Hour-X for Yugoslavia

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At the helm of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia since 1936, already called "the Old Man" (Stari) by the Partisans during World War II, the undisputed head of Yugoslavia's government since 1945, President Tito is now the world's oldest ruling statesman. Gone are Adenauer, De Gaulle, Haile Selassie, Ben Gurion, Franco, and Mao. Gone are other founders of the nonaligned movement, Nehru, Nasser, Nkruma, Ben-Bella, and Sukarno. Gone as well are many Communist leaders such as Stalin, Togliatti, Rakosi, Gomulka, Thorez, Dimitrov, Gheorghiu-Dej, Khrushchev, and Ulbricht. But Josip Broz-Tito, now eighty-four, still makes regular appearances at Helsinki, Colombo, the Vatican, East Berlin, and the United Nations, and regularly crisscrosses his own country, the size of Oregon. Despite occasional reports of poor health—the most recently circulated "diagnosis" is cancer of the liver—he is evidently in excellent physical and mental shape.

But for years now the citizens of his country and Tito himself have been aware of his finitude, and many of the recent convulsions can be attributed to the anticipation of hour-X, namely, Tito's death. The role of Tito for Yugoslavia is unprecedented. He is the country's George Washington or Mustafa Kemal Ataturk or Mao Tse-tung or Tomas Masaryk or Lenin, depending on which analogy you wish to press. With a great deal of skill, shrewdness, ruthlessness, and brilliant maneuvering he formed out of a civil war and Nazi occupation in the early 1940's the multinational, multireligious, multilingual, multi-... well, one of Europe's most pluralistic countries. In 1948, when he felt that Soviet hegemony threatened Yugoslavia's independence, he brought it out of the Soviet orbit as the first and only successful defection from Stalin. And he has since engineered and/or allowed a new socialist experiment, which often bears the name of "Titoism." In the over thirty years since World War II, Yugoslavia has earned the enviable reputation of having the most democratic form of socialism and a life-style not far removed from that of Western Europe, with a nonaligned international policy that has defied the imposition of superpower domination.

In many ways this "Titoist" Yugoslavia is a smashing success, envied by many in Eastern Europe, thoughtfully considered by many in the West, and proudly presented by most Yugoslavs. By the late 1960's and until about 1971 Yugoslavia had not only satisfied many consumer demands for goods proverbially lacking in socialist countries, but—with its workers' management, its freedom to travel, its casual life-styles, its new brand of thinkers—was well on the way toward democratic socialism. "Criticism is carried out openly, sometimes with pointed formulations—in contemporary Yugoslavia there is almost unrestricted freedom of discussion...," wrote Swiss professor Arnold Künzli ("Marxists on the Beach," Dialogue, Spring, 1968).

But the tensions and unsolved problems in Yugoslavia are also enormous. By the end of 1971 nationalism had reared its ugly head in unprecedented ways, and the old Croat-Serb tensions resulted in demonstrations, lists of those "other" nationals who are to be eliminated, worry about children who had not returned by dusk, as well as a great deal of heated intellectual debate about who is shortchanging whom. Emigres abroad, especially Croats, assassinated Yugoslav diplomats, bombed consulates, hijacked planes, and infiltrated Yugoslavia, where they burned forests, bombed theatres and railroad station luggage depots, blew up airplanes, and—in the one single act of courage amid all these acts of cowardice—actually fought with the army for a few days. And of course they attacked one another verbally and physically.

Thus the nebulous question, "What will happen after Tito's death?" asked since the 1950's, began to assume ever more pointed and realistic forms. Currently it is the most significant question. Abroad it is asked openly and
frequently. In Yugoslavia it is approached more obliquely, with greater assurances of optimistic outcomes and more hope that Tito’s good health will postpone the inevitable for a decade or so.

The Yugoslavs are, on the whole, pretending not to be doing much to anticipate hour-X. No heir apparent has been groomed; the charisma of the leader rarely allows the nurture of a potentially competing charisma. Tito, however, has not left all the problem-solving to posterity. A constitutional device has been created by means of which the President for Life will be succeeded at death by a collective Presidency. A Premier, often rotated, will tend to the daily business of the government. Much attention has also been given to the question of nationalism, perhaps on the theory that a channeled fire is easier to cope with than a smoldering, unnoticed one. There is now in Yugoslavia a theory of nations and nationalities, with strict quotas for all at all levels of government. The presidency of the collective Presidency will rotate from one nationality to another (six in all) until all have had their turn. No leader but Tito has developed a truly Yugoslav identity. The others retain their primary regional one. (Tito himself is a Croatian. Paradoxically, it is Croatian nationalism that is most restive, but its roots, both the glories and the pathology, go far back in history, as does the equally unpleasant “great Serbian” nationalism and the other subtler nationalisms of Yugoslavia.)

These open preparations move at an appointed pace, but the covert preparations for hour-X are more feverish. Most pronounced is the ruthless struggle within the Communist Party, a struggle that at this moment is not so much for personal ascendancy as for the ideological direction the Party will take. Ironically, Tito himself contributed much to this new search for identity in the Party, and there are many causes for it. The shock of the nationalist upheaval, economic difficulties, unemployment, inability to eradicate enormous differences in individual, corporate, and regional earnings, student restlessness, ideological diversity, the threat of a possible Soviet invasion à la Czechoslovakia—all seemed to convince the aging Tito that the fruits of his socialist revolution were not as assured as he had thought.

Feeling control slipping out of his hand and not understanding many of the liberalized processes, Tito turned to his unruly “children” and attempted to reverse those processes he deemed destructive. He sensed that not only did many non-Party people fail to recognize the leading role of the Communist Party in shaping the course of Yugoslavia but that Party members themselves had ceased to believe in it. To correct this he chose to reassert Party discipline, to limit sharply intra-Party discussion and dissent, to reduce dialogue with non-Marxists because it seemed to contribute to ideological laxity, to return to the center some of the power that had previously been decentralized, and to expel or punish or intimidate all real and potential and even some innocent Party members who did not anticipate this shift. This showed once more the wisdom of opportunism. Many of the victims of these purges were fully convinced that they had been carrying out Tito’s program, which indeed they had. But blessed are those who do not raise their heads, for they shall retain them.

The message about the tightening measures was quickly received by people outside the Party—for if Communist heads were rolling, how much faster could others’. It should probably be emphasized that these are figurative terms. In Yugoslavia today repression is rarely physical. Political murders and torture are mostly a thing of the past. Although many people end up in prison, the sentences are comparatively mild. The predominant form of intimidation is loss of position (by retirement or demotion), with salary often retained but influence lost. And the secret police, in a phoenix-like rebirth, are making more frequent appearances in offices and homes, dropping a veiled threat here, taking away a passport there. In any case, after some initial terror, the threat of terror is as effective as crude terror itself.

The result is greater conformity and a great many very disillusioned Communists. Only a few resist in various ways what they consider false accusations. But the majority does not sympathize with them, and opportunists are pressing their advantage, going in for the kill to obtain this or that lucrative or influential position. A curious generation gap has resulted. The old revolutionaries, regardless of their talent, are back in power. The middle generation of leaders has been all but removed from positions of influence (although some, scared witless, have been spared because of an impeccable revolutionary record). Since the old guard could not run all offices, they have resorted to a brilliant move: Very young people, in their twenties and thirties, have been offered some of the highest offices in the land, and they gratefully kowtow to any line they are supplied.

Two groups currently on the sidelines are preparing carefully for hour-X. The ustashes, the paramilitary arm of Croatian nationalism, see hour-X as a chance for a secessionist strike against Yugoslavia to create an independent Croatia. Nationalists of all sorts may be making plans to reshape Yugoslavia when the old man is gone. And so might the Stalinists, a small but dedicated group of pro-Soviet, hard-line Communists who maintained their orientation despite the repressive and reindoctrination measures undertaken after 1948. With the likely encouragement of the Soviet Government they even held a clandestine Party congress in Montenegro, which was infiltrated and broken up by the secret police. The frequent trials against both Stalinists and nationalists are not necessarily an index of their strength but a warning to both domestic and foreign enemies of the resolve of the Yugoslav Government not to allow them to fish in murky waters. Clear messages are being sent to both East and West that the regime is strong enough to deal with these attacks on an independent and united Yugoslavia, just in case the verbal assurances have not been understood. For those who would subvert Yugoslavia’s socialist economic system by corruption, bribery, unlawful enrichment, and maverick business practices, frequent jailing of offenders is intended as one more message to heed.

Strangely, another group has also suffered attack: the humanistic Marxist thinkers. One suspects that they are scapegoats rather than threats to “Titoism,” for they are its heirs.
Those of us concerned about the progress of the fledgling democratic processes in Yugoslavia write about repression in that country with a great deal of ambivalence. If we were to detail only the repressive measures, many readers would jump to the conclusion that Yugoslavia is no different from other totalitarian Communist regimes—which simply is not the case. If, on the other hand, we merely laud the progress achieved in the last thirty years, neither truth nor the cause of the victims of repression is served. Both praise and criticism must be meted out where due, and we risk alienating the “black-or-white” crowd of all ideological orientations.

Yugoslav institutions of higher education, publishing houses, the press, and the intelligentsia have, since the mid-1950’s, continually enlarged the meaning of liberty. By 1971 a democratic socialism developed that, despite its many limitations, was impressive both to the casual observer and to those who know the country well. The creative work of the Yugoslav Marxist humanist, Tito, the Party apparatus turned against those who went against the best interest of Yugoslavia. Despite numerous attempts to manufacture it, there exists no shred of evidence that the dissenters acted against the interest of the state.

The instances of repression against the intellectuals are too numerous to mention, but a few are illustrative. The “Praxis” movement—an unorganized, but self-conscious group of philosophers, sociologists, and other scholars gathered around the Praxis journal published in Zagreb, was the most evident target. Eight of the “Praxis” group were expelled from their teaching posts at Belgrade University in 1975 after a prolonged struggle, a struggle they lost only after the law regulating universities was changed for that very purpose. The editors of Praxis were given the option to produce a conformist journal or cease publication. Courageously, they decided to stop publishing. The world-famous Korcula Summer School, undoubtedly the freest forum for exchange of scholarly opinion in any socialist country, was canceled by the authorities in 1975. In 1976 it seemed that permission would be granted for the Korcula meetings, but they were prohibited shortly thereafter.

The methods of repression vary from place to place. A Slovene colleague noted that in Serbia they may hit you on the head with a hammer, but at least you know where you stand. In Slovenia the pressure is more subtle—more like the constant dripping of water on the head. A spectator standing on the other side of the street may think the Slovene is smiling, but in fact it is a grimace of pain. In Sarajevo (Bosnia) the slightest hint from Tito was heeded practically before the hint was dropped; the creative Marxists were expelled from the Communist Party and great pressure was applied against them. After almost the entire leadership of the Croatian Communist Party was purged for nationalistic deviation, attempts were made to distribute the purging equally—regardless of guilt. Thus the director, the editor-in-chief, and the Party secretary of the Novi Sad (Serbia) daily Dnevnik were removed from their positions and expelled from the Communist Party without reasonable justification and on clear instructions from above. In Ljubljana (Slovenia) the entire Faculty of Sociology, Political Science, and Journalism was accused of being Marxist in facade, in fact teaching “American ideology.” A dean and an editor resigned. Others were attacked in the press, much as were the “Belgrade eight,” and great pressure was brought to bear on many a professor. The Zagreb “Praxis” professors were less obviously the target of heavy-handed measures, but they have been victims of frequent potshots even by the highest Party leaders.

The latest pressure against the “Praxis” professors is the decree that unless they are currently teaching at a Yugoslav university they may be prohibited from attending the high-level international scholarly seminar in Dubrovnik in April, 1977. Many scholars from around the world plan to go to Dubrovnik out of respect for the highest Party leaders. Should some of the Yugoslav scholars be prevented from participating, it might well cause large-scale cancellations by foreign participants. But as if to show its determination, the government is not merely content to attack, or in some cases prosecute, the dissidents. In order to underscore the dependence of the judicial system upon the will of the Communist Party and to intimidate those lawyers who might retain their independence, one of the lawyers defending the “Belgrade eight” was convicted and sentenced for “hostile propaganda” against the state.

What cannot be described adequately is the psychological suffering and various social indignities heaped upon the dissidents. In early stages attempts were made
to “buy some of them off” with diplomatic or other lucrative posts, on the insulting assumption that their integrity and scholarly responsibility would collapse were the bribe large enough. Others are being viciously and slanderously attacked in the press, without their having recourse to a defense. In at least one instance the Zagreb newspaper Vjesnik falsely published a report that the editors of Praxis had repented, and it then refused to print the correction demanded by the professors. Many scholars are ostracized by colleagues. Long-standing friendships collapse when a scholar buckles under pressure and criticizes colleagues; well knowing the falsity of the charges. Books and articles are censored, apartments are searched, and passports have been taken away at the border. In some instances passports are returned, but there are those who are too proud and too hurt to ask for them back. Perhaps theirs is the vain hope that the passport will be returned with apologies, but apologies are not forthcoming. Members of the family, sometimes even those who disapprove of the dissident’s actions, are placed in jeopardy to force the dissident’s admission of guilt. Many spirits have been broken, but there are many who continue to search for vindication.

Under these conditions the dialogue between Marxist and Christian scholars, which was flourishing between 1968 and 1972, has all but disappeared. The Christians are still interested, but the Marxist partners do not dare to be involved because it is obvious that the government frowns upon it. (This writer was awarded an International Research and Exchanges Board [IREX] grant to Yugoslavia to study the Marxist scholarly study of religion but was rejected by the Yugoslav authorities—probably because they wish neither to encourage the dialogue even indirectly nor to give any recognition to those Marxist scholars who have engaged in dialogue.) While the principal reason for the decline of the dialogue is the official turn toward a more conservative Marxist ideological position, part of the blame lies on the doorstep of the churches as well. Church-State relations in Yugoslavia are reasonably well regulated (for instance, a Concordat was signed between the Vatican and Yugoslavia in 1968). But traditionally both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches have been closely tied to nationalism and have done little to distance religion from nationalism; in some instances they are inflaming national chauvinism. The Party leadership came to the conclusion that dialogue between Christians and Marxists might be interpreted by many as an implicit support of this nationalism. It appeared to them that there is more to be lost than gained through the dialogue. Now the churches, which were remarkably free when they kept within the confines of the government-defined “religious sphere,” are under increased surveillance, and the new legislation on churches promises to be more restrictive than before.

There are only three options available to Yugoslavia after Tito’s death.

The nationalist option. If the nationalists were to have a major say, Yugoslavia would be partitioned, after a bloody civil war, into a number of smaller units. These units would be unfit, economically and politically, for independence and would soon fall under the control of traditionally expansionistic neighbors. Such a divided country would provide a constant threat to world peace as the various Western and Eastern countries jockeyed for control of this strategic area.

Although the number of nationalists in Yugoslavia is considerable, their self-interests are so contradictory that they have little chance of success. Secession may seem a viable option to the schemers on the lunatic fringe, but recent European history offers no precedent short of major military cataclysm. The African precedents that are sometimes cited are irrelevant. The further “balkanization” of the Balkans, in other words, is highly unlikely, not because the temper of the people has changed, but because it is contrary to the vested interest of most of the people in Yugoslavia, especially people of influence.

The pro-Soviet option. The number of pro-Soviet Communist hard-liners is small. They opt for a second alternative after Tito’s death: return to the Eastern European bloc. This alternative may be the most desirable for Moscow, which is the only reason it should be considered seriously. Inside Yugoslavia it has extremely few adherents, and practically none is in power. But it constitutes an ever-present threat both to the general population and to the government. The government rarely mentions it outright, but criticism of the Brezhnev doctrine of “limited sovereignty of socialist nations,” constant reaffirmation of Yugoslavia’s policy of nonalignment, and stress on military preparedness of the army and the general populace are aimed at only one source: the threat from the East. Yugoslavia may not be able to defend itself indefinitely from an attack by Warsaw Pact troops, but it has vowed explicitly and forcefully to do so.

It is in the light of this potential threat of Soviet takeover that one should consider the debate between U.S. Presidential candidates Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in which they differed on the United States stance toward possible military aggression against Yugoslavia by the USSR. President Ford maintained that a U.S. President should not commit himself in advance to any specific course of action. Although one might consider this a greater deterrent to Soviet action than was provided by Carter’s response, it seemed to place the territory of Yugoslavia in the sphere of great power interest. For the Soviets this could ultimately provide a rationale for intervention: “The imperialists have indicated the possibility of military intervention and the transformation of Yugoslavia into a capitalist country, and this goes against the interests of the Soviet Union.”

Carter’s reply in that debate probably brought on nightmares for those in Yugoslavia who count on at least a theoretical deterrent. His promise not to involve any U.S. troops there—even in the case of a blatant Soviet military intervention—unless the U.S. was threatened could be interpreted as ceding Yugoslavia to the Soviet sphere of influence after Tito’s death. It was one of Carter’s least sophisticated comments on foreign policy. I doubt that his answer would be identical if he were asked what the U.S. would do in case of a Soviet military
attack against another neutralist nation, say, Austria, Finland, Sweden, or Switzerland. Surely if U.S. foreign policy follows any principles, and Mr. Carter appears to be a man of principles, it would seem that the U.S. would be willing to involve itself under some conditions (e.g., as part of a U.N. peacekeeping force, at the direct and unequivocal request of the Yugoslav Government, or when it appeared obvious that the Soviets intended to use the conquest of Yugoslavia for further operations against NATO countries).

Yet Mr. Carter's answer did have its merits and may even prove of some benefit to Yugoslavia. He signaled that the U.S. has no intention of conducting military operations in Yugoslavia. His answer could be used by Yugoslavia in the diplomatic sphere to urge the Soviets to keep out too, since this is in line with Yugoslavia's neutralist policy. (The basic soundness of this conclusion seems to have been confirmed by Brezhnev's declaration during his November, 1976, visit to Belgrade that the Soviet Union recognizes the principle of noninterference in Yugoslav affairs. I consider this an important declaration.) While the Soviet Union may ardently wish to have Yugoslavia in its orbit, the Soviets are cautious about entering a war. Only when they have been sure of a swift settlement of unrest in an area vital to the defense of their territory (e.g., Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia) have they fired shots. Carter was saying implicitly that, should Yugoslavia's leadership be reasonably united, he trusted that the Soviets would not embark on a costly and prolonged military adventure in which they would stand to lose more than they would gain. Carter's position was one that is consistent with Yugoslavia's third alternative after Tito's death, the course I feel to be most likely.

The 'Titoist' alternative. The third alternative for Yugoslavia to continue to be 'Titoist' long after Tito dies. This means that it will continue along the basic lines set by Tito and his comrades. These comrades will continue in power, and there will be no great shift in policy. I contend that we know what the course of post-Tito Yugoslavia will be; the only thing we do not know is who is going to implement it. The Titoist course of nonaligned self-management socialism will be followed. The successor, whether he be individual or collective leadership, may gradually effect changes, but the government will always maintain that it is true to the policies set by Tito. In other words, Tito will be for Yugoslavia what Lenin is for the Soviet Union and Ataturk for Turkey.

This third alternative for Yugoslavia is most likely to prevail because there are three very potent interest groups opting for it. The first is the present government and Communist Party leadership, most of whom stand to be replaced if either of the other alternatives come to pass. But these individuals are firmly entrenched. Slight shifts to the right or left are of no great consequence to most of them. Tito himself has undertaken to solidify their position and has continuously purged the proponents of the other alternatives.

Perhaps the most significant supporter of the third alternative is the army, which will most likely be propelled into a far more determinative role than it has had during Tito's life. Until now the army has maintained a low profile in internal affairs, but it would become a decisive force in case of any threat to the existing course. The only real training and indoctrination ground for the concept of a united Yugoslavia, it will oppose any attempts at partition. The nationalities are well integrated in the army. Although there is a predominance of Serbian officers, Serbian nationalism does not lean to partition. These same officers would rather command the army of a sovereign state than play an auxiliary role in the Warsaw Pact. This argues against the army leaning toward the Soviet Union. It should be clear, however, that in the case of a civil war that the army could not successfully control, there is an infinitely greater likelihood it would invite the Soviet army's intervention than it would the United States'. The Yugoslav army—only in the unlikely event of having to take drastic steps—would probably strive to preserve socialism even at the cost of closer ties to the Soviet Union.

The third potent factor in favor of a ''Titoist'' course is a growing and satisfied ''middle class'' (I use it differently from the Marxist sense): A vast majority of Yugoslavs, including many industrial workers and peasants, have become satisfied with their life-style, despite chronic complaints and criticism. Their living standard has continually improved, as have, with some oscillation, their civil rights. Most Yugoslavs eat well, dress stylishly, have considerable choice in consumer goods, travel much at home and abroad, enjoy retirement and social security benefits, and most now have good earning power. Most of all, they are allowed to complain! When this majority compares its living standard with the West's, their complaining gets louder. But—and this is crucial—they would not exchange places with any Eastern bloc nation. They know they are better off in terms of liberties and the necessities of life; they are proud of it, and they are not about to give it away.

The self-interest of this middle class dictates the continuation of the present policies, which have delivered much and promise more. There are groups within that middle class that may nurture separationist aspirations to achieve higher living standards for their ethnic group, but I doubt any substantial number will exchange the bird in the hand for two in the tree. The oft-repeated saying that Yugoslavs quarrel among national groups when they are not threatened from outside is substantially true.

The combination of these three elements appears to guarantee Yugoslavia's unity, independence, and socialist orientation. Less certain is fulfillment of the hopes of those intellectuals who are committed to democratic and humanistic socialism and who argue that Tito's departure may remove the charisma of the old man now turned conservative, thus liberating Yugoslavia for further democratic development and greater freedoms. They maintain that Yugoslavia has matured greatly in the last thirty years and that the country can stand the undoubtedly greater tensions true democracy brings. That test of maturity looms in the future. Many will cheer if the test is passed.