YUGOSLAVIA: “DOWN WITH THE RED BOURGEOISIE!”

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The Yugoslavian “1968” began on the night of June 2-3 in that year with a clash between the students and the police in Studentski Grad, a student district in the capital of Belgrade. Hundreds of young people wanted to go to a concert for which there were not enough tickets. When they began to riot at the door, the police intervened with guns, and the situation escalated into a street battle. The brutality the police had exhibited prompted several thousand students to march to the city center some six kilometers away. During this march, the conflict intensified and the police opened fire. Many people were injured including 130 students and 20 policemen. Dozens of students were arrested. Politicians were brought in to talk to students, but in one intervention, the police even beat up some of these mediators! Meanwhile, the student battalion chanted “Down with red bourgeoisie,” “We’re sons of working people,” “We need jobs,” “Students—workers.”

The next morning, Belgrade seemed deserted and quiet, as if a state of emergency had been declared. Street demonstrations were banned. Newspapers reported that there had been “incidents caused by a group of hooligans,” whereupon students and professors had “occupied” the university and declared an all-out strike. On June 4, the Student Assembly had decided to rename the Belgrade University “the Red University of Karl Marx.” Slogan-bearing banners were hung on the façades of the buildings. They read “Down with corruption” and “Our problems are also workers’ problems.” A list of demands soon followed: freedom of the press and assembly, the dismantling of the bureaucracy, and punishment for those responsible for the police brutality. The events in Belgrade immediately prompted similar actions in Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Sarajevo.

The biggest protest movement since World War II rocked the political system. It took a week of striking for Tito, the head of state and party leader, to publicly praise the young people’s commitment in the media and agree to meet the students halfway so that they could be persuaded to allow teaching to resume.

Interpretations of the Yugoslavian 1968

The year 1968 in the former Yugoslavian political universe, and particularly in Serbia today, has been transformed into a myth.
Its interpretations vary widely according to one’s political leanings, and the purposes to which one wants to put this historical moment.

Right-wingers today say that the occupation of the University of Belgrade was a Maoist means of applying pressure to restore Stalinism and thus to “rectify” Titoism. Moreover, they perceive the students as tools used by dogmatic elements within the ruling party.

Technocrats of “new capitalism” in Serbia claim that the rebellion halted economic reforms that were supposed to have led to the development of a market economy and political pluralism in Yugoslavia.

The apparatchiks of Milošević’s regime and the organizers of the “Anti-bureaucratic Revolution” say that Belgrade students lived in worse conditions than their peers in Zagreb and Ljubljana, and that Belgrade was brought “under control” after the protests.

Nationalists add that the students euphorically welcomed speeches by Serb writers and criticized Yugoslavia as an artificial creation that sought to wipe out national cultures.

Formerly disciplined members of the Communist League and some former party officials have their own viewpoints. Now enriched with new experiences, they say that the student rebellion could have been a basis for dialogue, but that its methods were disturbing and anarchic. They say that the students and professors assessed the situation in society unrealistically and that they unwittingly contributed to the escalation of conflict. Moreover, they provoked reactions from outside and brought the country under international pressure (which is to say from the Soviet Union).
The better part of the activists of the anti-war and anti-nationalist movements in the 1990s knew from experience that the 1968 protests imparted important lessons in the struggle against despotism and for freedom from the risk of political persecution, from arrests and trials. The events of that time made it quite clear that the state constituted a repressive mechanism and its ideology an officially propagated lie. The regime had exposed its weaknesses and its resistance to democratization with its response to the demonstrations, but the revolt had had a very simple motive: the younger generation sought to make more room for itself in a country increasingly under pressure from a geriatric elite. They struggled against the privileges of the party elite and against the poverty of workers and students. In a nutshell, the students were the first to demand public dialogue on the contradictions of the process of “building up socialism.”

The claims and interpretations of these various groups hit upon truths in particular ways.

**Persecution of people who thought differently**

The ruling elite, which had been narcissistically self-confident and untouchable up to June 1968, was overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety, resentment, and fear. This swiftly led to a new authoritarianism and the persecution of all who thought differently, which, in the following months and years, triggered a breakdown of the system and a deterioration of the values and already acquired freedoms that had given Titoism a reputation as a one-party system more open and more humane than the Soviet model.

However, one more thing must be added. On June 9, 1968, immediately after the protests, the party adopted a set of guidelines portraying the country as a “self-governing democracy,” developing unprecedented “human freedoms” and an “abundance of democratic forms” greater than any “democratic system in the history of mankind had ever been able to achieve.” This façade was shattered by the tectonic shifts of August 1968—the occupation of Czechoslovakia “in the name of proletarian internationalism” by the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries.

The Yugoslav authorities and Tito reacted fiercely, rejecting the occupation and showing their solidarity with Czechoslovakian reformist leader Alexander Dubček and his government. Some of the harshest condemnations were leveled against the Soviet
Brezhnev regime and its hegemonism. These events left deep rifts in the structure of domestic and international socialism that would never be healed.

**The Non-Aligned Movement**

But what had led to this “torrid summer” of 1968? After being expelled from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) in 1948, an organization of communist parties dominated by the Soviets, Yugoslavia acquired a reputation as the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement. This was a federation of, primarily, dozens of newly liberated former colonies in Africa and Asia. Some of them were monarchies, some were republics or even picturesque and mystical military dictatorships whose leaders wore colorful togas and strange headwear and were accompanied by a retinue of tribal brethren.

Such leaders toured the Brioni Islands, where Tito’s residence lay, in an ongoing pageant to “collect experiences” at factories and construction sites. Only when the state delegation began sailing from Alexandria or Calcutta to Indonesia and beyond—trips that would last three to four months—did this flood of visitors let up.

Due to the unique position and respect the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) enjoyed at the time, successful foreign trade was able to develop. Engineers, doctors, pilots, and even filmmakers traveled to far-off countries to provide “technical assistance.” Meanwhile, thousands of “non-aligned students” studied at Yugoslavian universities.

**Extreme unemployment after economic reform**

The communication with the world at large and the brisk foreign trade required that the domestic economy abandon the bureaucratic Soviet-style planned economy. “Economic reforms” were launched that bred tension in the bureaucratic apparatus and the emerging working class, including downsizing, lay-offs, and performance-based remuneration.

In 1967, I was making two documentary films: *Pioniri maleni* [Little Pioneers], about juvenile delinquents, and *Nezaposleni ljudi* [The Unemployed], about the wave of unemployment. An idealist and party member at the time, I was surprised by the magnitude of social differences and the misery that my crew and I encountered. We filmed people living in dire poverty who blamed the government for
its failure to adhere to socialist ideals. These two documentaries are still among the most poignantly critical projects we ever made.

At the time, the Yugoslavian employment office started promising jobs in West Germany, claiming that an official, bilateral agreement on this matter was imminent. It would be hard to imagine today the shock this news brought to working-class families at that time. Having only been dragged to the city from their villages as part of the industrialization drive a few years before, such families now had to deal with the difficult choice of whether to register to work and reside in a foreign country—and not just in any foreign country, but in the very country that had so often been at war with their own, as children learned day after day in school. Of the thousands of students living in dormitories—particularly in the biggest one, Studentski Grad, in Belgrade, where the 1968 protests had been ignited—many came from working-class families.

**Doubts about the “Western Model”**

In those years, doubts about the “Western Model” were prevalent. The United States was waging its war in Vietnam; the bombings and massacres sparked off mass demonstrations all around the world. The official Yugoslav line condemned the Vietnam War, but young people in Belgrade, Zagreb, and other cities still wanted to get personally involved. They wanted to show their solidarity and protest against “the opportunistic policy” of their country. The police (still called milicija, or militia, at that time) brutally suppressed several protests staged before the US Embassy in Belgrade in 1967 and in the spring of 1968.

This was the first time that the police stormed university buildings. Long discussions and party commissions dealing with those events brought professors and students closer together, as “the forums” at Belgrade and Serbian levels punished “undisciplined communists.” In this heated atmosphere, in April 1968, news arrived from Poland that students and professors of Warsaw University had been punished for anti-bureaucratic demonstrations and for collaborating with the church. In May, as Belgrade students, we all listened and watched the developments in Berlin, Bonn, and Paris closely, and we engaged in street protests and petitions in support of the French National Student Union and extra-parliamentary opposition in the Federal Republic of Germany. We were just waiting for a “spark” to ignite the fire. The spark came in the night of June 2–3, precipitating the events of the Yugoslavian “1968” described above.
Strategies against criticism of the regime

In all of Yugoslavia, the most dangerous political volcano had erupted—that is, criticism of the regime inspired by Marxist ideas. It threatened to spread the solidarity of workers and intellectuals in confronting “the red bourgeoisie.” The experienced Tito regime used every means at its disposal to crush its opponents and, in the process, sowed the seeds of the country’s disintegration: it emphasized regional differences and sparked disputes between regional party leaders, who accused one another of displaying less caution toward “the enemy.”

Communication between the students and workers was prohibited, and guards were posted at factory entrances. The state police scrutinized student publications and activists closely. The party cleansed its leadership of “anarchists” and filed the first criminal charges. University professors (particularly from the departments of philosophy and sociology), many of whom worked on the journal *Praxis*, experienced systematic persecution. Even Tito addressed this topic in a highly personal manner in a speech, somewhat inaccurately but harshly concluding, “Our enemies are some professors, ‘Praxis’ philosophers [*Praksisovci*] and other dogmatists ... We must stop such people, and we will stop them when we gain insight into their points of view and when we combat their negative activities with conviction. Finally, administrative measures must be taken at times. We must protect our socialist, self-governing system.”

A call to restore socialism to its roots

The sudden occupation of Czechoslovakia in August added fuel to the fire in Yugoslavia. The party and the authorities feared that Yugoslavia might be the next country to experience such a “brotherly embrace.” They churned out political condemnations of the Soviet decision and began preparing to defend themselves against a potential military attack. Disciplinary political measures were further increased. In the years that followed, the country would experience a period of re-Stalinization; many of the “anarcho-liberals, and pro-Western ultra-leftists” who had been denounced in 1968 would be labeled “anti-national elements” in the 1990s.

The revolts in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in 1968, in essence, constituted a call to restore socialism to its roots. This call was not really heard. As a result, both Titoist and Soviet socialism became and remain a taboo topic, even for today’s leaders. Only in recent years has the youngest generation of intellectuals in all the former
Yugoslav republics begun to analyze and reassess some aspects of this past.

* The author writes from the point of view of present-day Serbia. The title of the contribution, however, reflects the political alignment of the country in 1968.

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