

## THE LEGACY OF COMMUNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

— THE FORUM SPEAKS WITH MILOVAN DJILAS —

*Milovan Djilas was one of the leaders of the World War II Yugoslav Partisan struggle and Communist revolution. Between 1945 and 1954 he was at various times a member of Tito's Cabinet, vice-president of Yugoslavia, and president of the federal assembly. In 1954 he was stripped of his offices because of his advocacy of democratic reforms. He was imprisoned for a total of nine years by Tito, but his writings, published in the United States and smuggled back into Eastern Europe, were a source of inspiration to the next generation of dissidents. His best-known book, The New Class, published in 1957, was widely acclaimed in the West as a pioneering critical analysis of the Communist system by a former insider. Mr. Djilas, who lives in Belgrade, spoke with Margaret Smith of The Fletcher Forum on May 19, 1990, in New York City. He authorized and updated the interview in October 1990.*

**FORUM:** Were the events of 1989 in Europe a revolution, or were they merely the collapse of a bankrupt system? How would you characterize the political-economic entities that are emerging?

**DJILAS:** The events in Eastern Europe in 1989 can be characterized as a *specific revolution: specific* in the sense that it was bloodless, and *revolution* in the sense that forms of power and ownership are being altered. It is not, of course, wrong to characterize these events as the *bankruptcy of a system*. The bankruptcy was so deep and pervasive that what has occurred has all the characteristics of a radical, revolutionary change, even though, up to this point, mostly non-violent. I am stressing "up to this point" since in some states—in particular the USSR, and perhaps Yugoslavia too—the possibility of violence should not be excluded: neither in the struggle for power, nor among different nations. In any case, violent or non-violent, the bankruptcy of a system, judged by its social and political characteristics, is not different from a revolution.

The system in the Soviet Union, which was communism's center of gravity, collapsed because the party-bureaucratic power could not develop the forces of production, nor could it continue military-ideological expansion. The Soviet economy is not only backward and wasteful, it is also incurable and unrepairable without an alteration of the power structure. And even after that it will face enormously difficult problems in changing party-bureaucratic "social" ownership into private ownership. The breakdown of the system in the USSR was decisive because it showed to everyone the powerlessness of the *original* system in the strongest Communist state. This opened the way for the collapse

of the system in other states, whose nations have long been dissatisfied and could hardly wait to get rid of it.

In what direction will the changes go? First of all one should underline that they will proceed at a different tempo and in different forms from one state to another. But they are all going in the direction of pluralist democracy and market economy: most have already embarked on political pluralism, but still have to develop their market economy. These states have had a system of industrial feudalism and are now changing to liberalism.

For this reason, in my judgment, one cannot draw the conclusion that Western liberalism has won, although its role as a political model and as an economic power should not be neglected or underestimated. The East has been neither ideologically nor militarily defeated. It has simply disintegrated because of numerous factors, primarily internal ones along with the strong influence of the West.

*FORUM:* We have seen, particularly last year in Czechoslovakia, but more generally during the Communist era in the Soviet Union and all the countries of Eastern Europe, that artists and writers have played a major role in bringing change. You are primarily known as a dissident and political writer, but you are also a writer of novels and short stories, and translator of Milton's *Paradise Lost* into Serbo-Croat. How do you see the connection between your political life and your artistic life?

*DJILAS:* In our country there is no author who is not connected with politics in the larger sense. None. This is true for all South Slavs. We are small peoples, endangered by foreign peoples, in some cases by foreign empires. Secondly, our culture is relatively young. (Although it began in medieval times, its development was interrupted during the period when we were subjugated by the Ottoman Turks.) And because it is young, everybody is completely engaged. Many Yugoslav, or better to say Serbian or Montenegrin, intellectuals in my youth were inclined to revolutionary engagement.

Having said this, for me personally the connection between literature and politics is not that close. My literature is not ideological; I separate literature from politics as much as I can. I wrote poetry when I was very young. Then I was engaged in politics for a period of almost twenty years, and I did no literary writing. Then when I was overthrown from power in 1954, I returned to literature. Since then I have written political articles and books as well as short stories and novels. In fact the only place where I linked literature and politics is in my memoirs. Some people think that these are my best works, but I think my novel *Under the Colors*<sup>1</sup> is better than any of my memoirs.

*FORUM:* Do you think your artistic temperament contributed to your urge to rebel against the bureaucratic and oppressive nature of communism? Did your artist's eye help you see the weaknesses of the Communist regime?

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1. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.

*DJILAS:* Yes. Without this inclination I would not have seen it. In every author, even in the authors who are opportunistic with regard to politics, there exists the ability to be politically critical. I know many such cases. The Yugoslav winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Ivo Andrić, was servile, but he knew what was really going on. Most of the time he hid his opinions and feelings, but occasionally in his work you can find them. An artist cannot help but perceive the bad side of politics—and there is always a bad side to politics. In this sense no artist can be absolutely devoted to one political ideology, because part of the artistic self remains untouched by the ideology.

*FORUM:* Can you say something more about the greater role artists and intellectuals of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union play in political affairs than those of other European countries?

*DJILAS:* This is not the first time in history that artists and intellectuals, philosophers, and thinkers in general have played a major political role. Take for example the eve of the French Revolution. The philosophers and intellectuals prepared the revolution. The same is true in Russian history. Throughout the nineteenth century there was practically no author who was content with the political situation. It has been the same under communism. Characteristically the heroic persons under communism were intellectuals. An intellectual, like an artist, has a great responsibility—the responsibility not to be a liar—both toward himself and toward his own people. In democratic societies intellectuals do not play such a special role, because all people may freely express themselves.

*FORUM:* You met Stalin on a number of occasions and in fact your book *Conversations with Stalin*<sup>2</sup> was one of the reasons you were sent to prison for the second time by Tito in 1962. If Stalin were in Gorbachev's position today, what would he think or say about the decline of communism?

*DJILAS:* He would certainly be revolted and disappointed. He would take the view that this is a temporary crisis, a crisis which the imperialistic and counter-revolutionary forces in the country were using.

*FORUM:* So Stalin really believed that the perfect Communist society could be achieved?

*DJILAS:* The question whether he believed in a future Communist society or not has not been fully resolved by political theoreticians, philosophers, and psychologists. I discussed this with Russian intellectuals when I was in Moscow in January 1990. Some of them agreed with me, and some differed. My opinion is that Stalin believed in a future Communist society, but he saw

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2. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1962.

human beings as trash—as totally spoiled by class society. He said that he was using terror and dictatorship to “break” people. Churchill once asked him, “What is the strongest means in politics?” He replied, “Fear.” If someone believes that fear is the strongest instrument in social and political life, it is normal for that person to use violence. Stalin believed that socialist and Communist society could be achieved only by violence, because he knew history well; and of course it is true that violence has played a major role in history. But Stalin had no feeling for the democratic possibilities for transforming society. For him violence was the *unique* means for change. He

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believed that he was the first person in history to be engaged in building the ideal society of the future. He was very pragmatic, but there were many political and social problems he did not understand. He was a typical one-sided man, a fanatical believer. Yet his thought process was very complicated.

*FORUM:* Another Communist dictator whom you knew even better was Tito, who died in May 1980. He was perceived by many in the West both on the left and the right as a great leader. But given the problems of Yugoslavia today, would you say he had any lasting achievements, or was his genius simply in maintaining power?

*DJILAS:* Tito was a significant politician because of his role in the Yugoslav revolution which took place during the 1941-1945 struggle against the Nazi occupation. He resembled Stalin, though by mentality he was not as brutal as Stalin. At the end of the revolution Tito massacred his opponents much as Stalin would have done, but after this phase he stopped using such a ruthless approach. And after Yugoslavia's quarrel with Stalin in 1948 Tito recognized that he must modify his rule or lose the support of the West, as well as the support of the people of Yugoslavia. From that time he almost totally stopped killing his opponents; instead he used other methods of persecution such as expulsion from jobs and arrest.

Tito's primary achievement was that he brought about the Communist revolution. Of course those who opposed the revolution saw him as a brigand and a killer, but to his supporters he was an energetic and strong revolutionary leader. But in his later years, the revolutionary element diminished and the

despotic element became stronger and stronger. It is impossible to separate Yugoslavia's Communist revolution from the great war against fascism, where Tito played a major role. The struggle against fascism is not sufficiently appreciated by historians. First, without the battle against fascism, the drawing together of the nations of Europe is unimaginable. Second, America's world role, which in my view is on the whole positive, and America's confrontation with the Soviet Union and other totalitarians, would not have evolved. The third consequence of the struggle against fascism has been the struggle against *other* contemporary totalitarian regimes. These regimes are not the same as fascism, but their totalitarian character is the same. This means we cannot, even in the long run, separate what has been happening recently in Eastern Europe from the struggle against fascism. And fourthly, human rights would not be so important now, nor would they be so well articulated. I don't think the struggle against racism would have progressed as much as it has in the second half of this century were it not for the struggle against fascism. So, yes, the Yugoslav revolution—never mind what Communism is or is not—was a serious achievement of Tito.

The second of his achievements was his role in Yugoslavia's break with Stalin in 1948. When I was in Moscow in January 1990 at a conference devoted to this conflict, all the Russians and Yugoslavs present agreed that this was the beginning of the disintegration of communism. Tito's role was not one of theoretician, though the theoretical aspect of this conflict is very important. He was primarily a practical politician: he saved Yugoslavia's independence and at the same time his own power.

I don't evaluate highly his role in the non-aligned movement, because I don't have a particularly high regard for the movement itself. But his third relatively positive achievement was his role in the industrialization of Yugoslavia. If Yugoslavia had not been socialist or Communist, industrialization would have happened anyway, and perhaps even more harmoniously. But it happened during his life, and under his leadership. There were many mistakes and stupidities, but industrialization took place and Yugoslavia is no longer an agrarian country. Our industrial revolution was achieved under Tito.

These are his positive achievements, but from a humanitarian and social point of view his role was completely negative. He presided for a long time over an authoritarian regime, and his style was dictatorial. The consequence of this is that Yugoslavia today has no developed democratic political life, and has some very strong, aggressive, nationalist and even fascist movements. We are really on the verge of a religious-national conflict, maybe religious-national civil war, which is, I think, the worst form of civil war. Maybe we will avoid this, but if civil war does occur it will be a consequence of his rule.

*FORUM:* In your biographical essay on Tito, *The Story from Inside*,<sup>3</sup> and also in your autobiographical *Rise and Fall*,<sup>4</sup> you describe your personal relations

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3. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980.

4. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1985.

with Tito and other Yugoslav Communists. At the time you began criticizing the regime toward the end of 1953, your position seemed strong and unchallenged; in fact you seemed to be rising in the hierarchy, and your personal relations with your colleagues were good. When did you realize that your criticism was going to mean the sacrifice of your position and of your friendships?

*DJILAS*: I arrived at my opinions slowly. Schematically speaking, there were three periods. To begin with I was a typical Communist believer. Of course I was not so naive as to think that this path would be easy, and without brutal struggles, or that its goals would be realized tomorrow. But I believed it was possible. In 1945 when the revolution was completed, I was shocked with the behavior of many Communists, their greed for privileges, villas, cars, decorations, titles, and offices. But I considered this temporary, just a result of human weakness. My own plan was to abandon politics and return to literature. In 1946 I wrote the first draft of my novel, *Montenegro*,<sup>5</sup> which I later rewrote in prison. But then in 1948 the disagreement with Stalin began, and I decided to stay in politics. And what started as criticism of Stalin and the Soviet Union's policies began to take the form of criticism of the evils of Yugoslav communism. When Stalin died in 1953, and the threat of the Soviet Union toward Yugoslavia became weaker, the necessity to emphasize Yugoslavia's differences with the Soviet Union in order to gain public support diminished. Moreover Tito was aware that further liberalization would threaten his own powerbase. As a result the reform process in Yugoslavia was stopped, mainly at Tito's initiative.

I cannot fully explain why I could not go along with Tito. There are many elements. It was primarily a moral issue. I felt I could not deceive myself about what I really thought. But it was very difficult for me to separate from my comrades: that was harder than rejecting the old ideas. However, I slowly started to feel stronger and more certain. My first idea was to liberalize the Communist party. When, through my confrontation with the party, I lost my official positions, I continued to develop my ideas. This was how *The New Class*<sup>6</sup> was conceived, though in some respects *The New Class* still shows the remains of Marxist thinking.

From very early on I had the feeling that one day I would be arrested. It was not easy to be in prison, knowing that I had no serious support in the country. It was also difficult for my family. And it was difficult for me not only because of the physical hardships, but also because of the mental struggle I was undergoing. But slowly I was able to liberate my mind from the hold of communism and Marxism.

*FORUM*: You said you did not have much following. It seems there were some people who agreed with you within the party, but your opponents were

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4. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1985.

5. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1963.

6. New York: Praeger, 1957.

stronger. In 1989 the proponents of change and democracy both within the party and outside were successful in bringing change because *they* were stronger. Do you think you were too early with your criticism? Or were the reformers of the late 1980s too slow?

*DJILAS:* I always believed that I was right. But I never felt certain that my ideas would be realized, even partially, during my lifetime. For me it was always more important to be right than to win immediately. Many people have said to me, even in Russia, that some of my ideas were prophetic. Maybe this is true, but it has no importance for me. It is not that I am indifferent. I am glad that communism is disintegrating. But this does not influence me personally very much. As I said to one journalist, I feel as if I am sitting on the bank of a river. The river is clearer and clearer, but it is passing me, not touching me. This is why I am not committed to any party in Yugoslavia, and why, as a critic, I am still active. I not only oppose communism but also those negativist, chauvinist phenomena which are increasingly strong, not only in Yugoslavia but in all of Eastern Europe. These phenomena are not well understood in the West. These neofascist, racist movements present no less a danger for humanity than the dangers of Communist totalitarianism.

*FORUM:* You are respected in Yugoslavia now, and your books are being published there, all of which is in great contrast to your years of isolation and treatment as a non-person; nevertheless, in contrast with some other dissident figures in Eastern European countries, especially Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, you are not seen by many Yugoslavs as a possible leader. Why do you think this is so?

*DJILAS:* My position in Yugoslavia in many circles is very strong. But opposition to me is more acute now than at any time, even more than the opposition I experienced from Tito. The reason nationalists are against me—especially extreme nationalists—is not because of my revolutionary past, but because they believe that I could still play a serious leadership role for a united Yugoslavia. They are afraid that, because I have both international prestige and influence in Yugoslavia, I may become a rallying point for the forces of Yugoslav unity, and so threaten their nationalist program. I have no ambition to be a leader. I am old, and not in good health, but also temperamentally I am not much attracted to power. At the same time, I will play my role as an intellectual critic and fighter for democratic values in Yugoslavia.

*FORUM:* Is there a rationale for Yugoslavia to continue as a unified country?

*DJILAS:* As my son Aleksa Djilas has written in his book *The Contested Country*,<sup>7</sup> the basis of Yugoslavia is the Serbo-Croatian relationship. And as

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7. Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919-1953* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, to be released in March 1991).

he says, the Serbs and Croats cannot separate, because in large sections of Yugoslavia their populations are mixed. On the one hand this provokes conflict between the nationalist ideologies of Serbs and Croats, but on the other hand it bolsters the will to save the relationship. The Serbs, Croats, and Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina have common ethnic roots, and their language is the same. But over time they separated, mainly because of their different religions—Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Islam. I believe that in the long run, with greater democracy, these differences can be diminished if not liquidated.

I do not believe that the separation of the Yugoslav republics into individual states would of itself be a tragedy. If they separate, I believe the republics would ultimately have fledgling democratic regimes. But the tragedy lies in the fact that separation could be followed by religious-national war.

In Croatia the mass national movement which won the recent election is not only nationalistic; it also has a democratic program. But Croats are obviously demonstrating nationalist, even chauvinist tendencies. For example, they want to make the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina part of Croatia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are twice as many Serbs as Croats, and the Muslim population is just slightly greater than the Serbian. This is why Croatian nationalists invented the theory that Muslims are really Croats, "Islamicized Croats." But Muslims are in the process of developing a separate national identity, and as a result, it is the Muslims who will confront Croatian ambitions, not the Serbs. In my view the Croats' policy is unrealistic. If Bosnia and Herzegovina were Croatian, Croatia would have 2.1 million Serbs (this includes the Serbian minority in Croatia) and close to 2 million Muslims, and the Croats would have barely over 50 percent of the population. The Croats could never pacify the Muslims and Serbs. Likewise Serbia could never absorb Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially because the Muslims and Serbs have a tradition of conflict.

The problem is that the very faltering steps which have been taken toward greater pluralism have unleashed nationalist forces, but we have not yet had time to develop our democratic structures to the point where they could be a brake on these forces. Democratic tendencies are still weak, so even though people do not, in general, want conflict, they could be easily swayed by the aggressive activities of these chauvinistic movements. Democrats must fight this, but the trouble is they themselves have been poisoned with nationalism.

If the Bosnians succeed in saving the independence of their republic, I believe Croatian nationalism and Serbian nationalism would diminish. In addition, there are still some forces acting to hold Yugoslavia together. The new government of Prime Minister Ante Marković is very popular, and increasingly so, both in Serbia and in Croatia. Marković is a Croat, but by orientation he is a Yugoslav. Economic tendencies toward unity are still strong, and if Marković's economic program succeeds, they will be stronger. Moreover there is a strong desire to become genuinely part of Europe. But of course Europe cannot receive a country which is torn apart by extreme nationalism



and is on the brink of civil war. My hope is that the pull of Europe will help to suppress the nationalist conflicts.

*FORUM:* Is it in the interests of other nations to preserve Yugoslav unity? If it is in their interests, are they pursuing a policy that is helpful to this end?

*DJILAS:* It is definitely in the interests of the majority of other nations—for example the United States, Great Britain, the USSR—to support the unity of Yugoslavia. And this has been the official policy of the majority of European governments. But I doubt that all Yugoslavia's neighbors (Albania, Bulgaria, perhaps Hungary) are so well-intentioned. I also suspect that in some states, for example in Germany and Austria, there are influential groups who would like to see Yugoslavia disintegrate—from traditional hatred, from expansionist tendencies, and vague, unrealistic desires for revenge.

*FORUM:* With regard to Eastern Europe there are obvious tendencies toward democracy and integration with Western Europe, but they are accompanied by the threat of civil war in the Soviet Union, of war between Hungary and Romania, and perhaps even between Serbia and Bulgaria. There are also authoritarian tendencies in Poland and chaos in Romania. Given your impressive prophetic record with regard to communism, what would you say about post-communism?

*DJILAS:* I never felt myself to be a prophet. I think the national conflicts in the Soviet Union are a cause for great concern, especially those in the Muslim republics. I believe that the problem with the Baltic States will be peacefully resolved, and I don't foresee civil war among the Russians themselves.

The consciousness of the best of the Russian intelligentsia is definitely changing. The intellectuals I spoke with in January 1990 were not only criticizing Stalin, but also raising questions about Lenin. They see him as a great historical figure, but they think that the revolution was a mistake. They are even against Marx. They are revolted and ashamed that they permitted such a catastrophic regime for such a long time. The Russians are great in numbers, and great in their political role. But they also believe they have a great cultural, even messianic, role. Now they see one expression of this messianic role ending in failure, and realize that they will never earn this role honestly if they don't deal drastically with the results of this long and catastrophic dictatorship.

*FORUM:* What kind of leadership will be needed in the Soviet Union to bring it through the next years, which will undoubtedly be tumultuous?

*DJILAS:* The Soviet Union needs stable institutions and leaders with strength and authority. Gorbachev and Yeltsin, in their own way, have some of these characteristics. But new leaders will appear, perhaps more versatile and cour-

ageous. No military leader or military authorities will be able to solve any important or lasting question—they can only temporarily postpone changes toward pluralism. The leaders must come from the people and political movements. Ryzkhov's economic program was useless from the beginning. The Gorbachev-Ryzhkov compromise will not be any better. The time is not right for economic compromises, although Gorbachev is forced to make them because of the party-bureaucratic apparatus which is still strong. Yeltsin's program could be a good beginning, but only a beginning.

*FORUM:* How can the policy of the United States best assist the process that is going on in the Soviet Union?

*DJILAS:* I think that the United States and the West in general have taken a good and wise attitude. They could do more, especially financially, but it is true that most of these countries, especially the USSR, by their political and economic structure, are not, still are not, able to accept normal economic cooperation and credits.

*FORUM:* You mentioned earlier in the interview the link between World War II and the events of the past year, and this is in no way so evident as in the reunification of Germany. What role will Germany play in post-Cold War Europe?

*DJILAS:* One should not expect in the near future any danger from a united Germany, neither in Europe, nor outside Europe, not even from the economic predominance of Germany. What is economic predominance without military predominance? Higher quality production and more successful trade. Well, Japan already has these advantages and is not existentially threatening anyone. Germany is not even as territorially large as it was before the war. Nations should defend themselves from Germany—if defense is necessary at all—by improving their own industries. Difficulties with Germans are possible, but they will be neither tragic nor insurmountable.

I believe that Russia, through its size and culture, although it will cease to exist as an empire—especially because it will cease to exist as an empire—will preserve its important role, analogous to, but not the same as, the role of the United States, and that Eastern European countries, including the USSR, will create bonds of unity with Western Europe and through it with the United States.

