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On the AVNOJ Event in 1943 and 2023 (2023, 3,000 words)

1. On the AVNOJ Event

AVNOJ is the acronym for the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, the supreme representative institution of the National Liberation Struggle (Tito's name for the partisan insurrectionary movement and its supporters). It was founded in Bihać in November 1942 (see *the Resolution on its Establishment*), but the military-political circumstances at the time did not allow for actual work, which only began in Jajce in November 1943 and consists of three documents (see *Declaration*). The first is *the Declaration of the Second Session of the AVNOJ*, which develops a coherent discourse about "the past two and a half years of our National Liberation War" as a black-and-white polarization between the armed resistance of the masses against the fascist occupiers and their collaborators. These include not only the fully subordinate forces of the Croatian Ustaše, Serbian Nedić followers, and the like, but also the officially independent forces of the Chetniks, recognized by the exiled government in London. Their leader, Draža Mihailović, had in 1941 talks with Tito about a joint anti-occupier front but soon abandoned this, allegedly because of German reprisals against Serbian civilians, but in reality due to a fear that the partisans would threaten Great-Serbian monarchical rule by means of federalist ideas and the development of people's committees from below.

At the 2nd session of the AVNOJ there were present, in addition to Tito's Supreme Headquarters, 142 delegates from the field and 183 "delegate substitutes"; there were no representatives from Sandžak and Macedonia (the partisan movement developed later in Macedonia) and those from Serbia were elected from partisan units outside it. *The Declaration of the 2nd Session* proclaims the "right to self-determination" of the Yugoslav peoples and envisages their "brotherly democratic federal community, a new Yugoslavia ... built on the equality of our peoples," in opposition to both Great Serbian hegemony and "reactionary separatisms." Aimed in large part at the Big Three Allies (USA, Britain, USSR), this *Declaration* devotes much space to an argument for the recognition of the AVNOJ and the partisan movement as opposed to the monarchist government in London and the Chetniks. Finally, it claims for itself the "sovereignty of the people and State of Yugoslavia," and establishes a government, diplomatically named the National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia.

Two more AVNOJ documents followed the *Declaration*: the *Decisions of the 2nd Session* and the *Decisions of AVNOJ Presidency*, which are executive and operational. The most important of these are the appointment of Tito as marshal, the appointment of a new de facto government, and the annexation of the "Italian" territories from Zadar to the Soča.

A very brief comment: there is no doubt that the tone of the AVNOJ documents -- as in all bloody armed conflicts, and especially in this one, which was both a civil war and a revolutionary upheaval -- somewhat hyperbolic when it portrays the peoples of Yugoslavia as a homogeneous anti-occupying mass, and at the same time triumphalist when it predicts a complete victory. The first is the tradition of all revolutions against authority, such as the English, French, and American, and especially the Soviet Russian revolution of 1917, while the second is, so to speak, a bet that paid off. The principle of the self-determination of peoples, common to Wilson and Lenin, can hardly be disputed by today's so-called successor States of Yugoslavia, which invoked it to constitute themselves. Of course, Rosa Luxemburg's polemic against Lenin warned of the dangers of opposing nationalism to class self-determination, which has been historically confirmed.

In the founding *Resolution* of 1942, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was mentioned by name, because as is claimed, unlike all other political parties, "it alone... remained faithful to the people and its freedom, and immediately called on all peoples, ... all honest and patriotic people into a common armed struggle against the occupiers." Here too there is some exaggeration, since the KPJ's call to rise up was issued 2 months after the occupation, namely after the Axis attack on the USSR. Admittedly, Tito's perspective on an armed uprising was already clear in 1939 (see "Proclamations of the KPJ"), and some excuse could be the condition of a small illegal party under brutal military repression. But in essence, I consider the cited thesis to be correct: sitting at home like Maček's Peasant Party in Croatia, or even specializing in killing partisans and their civilian sympathizers like the Chetniks, is not, in my opinion, active anti-fascism. Later, very biased nationalist sources and unreliable data accuse the NOB of mass killings in the final months of the war, after coming to actual power from Belgrade to Trieste. As far as I know, there were local reprisals as well as occasional, hasty executions of collaborators, where a smaller number could have been punished more leniently, but there was no terrorism or torture like that routinely practiced by the Ustaše and Chetniks; also the expulsion of the entire German minority, although very popular throughout Europe, was a complete nationalist mistake. In particular, regarding the mass execution of Ustaše and pro-Ustaše forces at Bleiburg in May 1945 -- which would have been a war crime, the kind the Ustaše routinely practiced -- I am not aware of any expert research based on archival documentation, and so I cannot judge it (see Pavlaković,

and the opposing opinions of Hrženjak ed. and Jurčević). However, overall, the official and semi-official discourse on these issues after the breakup of the SFRJ does not seem convincing to me (see Kuljić and Radanović for Serbia), and the European discourse on communism is false (see Suvin, "The Trap of Totalitarianism" in "Orwell").

Tito's "left" deviations, as in the above paragraph from 1942, were criticized via radio communication by Stalin's Comintern because it wanted to avoid a conflict with the Western Allies. Therefore, in 1943, any mention of the KPJ was reduced to a passing phrase about the KPJ as a force that led the way. Today it's easy to say that these were tactics and that Tito and his circle were careful to seize power for the KPJ within the liberation struggle. But the long years of imprisonment and frequent police killings had left a deep mark, especially during the tense period of the 1946-48 saber rattling; I personally testify that until June 1948, the Communist Party never publicly emerged anywhere. This perhaps points to some initial tensions within the KPJ between State power and a libertarianism (which later crystallized as self-management within the country and international non-alignment with the military blocs), about which I have written at length in the book *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities: An X-ray of Socialist Yugoslavia*. A clear sign of a shift toward the State was given by Ranković's confidential letter to CPY cadres at the end of 1944, which reined in arguably the most democratic institution of the NOB, the Anti-Fascist Women's Front.

However, what remains for me is the fact that the 1943 AVNOJ session was what Alain Badiou calls a true event, which I have reformulated as a lasting and profound novelty (Suvin "Looking"). That the federal Yugoslavia, under historically unfavorable conditions of friction among the oligarchies of its federal units and the disappearance of a global counterweight to private capitalism, lasted less than half a century is also a fact.

2. Some Key Assessments of the SFRY

2.0. I am not presenting a comprehensive judgment on the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia here. I am speaking only about some lessons that can be drawn from its furthest horizons, opened by **AVNOJ**. I see three focal points for such a judgment: Party versus civil society as a whole or the working people; federation versus confederation; independence and foreign policy. The first point could also be

called class tensions, the second national relations, and the third international relations.

Without a doubt, the idea of the brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav peoples is a generous and unsurpassed horizon; the later development toward six or more nominally communist oligarchies was (as the philosopher Rastko Močnik aptly noted) a short-sighted compromise. And an independent foreign policy oriented toward international peace is very clearly desirable amid the new wars of the great powers at the expense of other peoples and their own. Here, I can contribute only to the first, which I consider the key nexus.

2.1. Democracy

Everyone today pays lip service to democracy, "the rule of the people." But the crucial question is how democracy is institutionalized, that is, how the authorities in practice allow it to function. It can be a representative democracy, an associative democracy, or a direct democracy.

Representative democracy is the type capitalism has most often favored (though whenever it fears it might lose power, it opts for absolutism or outright dictatorship). In it, the people — the nation — are supposed to govern through representatives, usually elected within territorial districts. It allows alternative teams and variants of labor exploitation to be interchanged without a radical change, but it permits certain second-rate, though occasionally important, modifications. Private funding of election campaigns in a multi-party system ensures that capitalist interests keep the parliament working for them.

Associational democracy or associative democracy is not discussed today. In it, various collective organizations — such as labor unions, cooperatives, or business associations — are directly involved in aspects of political decision-making, for example, by participating in government committees or through organizational representation in regulatory agencies, etc. However, their contribution to democracy in the interest of the people depends on the internal democracy of those associations themselves.

In a direct democracy, citizens are directly involved in the activities of political governance. One of its forms is the plebiscite or referendum, a tool to compensate for the weaknesses of representative, or parliamentary, democracy. But more importantly, the people must be significantly empowered so that various kinds of people's councils — not only territorial but also professional — are given real authority and the proper means to make decisions. This last was the fundamental form of democracy in Yugoslavia from 1941 on in the form of local National

Liberation Committees. This was the "revolutionary democratic idea of the Council" (Buden 54-55), common to all popular uprisings from ancient times to the Soviets of Trotsky and Lenin -- sadly castrated after about 1921. -- and on to Hungary in 1956 or Argentina in the 1990s. It includes a mandatory term limit and the possibility of recall by petition of a certain portion of the electorate, thereby considerably diminishing the prospects of the powerful and wealthy to bribe Council members against the interests of the people.

Favoring both associative democracy and direct democracy as opposed to capitalist representative democracy is the first lesson from the best tradition of the SFRJ. *Self-management is even today our furthest horizon.*

2.2. The Ruling Party versus the Working People

Class tensions and conflicts in the SFRJ revolved in part around the hub of the party oligarchy's ever-increasing appropriation of surplus value, but here I will discuss only the actual and potential roles of the Communist Party (by whatever name it was called) and the organized intelligentsia.

Probably the main weakness of communism after the Soviet revolution was its undialectical denial of every society's vital need to openly manifest and resolve its inevitable conflicts, which is commonly called politics. That practice was diametrically opposed to Lenin's brilliant vision in *The State and Revolution*, his bold and radical vector of power from the bottom, from the masses of working people, upward -- which ultimately requires the disappearance of the State apparatus. In that book, Lenin praised (with minor formal reservations) Pannekoek's formulation: "The proletariat does not fight only against the bourgeoisie for State power, but also against power in the State.... The proletarian revolution consists in the destruction of the State instruments of power, in their dissolution into the instruments of power of the proletariat." (my translation). But since Lenin himself, from 1918 onward, was diverted by the fiercest struggle for bare survival — against foreign intervention in the Civil War and against famine — toward building a powerful State apparatus, his original horizon is today usually forgotten; yet it remains the ultimate horizon of the ideal communist politics of direct democracy.

Russia had a weak tradition of popular democracy outside the village community, and Lenin underestimated it. But the main role in the complete oblivion of this horizon was played by the growing Stalinist despotism in the USSR. In the SFRJ, the reason for the underestimation of popular power was partly an abstract utopianism, which believed that the revolution had permanently resolved all possible conflicts, and partly an overestimation of the ruling party's permanent purity, which led to a self-serving clinging to power and, ultimately, to repressive elites detached

from the people. There was a lot of "political maneuvering" in the SFRJ -- the range of views within the SKJ was greater than it is today in all the parliamentary parties in the territory of the former SFRJ combined. -- but it was generally conducted behind closed doors, at the initiative of leading groups in the center, and later, increasingly, in the capitals of the federal republics.

The experience of the SFRJ shows that "blocking social conflict is a prelude to disaster" (see the brilliant Cortesi, p. 151), namely here: that both the pressure of citizen groups from throughout society and a coordinating, centralized agency of power are necessary for a modern, libertarian society (and impossible in plutocratic capitalism). For this to happen, strong and effective guarantees for associational and individual rights are necessary; but although Lenin early on published a "charter of civic rights of the People," this remained a sore point in the Bolshevik tradition. In the early days of the SFRJ, such groups were nurtured; we owe, for example, the youth work brigades, student theater, and all later Yugoslav film to them. However, later the Party State constantly marginalized and occasionally suppressed them — though less harshly than in the "Soviet bloc" or China. The turn toward oligarchy, initiated in the 1960s and intensified after the unwillingness to draw lessons from 1968 and 1971, can be seen in the failure to generalize self-management from basic work organizations to all levels of political decision-making, at the expense of bourgeois parliamentarianism. Thus, self-management largely became illusory and ultimately false, rather than a factor of integration. This led to a complete ideological, economic, and ultimately political catastrophe. Ideologically, this began with the failure to recognize and conceptualize new forms of class tension in "socialist" society, which would not necessarily be radically antagonistic if there were genuine economic democracy (including planning) from the bottom up as well as from the top down — that is, feedback.

3. Brief Conclusions

What kind of State was the SFRJ, then? This still needs to be discussed. Marx held that in socialism, as the first phase of revolutionary change, the "narrow bourgeois horizon of rights," namely bourgeois legislation and distribution of goods, has not yet been overcome; Lenin commented on this approvingly. Therefore, at best I would call the SFRJ a semi-socialist State, namely a compromise that lasted some twenty years and was mostly successful, even glorious. But even such progress, with antifascism, self-management councils, the creation of a larger working class and intelligentsia, comprehensive schooling and healthcare, and at least the liberatory horizon, and in part the practice, of the equal nations of Yugoslavia — all of which

was crucially initiated at the AVNOJ – was unheard of for the Balkans. It remains as our inspiration, present in its absence.

What, in my opinion, was missing in the SFRJ? A lot, but above all, the insight that history does not end and that, under the conditions of accelerating modern technology and ideological falsifications, a permanent cultural revolution is necessary, along with constant criticism and self-criticism to re-examine and transform the communist horizons. The only constant that remains as our guide is the liberation from exploitative labor as well as from premature death in wars and the blighted lives under capitalism.

Note

I have changed cases in the quotes as needed. I thank Krunoslav Stojaković for encouragement and materials, also him and Josip Jagić for their comments, as well as Lazar Atanasković, Stefan Gužvica, Saša Hrnjez, and Mladen Lazić for their helpful remarks. This also includes correspondence with Todor Kuljić from past years.

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