input (Rozvány 1906–07: 513–514).

Dimităr Blagoev, the theoretical leader of the Bulgarian socialists, went even further. In his analysis of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, he called it a “feudal-bourgeois revolution” (Plavšić and Živković 2003: 110). This unusual phrasing is not a sign of ignorance of Marxist theory. Rather, it is a display of the profound awareness of the contradictions of underdevelopment in the capitalist periphery. One could even call it an example of what Mignolo has termed “epistemic disobedience” – a subversive de-linking from the meanings in the established European

canon (Mignolo 2011: 45). Such a subversion, of course, is not merely verbal – Blagoev used it to describe very specific material conditions. In underdeveloped Turkey, the democratic revolution began not as a revolt of the urban bourgeoisie, which was too weak, numerically and financially, for such a feat. Rather, it was a revolt of the dissatisfied elements in the army and the state bureaucracy. As people with a vested interest in the Ottoman state, they understood the only way to preserve the Empire was to radically transform its ossified system. However, their “feudal-bourgeois revolution” was also self-limiting, as it was a bourgeois revolution conducted by the feudal class, which still sought to preserve the unsalvageable *ancien regime*.

In response, Blagoev reached a conclusion similar to Rozvan’s, but far more radical. The bourgeois revolution in Turkey would have to be completed by the urban proletariat in an alliance with the peasantry. Like Rozvan/Rozvány, Blagoev concluded that the phenomenon of peasant nationalism actually has roots in class dissatisfaction, but is manifested as a national struggle due to the ethnicized nature of nascent capitalism in the periphery (Plavšić and Živković 2003: 87–88, 112). This set the stage for a triple alliance of the proletariat, peasantry, and the movements deemed “national-revolutionary”. After 1917, this alliance would become the basis of communist policy in the periphery. Lenin reached virtually the same conclusion on the alliance with the peasantry: that it was necessary because the contemporary political alignment of capitalism would result in “two levels of revolution: socialist ones against imperialist regimes and, democratic ones against both imperialist and traditional regimes” (Lih 2015: 406). This was identical to Trotsky’s idea of “the permanent revolution”, elaborated before he joined the Bolsheviks, which also stated that the bourgeois-democratic revolution in the periphery would be conducted by the proletariat, thus growing into a socialist revolution (Löwy 2010). To achieve this in countries where the proletariat was in the minority, the triple alliance was absolutely necessary.

The Bolshevik who elaborated the application of this theory to the Balkans, however, was neither Lenin nor Trotsky, but Lev Kamenev, their close associate. In his little-known 1916 study, “Imperialism and the Balkan Republic”, he made it clear that the Balkan peninsula does not have to face an inevitable development of capitalist relations identical to those in Western Europe. If anything, he demonstrated that such a thing is difficult, if not outright impossible. From that premise, he did something far more ground-breaking. Kamenev emphasized the complementarity (but not equivalence) of the situation in Central Europe and the Balkans to the non-European colonies, and claimed that they have a new set of “objective tasks” now that they have been “drawn into the whirlpool of [world historical] events, without fully ridding themselves of the precapitalist stages of economic development” (Kamenev 1919: 6). Kamenev’s pamphlet is an argument in favour of a Marxist slogan of national self-determination, not only applicable outside of Europe, but within Europe as well, namely in its “backward”, Central, Eastern, and Southeastern parts. There, too, the national liberation movements, as peasant movements, could play a progressive role in the case of a proletarian revolution.

In the era of the Communist International, convinced of the fact of capitalism's inevitable and imminent decline, the Balkan Marxists elaborated on this analysis. For many of them, Bolshevism provided a coherent and successful theory that neatly responded to the shortcomings they observed in Orthodox Marxism until 1914. Moreover, the Russian Revolution opened the door to an alternative modernity. As early as 1919, the newly established Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) concluded that the World War had cemented the colonial position of "small and backward peoples", and that their revolutionary movements, "beginning as national, inevitably become social revolutions". They also clearly adopted the distinction between colonies and semi-colonies, showing an explicit acceptance of Lenin's theory of imperialism (*Kommunističeskij internacional* 1919/4: 507). The Marxism of the Balkans was going to be one that responds to the particular problems of the periphery, instead of a mechanical application of theories written for industrialized countries of Western Europe, as was characteristic of pre-1914 social democracy.

### **(Semi-)Colonies in the Balkans**

The application of Marxism in Southeastern Europe, however, would remain purely theoretical for at least two more decades. The defeat of the revolutions in Germany, Italy, and Hungary had left Soviet Russia isolated and made chances for a successful revolutionary upheaval in the Balkans quite low. The first response to the revolutionary retreat would be the United Front policy, articulated in 1921 and 1922 around political cooperation with the reformist left (McDermott and Agnew 1997: 27–40). In the Balkans, this policy meant the formation of the triple alliance, based on the platform of the right to self-determination until secession. Its main vehicle was the Balkan Communist Federation (BCF), an umbrella organization of parties established in Sofia in 1920. The BCF sought the establishment of a Balkan Soviet Federative Socialist Republic but also coordinated work with the national-revolutionary and agrarian organizations in the Balkans. Vasil Kolarov, one of the leaders of the BKP and the BCF, became the general secretary of the Comintern in 1922 (Marinov and Vezenkov 2013: 507). This is perhaps the finest illustration of how seriously the International took the project of establishing the alliance of workers, peasants, and national revolutionaries in the European periphery.

However, after a right-wing coup in Bulgaria in 1923 shattered all hopes of a successful communist revolt in the Balkans,<sup>3</sup> the International embarked on an even bigger retreat, announcing a temporary stabilization of capitalism. Nevertheless, stabilization was also seen as a preparation for a new revolutionary offensive. Marxist politicians in the Balkans used the calm to develop new theories of underdevelopment and dependency. The clear-cut division into imperialist, semi-colonial, and colonial states was crystallized precisely during the period between 1925 and 1928, when the communists grew increasingly concerned about the growing influence of great powers on new minor states formed in Europe, seen primarily as a part of establishing a *Cordon sanitaire* against the USSR.



The most systematic theorization came in the work of Nikolai Bukharin, who was already the party's foremost theoretician of imperialism while Lenin was alive. Preparing for the Sixth Comintern Congress, Bukharin created a categorization of capitalist states in the world based on their levels of development and their position in the global system. The general tactics of the International were to be decided in accordance with his theoretical model. Bukharin distinguished three types of capitalist states: the highly developed, the medium developed, and the colonies and semi-colonies (as a single category, implying they were functionally indistinguishable). The highly developed states were characterized by increasingly centralized production, a minor role of small-scale agriculture, and the completion of the "bourgeois-democratic" stage of the revolution. These countries were frequently imperialist (per Leninist definition) and owned colonies. Bukharin used Britain, the United States, and Germany as examples. The medium-developed countries, in his view, were those characterized by "semi-feudal remnants" in agriculture, present but nevertheless comparatively minor industrial development, and an "incomplete bourgeois-democratic transformation". He used Poland and pre-1917 Russia to illustrate his point. Finally, Bukharin saw colonies and semi-colonies as countries with rudimentary industries, marked by the dominance of "feudal-medieval relations" in both economics and "the political superstructure". Moreover, in these states, the most important industrial, banking, commercial, and transport facilities were in the hands of the capitalist states or private individuals from their ruling class. He used the examples of China and India, considering the former a semi-colony and the latter a colony (Komintern 1929a: 180–181).

These different types of states required an application of different communist tactics: the highly developed countries were, in Bukharin's view, on the verge of a proletarian revolution, rendering any collaboration with either reformist socialists or the bourgeois parties meaningless, and even harmful. In the medium-developed states, the situation was supposed to closely follow the Russian scenario: a democratic revolution, resulting in the inability of the nation's weak bourgeoisie to complete it, only to be followed by a worker-peasant revolution and the establishment of soviets. The colonial and semi-colonial states, however, had different axes of struggle: the agrarian revolution against the feudal structures, and a national revolution against the colonial or imperial metropolis. Notably, Bukharin dedicated the most attention precisely to this aspect of the struggle, although he emphasized the leading role of external proletarian dictatorships when it came to transforming the colonies towards socialism (Komintern 1929a: 181–182). Without such a transformation, their revolution would remain "only" bourgeois-democratic.

Bukharin's draft program did not mention the Balkan states, although it appeared that they were supposed to be placed in the second category of medium-developed countries. After all, Poland was geographically, economically, and politically closest to the Balkans, and they seemed to fit the same description. However, the situation was not so straightforward. Due to foreign involvement in the Balkans, the communists began raising serious doubts about their countries as "medium developed", with some leaning towards the idea of semi-colonialism or even colonialism. This view became increasingly common from 1926, when Italians

took control of Albanian ports, air travel, oil extraction, and the national bank, resulting in a virtually complete submission of the Albanian state to Italy. The word used at the time, however, was not “colony” but “protectorate” (Ter Minassian 2003: 67). At roughly the same time, the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia explicitly noted that the country was becoming “colonised” by financial capital of developed states (Vujošević and Gligorijević 1986: 138).

In December of that same year, the Seventh Extended Plenum of the ECCI saw the development of two different tendencies, which would debate each other in the Comintern and its journals over the following years. One of them considered the Balkan states to be medium developed, the other semi-colonial. The first group was close to Bukharin and its main theoretical exponent would be the Polish communist Tomasz Dąbal, the head of the Peasant International (Krestintern) (Komintern 1927: 193–194). The second was represented by Vasil Kolarov, who argued that “stabilisation in the Balkans is tantamount to colonisation” (Komintern 1927: 234). Both groups agreed that capitalist stabilization was temporary, but only the latter argued that it was fundamentally changing the character of Balkan states. In Kolarov’s words,

the penetration of foreign capital is carried out by using colonial methods. It puts its hand onto natural resources which make up the basis of the national economy of those countries, receives free concessions, establishes banks that deal exclusively in speculation and buying up the means of production. The end result is that these states are gradually turned into colonies of foreign capital.

(Komintern 1927: 231)

Dąbal’s position, however, also had traction in the Balkans, mostly among the members of the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ). They thought that the foreign “colonisation” of Balkan countries was exaggerated, and that in any case a distinction should be made between those states aligned with the Versailles order, such as Yugoslavia, and the “losers” of the new order like Bulgaria. Moreover, they claimed that Kolarov’s theory was implying that the proletariat of the Balkans was unable to successfully conduct a revolution without foreign assistance (Komintern 1927: 308–309). However, it appears that even this more cautious group considered at least Albania to have already become a colony of Italy (P. L., 1927, 731).<sup>4</sup> Despite strong support from Bulgarian communists, views of the group closer to Bukharin and Dąbal remained dominant, reaching their apogee in the summer of 1928, at the Sixth Comintern Congress.

In the Comintern program, the Balkan states were ultimately described as “countries at the mid-level of capitalist development” rather than as “colonial and semi-colonial countries” (Komintern 1929c: 37). This was, in effect, a confirmation of Bukharin’s intellectual and political dominance of the International, which was to last only for another several months. Kolarov, ever sensitive to which way the wind was blowing in Moscow, sided with Bukharin, and was actually the one who insisted on adding the Balkan states into the definition, as far better representatives of “mid-level capitalist development” than Poland. He did, however, leave room

for a broader interpretation, as he emphasized (quite correctly) that places such as Bosnia, Macedonia, and the Albanian-majority parts of Yugoslavia had not yet had their “agrarian revolution” (Komintern 1929a: 106–107). The Greek delegates also insisted on the “mid-level” classification for their country, and the consensus among Balkan communists was seemingly reached for the time being (Komintern 1929a: 155).

Despite this consensus, a questioning of Comintern policy in the Balkans nevertheless took place at the Congress, albeit from a rather unexpected place. A Colombian delegate, Jorge E. Cardenas, expressed his disbelief that a country like Argentina would be designated as a “semi-colony”, when it exercises far greater freedom in both internal and foreign affairs than the supposedly “medium developed” countries of the Balkans (Komintern 1929b: 436–437). However, the most comprehensive critique of the Comintern program came from a Czechoslovak communist called Ivan Mondok. A Rusyn by nationality who hailed from Carpathian Ruthenia, Mondok was a typical revolutionary from the imperial borderlands for whom social and national liberation blended together. He was radicalized as a Russian POW on the Eastern Front, and went on to partake in both the Russian and Hungarian revolutions. After the failure of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he permanently settled in Czechoslovakia, and led the party’s Ruthenian section. Mondok would be the first to suggest at the highest decision-making body of the Comintern that there may in fact be colonies within Europe.

Mondok pointed out the necessity of engaging with the fact that most European countries designated as “medium developed” have major problems with ethnic oppression. The states created in the wake of the downfall of empires were all very heterogeneous, and the dominant ethnic groups had rather slim absolute majorities, or were, as in the case of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, pluralities (Komintern 1929b: 364). It is important to note that such an analysis of the two states also stemmed from the fact that he considered them to be Czech- and Serb-dominated, respectively, and did not consider the Slovaks, Croats, and Slovenes equal to the dominant ethnicities. In Mondok’s view, these states were more aptly described as “semi-colonies and conqueror-states” which, while semi-colonial themselves, held territories that could be considered colonies in Europe (Komintern 1929b: 363). These states were simultaneously dependent on imperialist powers, and conquerors of territories dominated by “foreign” ethnicities.

Mondok provided a very detailed list of such colonized areas: Croatia, Bessarabia, Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, Bukovina, Dobruja, Transylvania, Carpathian Ukraine, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Vojvodina. He also outlined an entire list of measures considered “colonial:” moving factories from highly developed newly conquered areas to the “metropolis;” assimilationist cultural policies; and a greater tax burden on the peasantry inhabiting the regions conquered in 1918 (Komintern 1929b: 364–366). It appears that Mondok’s intervention went unaddressed at the time, but his theory would gain traction over the following years.

The Eighth Balkan Communist Conference, which immediately followed the Sixth Congress, seems to have taken the cue from some of the critics of Bukharin’s model. In the final resolution, contrary to the Comintern decisions, the Balkan

states were designated as “semi-colonies of imperialism”, dominated by the financial capital of foreign countries, preparing them for a war against the USSR (BKF 1928: 2). The national-revolutionary organizations of the Balkans were called to stand in solidarity with anticolonial movements, implying the complementarity of their struggles. A particularly important aspect of the resolution was the need to fight against attempts by various imperialist states to sway the nationalist movements towards the right (BKF 1928: 7). The primary danger, in the eyes of the Comintern, came from Mussolini’s Italy, which hoped to establish a network of nationalist antistate organizations in the Balkans. Instead, the communists were to try and turn the rank and file of these movements to the left.

The overall analysis was based on the belief that the incoming crisis would result in a socialist revolution achieving the tasks of the unfinished, bourgeois-democratic revolution (BKF 1928: 8). This was essentially a repetition of the old idea, articulated by Marxist pioneers such as Blagoev and Lenin, on the inability of the bourgeoisie in underdeveloped countries to complete its revolution, but now supplemented by the markedly communist belief that this task would be performed by the proletariat, not ushering in capitalism, but moving straight to socialism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it had one further twist: it abandoned the “stagist” view according to which a period of bourgeois-democratic revolution would precede the proletarian revolution, instead opting for the view that there would be an immediate socialist revolution, merely finishing the unfinished tasks of the democratic revolution in the process.<sup>6</sup>

Following its Eighth Conference, the Balkan Communist Federation effectively contradicted the head of the Comintern, although Kolarov had agreed with him earlier at the Congress. The BCF essentially openly sided with Bukharin’s left critics. Moreover, this view placed even more weight on the joint action of the proletariat with the peasantry and the “national-revolutionary” movements. Even though the leading role of the proletariat was always emphasized, in practice, the communist focus on working with the nationalists was effectively becoming the central point of their activity. The Balkan resolution reflected the Comintern’s further leftward turn after the Sixth Congress, as it was more radical than what the Congress itself had proposed. This was directly related to the political marginalization of Bukharin, who was removed from the ECCI in July 1929, at its Tenth Extended Plenum (McDermott and Agnew 1997: 85). The leadership of the Balkan communist parties generally sided with the new line of the pro-Stalin faction, embracing the view that the Balkan states were simultaneously semi-colonies and also internally conducting colonial policies over their minorities. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia was the vanguard of this process, as their analysis, passed at the Fourth Congress in Dresden in November 1928, followed the Balkan resolution and foreshadowed the further left turn in the International.

The resolution on the political situation concluded that indebtedness to finance capital had made Yugoslavia into a semi-colonial country, whereas Albania was already fully a colony of Italy. This dominance made not only the poor but also the middle peasantry to increasingly turn against the regime (Pijade 1950a: 149–154). The political strategy was based on the expectation of an incoming “imperialist

war” against the USSR, in which Yugoslavia would take part as the aggressor and an agent of British and French imperialism in the Balkans. The communists and national-revolutionary organizations would then take up arms, turning an imperialist war into a civil war, and by extension, a worker-peasant revolution (Pijade 1950a: 189–191).

Of course, all of this rested on an overly confident expectation that the intensifying class struggle would result in the population abandoning the hitherto dominant opposition parties and spontaneously turning to the communists: it was supposed to be a replaying of the summer of 1917, but throughout Eastern Europe. Although the crisis of capitalism prophesied by the likes of Bukharin did in fact come with the Wall Street Crash in October 1929, the communists ended up overestimating the scale of the crisis and its revolutionary potential.

However, there was another problem for the communists, and this one concerned the consistency of Marxist analysis. If Albania was a colony, for instance, the matter was pretty straightforward: the Albanian national movement, fighting colonial oppression, was progressive, and so was its demand for self-determination of areas of Yugoslavia with an Albanian majority (Pijade 1950a: 154). This was a rather orthodox Leninist assertion. As Lenin put it during First World War, “national wars waged by colonies and semi-colonies in the imperialist era are not only possible but *inevitable* ... progressive and revolutionary” (Lih 2015: 408). But there was also a contradiction: if, for instance, Romania is a semi-colony, wouldn’t its national wars also be “progressive and revolutionary”? This contradiction was pointed out at the Tenth Extended Plenum by the Hungarian economist Eugen Varga, whose views were now under fire as “Bukharinist” (Komintern 1929d: 212). No one explained how semi-colonies, whose struggles were progressive in Leninist analysis, were now becoming parts of a global reactionary imperialist chain aimed against the USSR.

The “colonial” analysis, while raising important issues about the conquests of 1918, created similar problems. Aside from the question of how a country could simultaneously be semi-colonial and imperialist, there were further problems that went unaddressed. For instance, one could certainly make an argument for colonial-style economic and ethnic oppression in a place such as Kosovo or Bessarabia, but what about regions such as Transylvania or Croatia, which were visibly wealthier and at times even had a stronger bourgeoisie than the capital cities? In what ways were they oppressed? Ultimately, was it possible to even make an argument in favour of working with the national bourgeoisie of one’s own (semi-)colonial country for the purposes of “completing” the bourgeois revolution? Andronikos Khaitas, the secretary of the Communist Party of Greece, would propose exactly this, arguing that the communists should align with the progressive sections of the national bourgeoisie in Greece to liberate it from its semi-colonial position (Alexander and Loulis 1981: 378).

Precisely because of such potentially heretical views, the debate moved from the “colonial” question, in which the pro-Stalin viewpoint was far weaker and inconsistent, to the question of revolutionary stages. Interestingly, the adherence to the “two-stage theory” is generally associated with Stalin in debates against Trotsky

on the Chinese question in 1926. At the time, Stalin argued for a two-stage revolution in China, including even a coalition government with non-communist forces (Löwy 2010: 75–77). What is significant for the debates against “Bukharinists” from 1929 on is precisely the rejection of stagism by the pro-Stalin faction. The new “single-stage” theory embraced by Stalin was merely Trotsky’s permanent revolution by another name. In other words, although this is largely forgotten now, Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution was actually a hallmark of Stalinist policy for several years, starting in 1929. Likely, this was a manoeuvre for winning over many of the adherents of various “left factions” throughout the 1920s, who could be potentially lost to Trotskyism if the Comintern failed to accommodate them. At the same time, Stalin’s courting of the left prevented the unification of the oppositionists from the left and the right. Political manoeuvres aside, the debate resulted in important theoretical insights on dependency and colonialism, developed directly by Balkan Marxists themselves.

### **Stagism and colonialism**

The rejection of stagism was necessarily bound up with the analysis of the Balkans as a semi-colonial space. The most significant Balkan figure in the “Bukharinist” camp initiated the stagism debate precisely because he wanted to argue that these countries could not be considered colonies or semi-colonies. His name was Solomon Timov, and he was a member of the Communist Party of Romania (PCR) and an employee of Varga’s Institute of World Economy and World Politics. Concerned with what he saw as a harmful policy taking shape in the International, he wrote a couple of articles in his Institute’s journal, called *World Economy and World Politics*, on the issue of revolution in Romania, and the implications of the electoral victory of the National Peasant Party.

In November 1928, the National Peasant Party (also known as the Tsaranists) decisively won the election and ousted the hitherto dominant National Liberal Party from office. Timov wrote two articles analyzing their success and positing what the future holds for Romania. In the first one, he argued that, despite its ostensibly agrarian program, the Tsaranists are going to continue the industrialization of Romania. He directly challenged the thesis put forward by Vasil Kolarov, which ruled out the potential of any further industrialization in the Balkans under capitalism (Timov 1929a: 22–23). A state like Romania, in his view, had no choice but to industrialize. The only difference was which path they would choose: the path of economic autarchy or the path of importing capital. The liberals chose the former, coupled with agrarian reform, and it failed. The path of the Tsaranists was the path of actually liberalizing the Romanian market and making the state more dependent on French and British capital, as the domestic bourgeoisie had proven unable to develop the country rapidly enough (Timov 1929a: 24–30).

In his second article, Timov emphasized that his analysis shows that Romania is not a colony, and argued instead that it is an imperialist country, and that it would be incorrect to call it completely subject to Britain and France. However, he did acknowledge that the position of lands acquired by Romania in 1918 is effectively

that of colonized countries, justifying their self-determination (Timov 1929b: 45–46). Timov did not elaborate further on this particular issue, but rather posed the question about the implications of the new Tsaranist government and its policy of industrialization.

The peasant movement that the Tsaranists led was, in Timov's view, dominated by rich peasants and the petty bourgeoisie, who welcomed the entrance of foreign capital onto the domestic market, unlike the Bucharest-based financial bourgeoisie that supported the liberals. The mass mobilization of poorer peasants behind them was a consequence of the autarchic policies of the National Liberal Party, which hurt the poor peasantry. This mobilization, starting in 1928, was in Timov's view, a new stage of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, which would lead to the breakup of feudal relations in the countryside and the development of capitalist relations of production there. However, the modernization program of the agrarians is doomed to fail, and would lead to ever greater exploitation in the villages, further destabilizing the new regime, and creating a revolutionary situation (Timov 1929b: 49–55).

Timov expressed his belief in the scenario of the immediate socialist revolution in Romania, and outlined the tasks of the PCR in the coming period (Timov 1929b: 55–58). The implication, however, was that Romania could have an immediate socialist revolution because the bourgeois-democratic stage was already ongoing. Therefore, Timov's analysis was stagism in all but name. Moreover, they could also be seen as a return to Gherea's old stagism of the Second International, equally frowned upon because of its belief in the necessity of a complete capitalist transformation of Romania as a precondition for socialist revolution. Insightful readers did not miss this crypto-Bukharinism, and Timov's views were soon condemned by the Comintern. The International's theoretical journal ruled that Timov is a "right opportunist". Their rather eclectic interpretation of Romania was that it is a state which is simultaneously "imperialist", treating the areas conquered in 1918 as "semi-colonies", and also a "vassal" of Britain and France (Michajlov 1929: 38). The more controversial definition of Romania as a colony was omitted.

Nevertheless, interpretations of these countries as semi-colonies persisted, as the general tactical proposals of those who adhered to the colonial interpretation were closer to the Comintern line. Kosta Novaković, one of the foremost Yugoslav party theoreticians, based his analysis of the country's semi-colonial status on the preferential position enjoyed by foreign capital and on the dependence of Yugoslavia on the French armaments industry (Dragačevac 1932: 86–87, 93–94). The Bulgarian party theoretician, Khristo Kabakchiev, considered that the process of turning Balkan countries into semi-colonies was ushered in by the era of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, only to be completed by the destructions of war in the decade between 1912 and 1922. This decade cemented the dependency of Balkan states on the financial and banking capital of the imperialist countries (Kabakčiev 1928: 104–106). Kolarov, on the other hand, made sure to clarify that the semi-colonial position of these countries rules out a coalition with the domestic bourgeoisie, due to its entanglement with foreign capital, which makes it unable to play a revolutionary role (Kolarov 1927: 6). Thus, Kolarov opened the path for an explanation of why Marxists should not necessarily support the bourgeoisie of

“their own” dependent countries. He was essentially speaking of the comprador bourgeoisie, although he did not use this exact term, which had appeared in communist jargon at the time (Zedong 1926; Trotsky 1930).

Despite the “ruling” from the highest theoretical organ of the international communist movement in 1929, the stagist debate continued throughout most of the Third Period. Even though harsh accusations were coming from both sides and opposing views within the International were met with increasing intolerance, the discussion went on until 1931. Over these few years, all Balkan parties would have “left” factions, endorsing a view of their states as semi-colonies, and the “right” factions, seeing them as countries at the medium level of capitalist development. They had different revolutionary predictions arising out of these premises, but they agreed on one thing: their countries’ embeddedness in the system of global imperialism, and their ultimate dependence on it.

The major distinction was that those labelled “rightist” or Bukharinist thought that a semi-colony cannot simultaneously be imperialist, even though its foreign policy may be dictated by imperialist powers. In practice, this did open the door for potential collaboration with the country’s ruling class for the sake of “modernisation”, that is, the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. From 1931, with another political turn back to the right, the Comintern itself would come to embrace this view and project it onto the parties it had controlled (Miloslavljević 1981: 125). Such theoretical flexibility would open up the path for class collaboration during the Popular Front era, starting from 1934.

The debate on revolutionary stages was thus resolved with the Comintern effectively returning to the “stagist” view, which is usually associated with Stalinism to this day. However, as this section has shown, there was an important yet overlooked period between 1929 and 1931, when Stalin’s Comintern accepted the “Trotskyist” view. Although it was subsequently abandoned, the Third Period interpretation of semi-colonies in Europe would have its echoes in subsequent policies of Balkan communist parties, whether it be Tito’s support for Third World liberation movements, or Ceaușescu’s fight for the designation of Romania as a “developing country” by the World Bank (Fischer 1983: 50).

## **Conclusion**

The collaboration of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe after 1945 with the Third World was not only a matter of proletarian internationalism but also of a perceived shared structural position in the global capitalist system. This perception can be traced back to the Marxist analyses of the first half of the twentieth century, reaching their apogee in the so-called “Third Period” of the Comintern between 1928 and 1934. The theoretical input of Lenin, who developed the term “semi-colony” to denote independent states whose sovereignty was effectively abolished by imperialism, was crucial for this development. Lenin’s approach evokes similarities with the contemporary theories of decoloniality, explaining the persistence of colonial structures after independence. Moreover, although named by Lenin, it was



not a mere imposition, but rather a signification of a phenomenon that had already been observed by the Balkan Marxists themselves.

The analysis of the Balkan space as “semi-colonial” is of particular importance here. The Balkan Marxists concluded that the “national liberation” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, rather than bringing independence, resulted in submission to great powers, as it coincided with the imperialist epoch. The only way out, therefore, was a communist revolution and the creation of a federal soviet republic encompassing the entirety of the peninsula. Acutely aware of the region’s underdevelopment, they understood that the minuscule proletariat alone could not achieve this feat, building instead alliances with peasants and groups they considered “national-revolutionary”.

The definition of Balkan states as semi-colonies was particularly developed between 1926 and 1932, first in the period that the communists saw as a “temporary stabilisation” of capitalism, and then, after 1928, in the era which was supposed to bring about a new revolutionary wave. The analysis which considered Balkan countries semi-colonial was based on the predominance of financial capital from Western Europe in these states after 1918, which intensified after their destruction in the Balkan Wars and First World War. However, such an analysis was questioned by those who considered that these countries were in fact at the “medium level of capitalist development”, a designation used to describe societies such as prerevolutionary Russia.

The very development of these political debates is in itself significant for a decolonial perspective on the Balkans: while “Western” and Russian communist thinkers have found their place in philosophies and intellectual histories, the regions in between, namely the Balkans and East-Central Europe, have remained ignored, except perhaps György Lukács, who is in any case considered to be part of the canon of “Western Marxism”. This chapter has shown that the region has had a great variety of relevant thinkers who offered significant theoretical insights on issues of dependency and uneven development. It only scratches the surface of their works, but I hope it shows that they deserve further scrutiny, not just for the sake of history but also for a contemporary understanding of the Balkan region.

Granted, many of these figures (Rozvan/Rozvány, Novaković, Mondok, Dąbal, Khaitas) have been consigned to oblivion by the communists themselves, namely because they were murdered in Stalin’s purges and subjected to *damnatio memoriae*. However, those who were not, such as Kolarov, Timov, and Kabakchiev, have also not received the academic attention they deserve. This can be understood as part of an academic bias against Stalinism (which, for all its crimes, cannot be perceived as pure anti-intellectualism) but also of a structural bias against thinkers from what was collectively known, between 1945 and 1991, as Eastern Europe. This perspective betrays the fact that “Eurocentrism” in itself has a very specific “Europe” in mind, one which more often than not excludes at least half of that continent.

The case study of Balkan Marxists bares the limitations of the decolonial approaches which tend to reduce Marxism to a Eurocentric imperial ideology,

showing it as a vehicle of liberation for those within the European continent who have very much felt the structural pressures emanating from the countries of the capitalist centre. Moreover, it shows that the framework of decoloniality should be applied to rehabilitate and reinstate local theoretical traditions that have been forgotten due to a variety of historical factors.

Finally, the research on the theoretical production of interwar Balkan communism also has significant implications, both historiographical and contemporary. Historiographically, it helps us understand the overarching strategies of the communist movement in a way that does not reduce it to the framework of an individual party operating within a nation-state. Perhaps even more importantly, it fights against the tendency, which has been common in ethnocentric examinations of these parties, to reduce their activity to the national question, observed and evaluated in a vacuum and from imagined ahistorical perspectives of a timeless “national interest”.

In terms of contemporary implications, the lessons of Balkan communism in the 1920s and 1930s are perhaps even more important. Reinstating the concept of a “semi-colony” to denote the dependence of Balkan countries on the current imperialist system would be of great use for the Marxist understanding of the region. The same is true for the methodological approach to making such claims, found in the interwar communist theoretical periodicals. It would enable us to move away from colloquial and moralistic definitions of “colonialism” which tend to dominate the public space when it comes to questions of dependency, and replace them with a proper scientific materialist analysis, which has already been present, albeit largely forgotten, in the domestic Marxist traditions.

The contemporary implications also face us with a historical cautionary tale. In the Third Period, both the analyses of semi-colonialism and of mid-level capitalist development had opened the space for class collaboration. The latter saw the bourgeois revolution as incomplete, and the former saw a state that has lost its independence due to structural factors of the imperialist system. Both interpretations open the path for potential cooperation with the “progressive” sections of the national bourgeoisie, in a bid to achieve either modernization or relative sovereignty. This was a consequence of the disregard for the necessity of the leading role of the proletariat in the class struggle – a problem which was emphasized by critics of Bukharin’s analysis, such as Smirnov, but also by those who built upon Bukharin’s analysis, such as Kolarov.

Today, moreover, a mechanical application of these slogans and analyses would be ahistorical, precisely because the debate on “revolutionary stages” has ended – at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the entire planet is capitalist. Feudal remnants are gone, and so is the primacy of the peasantry as a class. An overwhelming majority of the global population is proletarian, meaning they live exclusively off selling their labour power on the market in exchange for money. Therefore, the material basis for the orthodox Leninist interpretations of the national question in the periphery as a class issue no longer exists. It is therefore unsurprising that those who try to mechanically apply such a framework today end up either in reformism or nationalism (usually a combination of the two). When a

new era of imperial scrambling for semi-colonies of the world is just beginning, in the absence of any workers' states, a truly decolonial Marxist perspective ought to avoid falling back into either parochial nationalism or preferences for one state imperialism over another.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter was prepared within the framework of the HSE University Basic Research Program.
- 2 Of particular importance here is the debate of Dimitrije Tucović with the Austro-Marxists, who denied that Austria-Hungary's policy towards Bosnia is colonial, and with Eduard Bernstein, who argued that colonialism is actually a positive phenomenon. See the texts in Plavšić and Živković (2003, 123–149).
- 3 The extremely important topic of the failed Bulgarian revolution is beyond the scope of this chapter, so I would merely like to point out a couple of authoritative books on the topic, namely Stankova (2010), Bell (1986), and Rothschild (1959).
- 4 The author, "P. L.", is a Yugoslav, and it is most likely Petr Lazitch, which was the Russian pseudonym of Lazar Stefanović, a member of the KPJ Politburo at the time.
- 5 Trotsky and then Lenin were the first to come to the conclusion that the bourgeois revolution led by the proletariat would grow into a socialist one. Blagoev (and most other Marxists) did not develop this view until after the October Revolution in Russia.
- 6 Stagism was significant in discussions of the International because of the strategy and tactics concerning the Chinese Revolution and the relationship to the Kuomintang. Rejection of stagism (at least until 1928) was associated with Leon Trotsky (Johnson, Walker, and Gray 2014: 415–416). However, as this chapter shows, between 1929 and 1931, the Comintern would accept Trotsky's analysis without crediting him.

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