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KHRUSHCHEV AND THE 1948 COMINFORM RESOLUTION

In his speech at the 7th Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party Nikita S. Khrushchev, First Secretary of the CC-CPSU and Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, presented an outline review of Soviet-Yugoslav Party and State relationships since the end of World War II. The key sentence in the 90-minute speech was the following reference to the ideological excommunication pronounced a decade previously:¹

"In 1948 a conference of the Informburo issued a resolution on the state of affairs in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia on a number of questions of principles. This resolution was fundamentally correct and corresponded to the interests of the revolutionary movement."²

Because the Chinese Party organ, Peoples Daily, had, a month earlier,³ already proclaimed the validity of the 1948 document, there was considerable speculation in the West, arising primarily from Polish inspired sources,⁴ that Mao and/or the Stalinist elements in Peking had supported Suslov and/or an unidentified opposition in Moscow in forcing Khrushchev to renounce his former pro-Yugoslav policy. While very little can be stated with certainty concerning the reasons for the timing or intensity of the belated Chinese intervention in the protracted controversy between the Kremlin and Belgrade, the tenacity with which Khrushchev has maintained his ideological position throughout the past three years of tactical shifting can be established beyond any reasonable doubt. From documentary sources—Soviet as well as Yugoslav—it is possible to demonstrate that the First Secretary, while ruthlessly exploiting the reconciliation with Tito in his own intra-Party struggle for power, simultaneously duped the Marshal into making unrequited political concessions in foreign affairs. In completing the process of consolidation of the Soviet orbit, showing marked signs of disintegration after the semantic concession to Tito (June 1955), the secret speech against Stalin (February 1956), and the Hungarian and Polish Octobers, Khrushchev reformulated the foundation of his foreign policy—the integral indestructible character of the socialist camp.

Chronologically the tangled tale of Soviet-Yugoslav relation begins with an undetermined Soviet initiative in 1954.⁵ The first suggestion of differ-

¹ Pravda, 29 June 1948

² Pravda, 4 June 1958

³ Jen Min Ji Pao, 5 May 1958; reprinted in Pravda, 6 May 1958.

⁴ See, for example, E. Halperin, Die Weltwoche, Zurich, May 1958.

⁵ International Affairs #8, 1955
January 1955.

ences of opinion within the Soviet leadership, however, were revealed in Molotov's restatement of a "Stalinist" view on Yugoslavia at the Supreme Soviet session which had removed Malenkov,⁶ Tito's stinging reply⁷, and the disarming Soviet rebuttal.⁸ A little more than two months later, nevertheless, Khrushchev expressed his apologies for the past on the Belgrade airport to an astonished—and silent—Tito.⁹ In the intentionally vaguely worded speech there was no mention of any specific errors, although the entire responsibility for the deterioration of Party/State relations was placed upon Beria and Abakumov.

The initial outraged response to this apparent reversal of 1948 came from nearby Trieste where the unrepentant V. Vidali rejected the generally accepted interpretations;¹⁰ even more unambiguously did the French Communist Party, first in the person of P. Courtade and then CC Secretary E. Fajon, apply correctives to the unwarranted version of Khrushchev's unconditional surrender.¹¹ According to the secretary of the French CC, as the organ of the Yugoslav Party quickly noted, the 1948 resolution contained

"entirely normal criticism (which) dealt with the Yugoslav Communist Party's attitude towards such questions as.....the leading role of the proletariat, class struggle, relations between the Communist Parties and People's Fronts, and some others."¹²

The same editorial complained that the Italian leader, Luigi Longo, despite his commendable attempts to bring Vidali into line, had approved the views of those who found

"the criticism of 1948.....absolutely permissible.... and based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism."¹³

Altho The sharp eyed Borba writer then pointed out that Fajon had also had carefully distinguished between the first resolution (1948) and the second (1949)

⁶ Pravda, 8 February 1955.

⁷ Borba, 8 March 1955, reprinted in Pravda, 10 March 1955.

⁸ Pravda, 12 May 1955.

⁹ Pravda, 27 May 1955; also R. Lowenthal, The Observer 5 June 1955.

¹⁰ Lavoratore, Triest, 30 May 1955.

¹¹ L'Humanite, 7 & 8 June 1955.

¹² Quoted from Borba, 11 June 1955.

¹³ Ibid.

which was

"wrong and therefore unacceptable...because it did not respect the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of each Communist Party."¹⁴

Thus, either in the absence of instructions or, far more likely, because of Moscow guidances, the ideological premises of the 1948 attack had, in essentials, maintained their validity; only the political implementation of 1949 was labelled erroneous and unjust. In other words, the tactical concessions of the moment had in no way compromised the strategic aim of inducing the heretic to return to the fold.¹⁵

Although the leadership of the two most important Western Communist parties had thus suggested the line which Khrushchev had drawn as the limit of his retreat, no such hints appeared within the Soviet orbit. After a one day stop in Sofia the communique, concise and conclusive as always with this loyal partner, expressed "complete unanimity" on the questions of establishing friendly cooperation both between the USSR and Yugoslavia and between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia."¹⁶

The next day the communique of the four countries—Hungary, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union—was much less exact; "complete unanimity" was reserved for "international questions" in general and only "satisfaction was expressed regarding friendly cooperation achieved between the USSR and Yugoslavia."¹⁷ On their behalf Rakosi, Novotny, and Gheorgin Dej merely "expressed...hope and confidence that friendly cooperation would be achieved."¹⁸ When and how was, of course, not specified and the impression was clearly left that the removal of doctrinal differences and the settling of economic accounts would be a matter of individual convenience—and strength.

From the political testament of Imre Nagy there is confirmation that Rakosi, at least, had indeed recognized the opportunistic character of the Soviet concessions. With the naivete that marked so much of his writing and actions, the former Chairman of the Hungarian Council of Ministers wrote:

"The leadership of the Hungarian Workers Party as evidenced by many manifestations regards—completely incorrectly—the Belgrade Declaration as a temporary compromise and a sacrifice which the Soviet Communist Party was obliged to make in order to tear Yugoslavia away from the influence of the imperialists. This is the explanation why nothing has happened so far in our camp to put into operation the principles enunciated in the Belgrade declaration."¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See J. Schaerf: Tito bleibt ein Ketzer, Ost-Probleme, 1955, p. 995.

¹⁶ For a Lasting Peace, for Peoples' Democracy, 10 June 1955.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 23 June 1955, Pravda, 24 June 1955, p. 1.

¹⁹ Imre Nagy On Communism, F. Praeger, N. Y., 1957, p. 28.

Returned to Moscow Khrushchev reported to the plenum of the Central Committee on the Belgrade Agreement, but neither his speech nor the resolution has yet been published. Except for an excerpt from the resolution which was, as usual, "unanimously adopted",²⁰ no reference was made in official Soviet sources to the discussion of Yugoslavia at this plenary session until the expulsion of the anti-Party group in July 1957. Then it was stated that

"the incorrect position of Comrade Molotov on the Yugoslav question was unanimously condemned by the Plenum of the Central Committee in July 1955 'as not conforming to the interests of the Soviet State and the socialist camp and not corresponding to a Leninist policy'."²¹

The castigation of Molotov as the protagonist of an anti-Yugoslav policy was, no doubt, justified, but revealed nothing of his arguments nor of the rebuttal by Khrushchev and others. For this there is, even today, only a single source, a former functionary of the Polish Central Committee, who had seen the sole copy of the minutes of the July 1955 Plenum sent to Poland.²² Bailer's detailed published report, unfortunately, omits the key argumentation of the First Secretary in his polemics with Molotov. In a summarized form it was, however, included in material prepared for RFE, Munich:

"Khrushchev then discussed Yugoslavia. In discussing the resolution of the Cominform adopted in 1948, Khrushchev supported the first resolution, although casting doubt upon the case of Soviet technicians in Yugoslavia, saying the accusations in this specific instance had been invented by Beria. He also stated that the resolution 'The Yugoslavia Communist Party is in the Hands of Murderers and Spies' was an error and that the blame again belonged to Beria. Khrushchev next discussed his visit to Yugoslavia, praising Yugoslavia, saying it had not joined the capitalistic block and saying the main reason for Yugoslavia's trouble was that it had separated itself from the Soviet Union. In conclusion, he said the problems raised by nationalism and peculiar to nationalism had never been correctly understood. He added that some of the failures which had taken place in the relations between the USSR and the Satellites could be explained by this failure to understand the force and meaning of nationalistic feelings. Khrushchev also said that the Soviet Politburo had suggested to those Communist Party members of the Cominform that the resolution 'The Yugoslav Communist Party is in the Hands of Murders and Spies' be declared nullified. According to Khrushchev, this had been agreed upon and the nullification had already taken place."²³

²⁰ Pravda, 23 November 1956, in response to Tito's Pula speech.

²¹ Pravda, 3 July 1957.

²² S. Bialer; I Chose Freedom, News from Behind the Iron Curtain, Free Europe Press, October 1956, pp. 9-15.

²³ (Background Information on S. Bialer, Office of the Political Advisor, RFE Munich, June 1956).

The validity of this short paragraph, representing Khrushchev's basic position, had been partially substantiated in the First Secretary's speeches in Belgrade (May 1955), Prague (July 1957), and Moscow (April 1958); since then it has been completely confirmed in the Sofia outburst on the 3d anniversary of the Belgrade declaration.²⁴ Only in the light of the fact that Khrushchev had never denounced the doctrinal tenets of the 1948 resolution can the irreconcilable Party differences between Tito and Khrushchev be comprehended; the continued silence of the Marshal—who has not yet publicly challenged this point—is tantamount to acceptance of Khrushchev's bold differentiation between having sinned in practice (1949) and while defending the dogma in theory (1948).

Thus the May 5 article in People's Daily did not introduce the 1948 resolution as a new factor in Soviet-Yugoslav polemics; it merely, and this is of course important, revealed Khrushchev's 1955 position officially for the first time. Furthermore, as Bialer had earlier stated (see above), the Chinese, never a signatory to either of the Cominform resolutions, also disclosed that the 1949 resolution "had been withdrawn by the Communist Parties which took part in the Information Bureau meeting."²⁵ The SED which, like the Chinese, came to power after the founding of the Cominform, has also joined the growing list of retroactive revealers of the truth. In a 34-page article, published in Einheit, #5, (passed for publication 31 May) Ulbricht's Agit-Prop now deems it necessary to evaluate the 1948 criticism of the Yugoslav Party as "in essence correct", adding the stereotype that only "the methods used....and the false personal charges against the YCL leaders" in the 1949 resolution were wrong. For good measure, the SED then makes the following contribution to an understanding of Khrushchev's tactics at Belgrade in May 1955:

"...the Communist and workers' Parties were quite clear—and the CPSU left no doubt about it either—that they continued to regard the criticism made in 1948....as correct and that there were still a number of ideological disagreements."²⁶

After Khrushchev's unambiguous declaration of the unimpaired validity of the 1948 resolution in Sofia (see above p. 1), the other Party signatories to the Cominform resolution are hastening to stand up and be counted once again. For the Czechoslovak Party the First Secretary Novotny has easily found the appropriate phraseology:

"Our Party has supported and still continues to support the point of view that the resolution of the Information Bureau on Yugoslavia of June 1948 was correct, in principle; that however, mistakes were made in the methods of implementation and that the second resolution of November 1949 was incorrect."²⁷

²⁴ Pravda, 3 June 1958.

²⁵ Resolution of Second Session of the Eighth National Congress, NCNA, 27 May 1958.

²⁶ Einheit, #5, 1958, quoted from dev, General Desk, Background Report, #284, 13 June 1958)

²⁷ Ceteka, 18 June 1958.

There can be little doubt that the others, like the soldiers in the platoon Khrushchev described to K. Popovic,²⁸ will march in step—except for Poland. In Warsaw's only major commentary to the Soviet-Yugoslav dispute *Trybuna Ludu* had not accepted the facile differentiation between 1948 and 1949. The words of May 14, 9 days after the Chinese had sounded the signal, are pregnant with reminders of Gomulka's dilemma a decade ago:

"Our Party, too, had committed serious mistakes with regard to Yugoslavia both in 1948 and subsequently. These had harmful consequences also for the internal life of our country.....There can be no return to the errors and methods of the previous period."

After the execution of Imre Nagy, and the branding of Tito as Judas, Gomulka, once before a victim of ideological and political terror, now faces the combined pressures of the bloc of "Ruling Parties". The man who on his return from Moscow after the November meeting found not a single favorable word for the Cominform will not yield easily to threats. In October 1956 he called Khrushchev's bluff and won; in June 1958, the 10th anniversary of his own defeat, he faces his greatest challenge on almost the same issues. From Khrushchev whose tactics with 1948 Cominform resolution are the words which provide the background for the infamous deed of the execution of Nagy, Gomulka can expect as little mercy as he received at the hands of Stalin.

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²⁸ Pravda, 4 June 1958