

Vjeran Pavlaković

# YUGOSLAV VOLUNTEERS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR



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# Yugoslav Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War

Vjieran Pavlaković

## Introduction to the Spanish Civil War

*Today, the struggle is in Spain. Tomorrow it may be in other countries – our own...This is the question we are asking you: Are you for, or against, the legal Government and the People of Republican Spain? Are you for, or against, Franco and Fascism? For it is impossible any longer to take no side.*

*Question posed in Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War<sup>1</sup>*

Eighty years after rebel army officers fired the first bullets against their own government, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) continues to spark passionate historical debates, both dividing the Spanish political scene, and serving as an inspiration for international anti-fascist activism. Scholars, artists, journalists, politicians, and other social actors from across the political spectrum still fervently defend rival historical interpretations in numerous books, memoirs, movies, and exhibitions in Spain and abroad, even though the conflict was overshadowed by the greater tragedy of the Second World War. For the Left, the war in Spain remains a romanticized episode that revealed the emancipatory potential of revolution, epitomized by dramatic transformations which took place in cities such as Barcelo-

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Valentine Cunningham, *Spanish Front: Writers on the Spanish Civil War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 51.

na, or the agrarian reforms in the impoverished Spanish countryside. This Spanish Revolution inspired thousands of volunteers from more than fifty countries – communists, anarchists, workers, intellectuals, and antifascists of all political persuasions – to fight in the International Brigades, the Comintern’s military units that play a major role in the Spanish Civil War. For the Right, the Civil War represents the dangers of “left-wing extremism” in the form of militant labor movements, anti-clericalism, and the insidious nature of Stalinism. The opening of Soviet archives in the 1990s revealed the extent of Stalinist crimes and political intrigues in Spain, which continue to serve as justification for the brutal methods of the Franco regime and open collaboration with Nazi-fascism.

Although the details regarding the causes and nature of the Spanish Civil War remain contested between ideologically opposed scholars, there is no doubt that the democratically elected Popular Front Government was attacked during the night of the 16/17 July 1936 by rebel officers in the Spanish Army. This attempted coup, supported by Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany, set off a bloody civil war that lasted three years and resulted in approximately 500,000 deaths, many of them civilians. What was initially a Spanish affair rapidly escalated into an international crisis, which divided societies far from Spain over the issues of fascism and antifascism. While Rome, Berlin, and Moscow considered Spain to be a training ground for the looming world war (which erupted seven months after the end of the Spanish Civil War), thousands of individuals from around the world volunteered to defend the Popular Front government, not because of Stalin’s political agenda, but because they believed in freedom, democracy, and international solidarity against fascism.

This publication focuses on the Yugoslav volunteers who came to Spain to fight for progressive ideals that were under threat throughout interwar Europe. It also focuses on how the experiences of Yugoslav volunteers in Spain shaped the subsequent history of

the Second World War and socialist revolution in Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup>

The memory of the Spanish Civil War was not only embedded in the official historiography of socialist Yugoslavia, but was also preserved through the Spanish veterans' organization,<sup>3</sup> publications, memoirs and serials in newspapers, monuments, commemorations, museum exhibitions, school visits by veterans, and documentary films. In many ways, the lost cause in Spain became a romanticized struggle that in certain moments - especially in the late 1970s and 1980s when disillusionment with Yugoslav socialism had set in - even surpassed the nostalgia for the heroic days of the Partisan victory. In an interview in the 1980s, the Spanish veteran Ivo Vejvoda passionately argued that:

»Spain was one of the brightest moments of this century. It was something special, not only in the lives of the generation of Yugoslav students studying in Prague [many of whom fought in the IBs, V.P.], but for all progressive people in the world.«<sup>4</sup>

Although there are but few individuals remaining who lived through the Civil War, it remains a divisive moment for Spanish society, politics, and scholars, despite decades of consensual historical amnesia enacted through the so-called 'Pact of Forgetting'. Since the Franco regime tightly controlled its version of the historical narrative, alternative historical reflections came from foreign scholars or Spanish exiles. Much of this scholarship focused on the international aspects of the Spanish Civil War, and especially the role of the Internation-

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2 For an in-depth analysis of how the Spanish Civil War influenced the political situation in Croatia, see Vjeran Pavlaković, *The Battle for Spain is Ours: Croatia and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2014.

3 The Association of Yugoslav Volunteers in the Spanish Republican Army, 1936-1939 (*Udruženje jugoslavenskih dobrovoljaca španske republikanske vojske, 1936-1939*).

4 Gojko Berić, *Zbogom XX. stoljeće: sjećanja Ive Vejvode*, Zagreb: Profil, 2013, p. 77.



al Brigades, which distorted the reality and Spanish character of the conflict. After Franco's death in 1975, Spanish elites pursued a policy of reconciliation »in order to silence the bitter voices of the past«, and used the traumatic collective memory of the civil war to reinforce the lesson that such a fratricidal conflict should never be repeated.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars view Spain as a model for democratic transition, especially when it comes to issues of transitional justice and dealing with the past. However, ongoing debates over justice for the victims of the Franco dictatorship and the controversies which have taken place over the Historical Memory Law (*Ley de la Memoria Histórica*) from 2007 onwards indicate that the ghosts of the civil war have not been completely laid to rest.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have also tackled a number of thorny issues such as Francoist (and Republican) repression,<sup>7</sup> the activities of the anti-Franco guerrillas (*maquis*) that continued for decades after the end of the civil war,<sup>8</sup> the myths of both pro-Republican and pro-Nationalist camps,<sup>9</sup> and new perspectives on the cultural history of the war.<sup>10</sup>

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5 Paloma Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy*, trans. by Mark Oakley, New York: Berghahn Books, 2002, p. xx.

6 Oxana Shevel, *The Politics of Memory in a Divided Society: A Comparison of Post-Franco Spain and Post-Soviet Ukraine*, in: *Slavic Review*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2011, p. 139.

7 Javier Alfaya, *Crónica de los años perdidos: La España del tardofranquismo*, Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2003; Julius Ruiz, *Seventy Years on: Historians and Repression during and after the Spanish Civil War*, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2009; and Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-century Spain*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012.

8 Dolors Marín Silvestre, *Clandestinos: El Maquis contra el franquismo, 1934-1975*, Barcelona: Plaza & Janés Editores, 2002.

9 Pío Moa, *El derrumbe de la segunda república y la guerra civil*, Madrid: Encuentro, 2001; and Alberto Reig Tapia, *Memoria de la Guerra Civil: Los mitos de la tribu*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999.

10 Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, eds., *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

The Spanish Civil War was first and foremost the result of political, social, and economic problems which Spain faced in the early twentieth century, and not the ideological divisions that came to characterize it later. Although Spain had succeeded in staying out of the First World War, it was nonetheless wracked by violence as strikes paralyzed the state and the government responded with brutal force. After the dictatorship under General Primo de Rivera failed, citizens greeted the declaration of the Second Republic on 14 April 1931 with considerable jubilation on the streets of Spain. It seemed that the forces of liberalism had become victorious, and the new left-leaning government in the *Cortes* (parliament) attempted to push through ambitious reforms that secularized education, improved workers' rights, offered autonomy to Spanish regions that had chafed under Madrid's rule, and began to tackle the difficult agrarian problem and deplorable conditions in which the Spanish peasantry lived. However, the Spanish Left was too divided, and had been too threatening to the established classes for it to stay in power, and when new elections were held in 1933, a right-wing coalition called CEDA (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*), emerged victorious. In early 1936, when new elections were called for due to corruption scandals that had brought down the CEDA government, Spain was already deeply divided ideologically and seething with barely controlled political violence.

Despite deep divisions on the Spanish Left, various factors - such as the authoritarianism of the reactionary forces, and the rise of international fascism - convinced republicans, liberals, socialists, and communists, as well as Basque and Catalan nationalists, to form a coalition against the Right.<sup>11</sup> Although the Popular Front won only slightly more votes in the elections on 16 February (4,654,116 votes, or 34.3%) than the right-wing National Front (4,503,505 votes, or

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11 Helen Graham, *The Republic at War, 1936-1939*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

33.2%), Spain's electoral system awarded the Popular Front more seats than it had proportionately won.<sup>12</sup> The Spanish Socialist Working Party (PSOE – *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) was divided between the fiery Francisco Largo Caballero, known as »the Spanish Lenin«, and the more reformist Indalecio Prieto.<sup>13</sup> The PCE received only two minor cabinet posts, but the Right had already begun to accuse the Popular Front government of acting as an extension of Soviet power. The Right, including militants from the CEDA and Spain's fascists, the Falange, clashed with supporters of the government and armed supporters of the UGT and CNT.

The assassination of José Calvo Sotelo, the authoritarian monarchist leader of the National Front, on 13 July 1936, was the trigger that set into motion the *pronunciamiento*<sup>14</sup> that a group of Army officers had been planning if the Popular Front were to win the elections. Rebel generals, including Francisco Franco, Emilio Mola, and José Sanjurjo, believed that the leftist coalition posed a dire threat to Spain, and decided to act before the country would allegedly be turned into a Soviet satellite.<sup>15</sup> The military uprising began on the 17 July in Morocco, a Spanish colony, and spread the following day to the mainland. Consequently, some of Franco's best (and most

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12 Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, rev. ed., New York: Modern Library, 2001, p. 147.

13 Francisco Largo Caballero (1869-1946) was the leader of the left-wing faction of the Spanish Socialist Party, and served as prime minister from 1936 to 1937. Indalecio Prieto (1883-1962) represented the right-wing faction of the Socialist Party, and was the Minister of Defense from May 1937 until March 1938.

14 The army, which saw itself as the defender of the Spanish state, had repeatedly intervened into politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by carrying out a *pronunciamiento*, or military coup.

15 Franco outlasted all the other leading conspirators and was able to concentrate power so as to take control of the leadership by the end of the civil war, since both Sanjurjo (1872–1936) and Mola (1887–1937) died in plane crashes during the early phases of the conflict.

brutal) troops came from the Spanish Foreign Legion (*Tercios*) and the Moorish units of the Army of Africa. The government initially hesitated as it was unsure which army units would remain loyal, but it soon distributed weapons to the working class militias who were resisting what they believed was a fascist grab for power. The military rebellion had failed to gain control over Spain's main cities, in part due to the loyalty of certain army commanders and partly because of spontaneous mass resistance by workers, anarchists, and ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, the rebels had a foothold in southern Spain and controlled the region of Navarre in the north, where the followers of a strongly religious monarchist movement, the Carlists, had thrown in their lot with the army. Thus Spain was plunged into civil war; on one side were the reactionary forces that had joined in the army's uprising, including the Catholic Church, two monarchist movements with rival claimants to the throne, landowners, and the fascist Falange, while opposing them were the members of the Popular Front supported by anarchists, the Basques, Catalans, and other leftist parties.<sup>16</sup>

What initially seemed to be a local conflict in a European backwater quickly grew with the involvement of other countries. Franco appealed to Germany and Italy, and soon the two dictators were supplying the nationalist rebels with weapons, equipment, and soldiers. The legally elected Popular Front government initially sought help from Western democracies, in particular England and France. However, fears of a larger European war and memories of the massive losses of the First World War pushed England

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16 Rather than delve into the complex array of political parties and their abbreviations, I have provided only a brief overview of the two sides in the civil war, and have focused on those groups which were most relevant to the situation in Croatia. George Orwell, commenting on the »kaleidoscope of political parties and trade unions,« wrote that it seemed as though »Spain were suffering from a plague of initials.« George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1952, p. 47.

and France to pursue a policy of non-intervention, and to place an embargo on Spain in an attempt to isolate the conflict. The Republic, which was the part of Spain that remained under the control of the government, then turned to the Soviet Union for help. Stalin decided to intervene by aiding the Republic, and although Soviet aid was instrumental in keeping the Republican defense alive for as long as it did, this aid was never enough to decisively defeat the Nationalists. Moreover, Soviet intervention brought with it all elements of the Stalinist system, including the liquidation of political opponents who veered from the Soviet line.

Foreign involvement suddenly transformed a Spanish crisis into an international battleground. The farce of non-intervention did not stop the flow of German, Italian, and Soviet aid to both sides, although the Nationalists, who consisted of most of the experienced pre-war army, held the advantage militarily throughout the war and benefited the most from the arms blockade.

## **The Spanish Civil War as a Global Event**

The failed uprising in July 1936 quickly blossomed into a fully-fledged civil war that gripped the world's attention. A revolutionary surge swept through Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, and other Spanish cities. Workers' militias and anarchists, armed by the desperate government, fought against soldiers and the Civil Guard. The revolutionary energy in Republican cities, where the »people« had taken power into their own hands and seemingly created a new society, served as a powerful mobilizing force for the Left. Pictures of armed workers taking power and controlling factories inspired members of the working class movement in other countries to rise and defend the Spanish Republic, believing in the ideal of international solidarity with their Spanish brethren. The revolutionary upheaval appeared to

herald the creation of a new, more just society. As one participant in those tumultuous events recalled: »Suddenly you feel their [the working classes'] power; you can't imagine how rapidly the masses are capable of organizing themselves.«<sup>17</sup> Despite the initial potential of revolutionary energy unleashed by the failed coup, the war in Spain was ultimately determined on the battlefield. The rebel Nationalists were pitted against the Republicans, who had democratic legitimacy but were at a grave disadvantage from the start due to Franco's professional and well-equipped army.

In August 1936, England and France pledged that they would not intervene in Spain, followed by (in theory) Germany, Italy, Portugal, and the Soviet Union by the end of the month. This series of diplomatic initiatives became known as the Non-Intervention Agreement, although it was never recognized as a single legal and binding document.<sup>18</sup> On 9 September 1936 in London, the aforementioned countries established the Non-Intervention Committee, which, in the words of Hugh Thomas, »was to graduate from equivocation to hypocrisy«, and remained in effect until the end of the war.<sup>19</sup>

Franco delayed General Juan Yagüe's Nationalist troops advancing on Madrid by ordering him to break the siege of the Alcázar, a fortress in the city of Toledo under siege by Republican militias. Although Franco was later criticized for his decision to relieve the Alcázar due to its minor strategic significance and the fact that those defending Madrid were given more time to prepare for the Nationalist attack, »the emphasis given to the ›epic‹ of the Alcázar in subsequent propaganda derived from a desire to leave the impres-

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17 Narciso Julian, communist railway man, quoted in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1979, p. 137.

18 George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert, *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931–1939*, London: Longman, 1995, pp. 190-191.

19 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 382.

sion forever that the decision was a right one.«<sup>20</sup> According to Hugh Thomas, the successful relief of the Alcázar was the crucial event which convinced those generals who were unsure about their choosing Franco to vote for him<sup>21</sup>, while Sebastian Balfour characterizes it as »the most enduring symbol of the insurgent cause.«<sup>22</sup> Consequently, on 1 October, Franco was installed in Burgos with the full powers of the junta, and from that moment on he was increasingly referred to as *Caudillo*, or leader, his stature undoubtedly boosted by his role as the »savior of the Alcázar.«

While the Western democracies passively remained on the sideline as the legal Spanish government struggled against the insurgent onslaught, the Soviet Union and Mexico sent much needed supplies to the Republic. This came at a heavy price. Not only did the Republican government transfer much of the country's extensive gold reserves to Moscow in return for rifles (many of them outdated), tanks, planes, and other military equipment, but the Soviet pilots, tank drivers, and military advisors were accompanied by NKVD agents who increasingly waged a war within a war behind Republican front lines. The Popular Front government, desperate to convince England and France that democracy, and not revolutionary communism, was at stake, played into the hands of Stalin, who provided enough support to keep the Republic alive but left it unable to achieve a decisive victory.

The Nationalist drive to take Madrid ground to a halt on the outskirts of the city in November, when the first units of the soon-to-be-legendary International Brigades joined the hastily organized government troops, workers' militias, and citizens manning the

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20 Ibid., p. 400.

21 Ibid., p. 410.

22 Sebastian Balfour, *Spain from 1931 to the Present*, in Raymond Carr, ed., *Spain: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 258.

barricades. Coordinated by the Comintern and led by a variety of leading international communists, the brigades were a mix of experienced communist cadres sent to gain additional knowledge on the battlefield and volunteers who came from all kinds of backgrounds, from labor activists to adventurers, artists, and intellectuals. On 22 October, the Republican command decided to create the International Brigades, commanded by Comintern operatives and composed of foreigners that had rushed to defend the Republic over the first few months after the attempted coup. The first four battalions – the »Commune de Paris« (French-Belgian), »Edgar Andre« (German), »Garibaldi« (Italian), and »Dombrowski« (Polish-Balkan) – gathered in October in Albacete. By early November the Republicans had formed the first two International Brigades (the XI and XII) out of these battalions (along with the »Ernst Thälmann Column«) and sent them to assist in the defense of Madrid. The Comintern established three more brigades (XIII, XIV and XV) in December and January, subsequently reorganizing them into divisions supplemented with Spanish troops when the flow of international volunteers diminished. It is estimated that between 32,000 and 35,000 individuals from fifty-three countries fought in the brigades, while another 5,000 foreigners served in other units and 10,000 volunteered for the Republic in non-military roles.<sup>23</sup> Comintern veterans such as Andre Marty, Luigi Longo, Manfred Stern »Kleber«, Mate Zalka »Lukacs«, and Janos Galicz »Gak« commanded the International Brigades, which often resulted in political calculations taking precedence over military strategies.

Spain also inspired a generation of poets, authors, intellectuals, artists, and activists to become passionately involved in the

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23 Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006, p. 157. For the Nationalist side see Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco: International Volunteers in Nationalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, London: Leicester University Press, 2001.



cause. Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Neruda, George Orwell, Langston Hughes, and Pablo Picasso are just a few of the most well-known figures who became militarily, politically, or artistically involved in the Spanish Civil War. The defenders of the Republic believed that it was their moral duty to stand up to what was perceived to be a great evil. Although the Soviet Union and the Comintern played a central role in supplying and organizing aid to the Popular Front government, the defense of the Republic was a cause championed not only by communists, but also by anarchists, socialists, liberals, republicans, democrats, and people who identified themselves as simply »antifascists«, and who were all seemingly unified on the Spanish issue.

However, many individuals who went to fight in or report on Spain, especially from the West, became disillusioned with the political intrigues and Stalinist character that defined the Republic at war. Communist historians have long trumpeted Stalin's support of the Spanish Republic as »a saga that would always reveal the Soviet Union in a positive light.«<sup>24</sup> Recent scholarship based on the newly opened Comintern archives has provided considerable insight into the goals, methods, and degree of Soviet involvement in Spain, revealing a much darker truth.<sup>25</sup> The documents and research support the argument that by »using officials from the military, intelligence, and the Comintern, Moscow attempted to take over and run the Spanish economy, government, and armed forces.«<sup>26</sup> Regardless of Stalin's long-term plans had a Republican victory occurred, the

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24 Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 317.

25 Important Comintern documents relating to Spain have been translated and analyzed in Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, eds., *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.

26 Radosh, et al., *Spain Betrayed*, p. xviii.

Popular Front government led the war effort, and despite the authoritarian methods adopted during the conflict, the Republican side defended Spanish democracy from an illegal military uprising.

After the Nationalists' efforts to assume control of Madrid and end the war quickly were foiled due to the gallant defense of the city by its citizens, the rest of the conflict could be characterized in terms of slow and steady Nationalist gains, combined with repeated Republican offensives that could never be converted into strategic victories. In this scenario the Nationalist forces were bound to win, due to the professional army under Franco's command and the constant supply of weapons from Hitler, Mussolini, and most controversially, private companies in the United States (such as Texaco) that violated neutrality laws in order to provide fuel for the Nationalist war machine. The Republicans could never replace the men and material they lost in costly attacks, and they were too internally divided and internationally isolated to do more than delay the inevitable.

The differences on the battlefield became clear as early as February 1937, when the Republican command hastily threw a number of newly organized International Brigades into combat at the Battle of the Jarama to prevent the Nationalists from severing the road between Madrid and Valencia, where the Popular Front government had relocated during the siege of the capital. Although the Nationalist advance was stopped, the brigades took heavy casualties, especially the American and Canadian units. These events have been recounted in a number of memoirs and most recently in Adam Hochschild's book *Spain in Our Hearts* (2016).<sup>27</sup> After the Republicans repelled another Nationalist attempt to take Madrid at the Battle of Guadalajara (March 1937), the Nationalists struck in the north in the isolated Basque Provinces, whose industries were coveted by both

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27 Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

armies. The German Condor Legion's destruction of the Basque town of Guernica on 26 April sparked a vicious propaganda war instigated by the opposing combatants and their international sympathizers. This was followed by the Nationalists' capture of Bilbao in June. In the meantime, the Republic attempted a series of ambitious summer offensives so as to relieve pressure on the northern front, informing media the world over of new stories of bloody battles, terrifying bomb attacks against civilians, and of repression of one's enemies (both real and imagined) behind Nationalist and Republican lines. The Battle of Brunete (6 -26 July 1937) and the Zargoza offensive (24 August - October 1937) both involved significant numbers of foreign volunteers, and these events revealed the inability of the Republic to secure victories on the battlefield and prevent the Nationalist takeover of the Basque lands.

Although the course of the war was being determined on the frontlines, the Republic's revolutionary fervor was being quashed by its own government in the name of creating a unified military front against Franco. In May 1937, fighting erupted between anarchists and government troops in Barcelona, thus revealing the presence of conflicting visions for the future of the Republican war effort. While the anarchists embodied the spontaneous and impassioned energy of social revolution, the increasingly powerful communists ultimately prevailed in bringing all of the Republic's disparate political groups under one command. The crushing of the revolutionary forces during the May Days in Barcelona signaled the beginning of Republican Spain's transformation from democracy into military authoritarianism, assisted by Soviet NKVD agents who mercilessly pursued anarchists, alleged Trotskyites, and indeed anyone who disagreed with the government's policies.<sup>28</sup> Francisco Largo Caballero, the veteran socialist leader who had headed the Republican government

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28 Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 263-273.

since September 1936, resigned on 15 May, and was replaced by Juan Negrín, who many considered to be under the control of Moscow.

The communist reorganization of the Republic's forces initially bore positive results during the fierce assault on the city of Teruel (15 December 1937 - 22 February 1938) in horrific winter conditions, which claimed as many lives as the actual fighting. Although the Republic was able to capture Teruel after weeks of stiff resistance from its defenders, Franco's unwillingness to allow any loss of territory spurred a Nationalist counter-offensive that recaptured the city and devastated the Republican capacity for offensive military operations.

Prime Minister Negrín threw the bulk of the remaining Republican forces into one final offensive, which was calculated to prove to the world that the Republic was still alive and worth fighting to save. As with previous offensives, the Battle of the Ebro (25 July - 15 November 1938) saw the Republican army gain considerable ground in a well-executed surprise attack, until the brunt of the Nationalist war machine was redirected to that front. The Nationalists literally blasted the Republican troops off the barren hills and pushed them back across the Ebro River in full retreat. Once again, the Republic had suffered irreplaceable losses of both men and equipment, and the road to Barcelona lay open for another Nationalist offensive.

Even the Republic's dismantling of the International Brigades was unable to sway the opinions of England or France. While thousands of former participants in the Brigades returned to their home countries, those who had lost their citizenship (such as the volunteers from Yugoslavia) or who were from Axis countries (Germans and Italians) continued to fight for the Republic as the Nationalists drew closer to Barcelona. The capital of Catalonia, and the heart of Spain's anarcho-syndicalist movement, fell to Franco on 26 January 1939 despite a spirited defense outside of the city. Columns of civilian refugees, Republican soldiers, and international volunteers, numbering over 400,000 individuals in total, surged north across

the French border, from where they were taken to a number of camps quickly set up by the French authorities, or built by the Republican prisoners themselves. In early March, Colonel Segismundo Casado carried out a coup against the Negrín government in a vain attempt to negotiate a settlement with the Nationalists, and the final days of the Spanish Civil War were characterized by violence between different factions of the Republican army. Madrid, which had resisted Franco for over two years, capitulated at the end of March as the Republican army disintegrated. On 1 April 1939, the victorious *Caudillo* declared the civil war to be over.

### **Interwar Yugoslavia: the Regime and Political Opposition**

As Spain was tearing itself apart in the late 1930s, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was itself deeply divided. The interwar era in Yugoslavia can be split into two broad periods; the first, from 1918 to 1929 (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), was characterized by a formal parliamentary democracy, while the second, from 1929 to 1941 (the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), saw the imposition of a royal dictatorship followed by a gradual return to a limited form of democracy before the country's destruction by Axis powers.

It was the murder of Stjepan Radić, leader of the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS – *Hrvatska seljačka stranka*), that prompted King Alexander Karađorđević to declare a royal dictatorship on 6 January 1929, bringing an end to all legal political activity. In 1931, a new »imposed« constitution (*Oktroirani ustav*) created the façade of democracy, even as numerous opposition politicians languished in prison.

King Alexander's assassination in 1934 left the throne temporarily vacant because the royal heir, Peter II, was not of age, and Royal Yugoslavia was placed under the control of the murdered king's cousin, Prince Paul. The eruption of the Spanish Civil War in the

summer of 1936 coincided with Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović's (1888-1961) rise on the political scene. Regent Prince Paul appointed Stojadinović after a strong performance by the Opposition Bloc, led by the HSS's Vladko Maček, in the elections on 5 May 1935. Despite initial moves made to relax press censorship, ease restrictions on public assemblies, and release over one thousand political prisoners, Stojadinović was reluctant to reach a significant compromise with either the Croatian or Serbian opposition.

Stojadinović's years in office (1935-1939) were characterized by a shift away from the alliance system created by France after the First World War, and a turn towards Germany, both politically and economically. From 1937 onwards, Stojadinović also increasingly adopted pseudo-fascist trappings, such as green-uniformed youths at his rallies and the title of *vođa*, or leader. This change in Yugoslavia's foreign policy, amidst continuing efforts to eradicate communist agitators, helps explain the government's position on the Spanish Civil War and the harsh tactics used to enforce its strict policy of non-intervention. Surrounded by countries with aspirations for Yugoslav territory, and faced with domestic instability arising from the continuing obstinacy of the Croatian nationalist opposition, Stojadinović's foreign policy goals focused on maintaining neutrality at all costs. Furthermore, the regime was faced with a resilient communist movement that continued to agitate against the state throughout Yugoslavia in spite of significant police successes in disrupting the Party's activities. The events in Spain were threatening to Yugoslavia both internationally, as Europe seemed on the verge of a general war, and domestically, because of the polarizing effect of the conflict. While supporters of Franco's Nationalists were minimal in Serbia, the state considered those supporting the Republic to be more dangerous because the KPJ was skilled at exploiting antifascist sentiment, economic and social dissatisfaction, and the desire for national liberation through their discussion of the war in Spain. The

Stojadinović regime correctly anticipated that the Yugoslav communists would use the Spanish conflict to further their own political agenda.

Thus, from the very beginning of the war in Spain, the Yugoslav authorities made every effort to limit its impact on the internal political situation. This was manifested not only by following a strict policy of non-intervention and by controlling access to information on events occurring in Spain, but also through involved widespread police and gendarme operations against all overtly pro-Republican activities, such as the collection of aid, public demonstrations, and the recruitment of volunteers. The Yugoslav regime identified Republican Spain as an outpost of Bolshevism early on in the conflict, and Stojadinović's anticommunism ensured that Yugoslavia tacitly supported the Nationalist side in the war. In this sense, the position of the regime and the legal opposition parties, which were otherwise at odds on most issues, was very similar. Both feared that Spain would strengthen oppositional forces in the country, and through the press and public statements, therefore sought to portray the Spanish Civil War as either irrelevant or as a horrific consequence of supporting radical political options. The violence in Spain began to attract the attention of Stojadinović and Regent Paul, who were determined to prevent a similar situation from developing in Yugoslavia. Eager to prevent an escalation of the war, Stojadinović agreed to a policy of non-intervention on 23 August 1936, and sent Slavko Grujić as Yugoslavia's representative to the Non-Intervention Committee.

Despite the deliberations of the politicians in London, foreigners were pouring into Spain, most of them volunteering to defend the threatened Popular Front government. By the end of 1936, the authorities in Belgrade had learned of the presence of Yugoslav volunteers in Republican Spain. In December, a report was sent to all the district heads, city police, and border guards, which contained

information from Yugoslavia's embassy in Madrid stating that

»... in Spain, our citizen-volunteers have formed a special "Yugoslav company". Our citizen-volunteers come from all parts of the Kingdom and their numbers grow daily in the communist-Bolshevik militia. The latest of these volunteers are being transported from Belgium.«<sup>29</sup>

The Ministry of the Interior sent out instructions to collect information on individuals who were known to have left for Spain. A subsequent report stated that the communists were primarily »recruiting volunteers for Spain among Yugoslav worker colonies in Belgium and France«. However, it also noted that »communist agents will attempt to recruit poor workers for Spain here as well, which must be thwarted by all means available.«<sup>30</sup> Following this report, the authorities began collecting information from every district concerning known or suspected individuals who were fighting in Spain. In addition to reports from the local authorities, the police relied on interrogations conducted with communist recruiters or informers, as well as on confiscated mail which arrived from Spanish or French addresses, and communist publications. They used the information gathered to build a fairly comprehensive database of volunteers from Yugoslavia.

Initially, the Yugoslav authorities focused on preventing the collection of funds and other aid materials for the Spanish Republic, which communists organized through their Yugoslav National Com-

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29 Jugoslavenski državljani kao dobrovoljci u vojsci Madridske vlade, podaci, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. br. 38029/36, 12.12.1936, Hrvatski državni arhiv (HDA), coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 1.

30 Dobrovoljaca vrbovanje po komunistima za Španiju, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. br. 296/37, 11.1.1937, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25.



mittee for Aid to Spain, which was based in Paris. They also censored pro-Republican publications, which were often sent from abroad and circulated by workers. The authorities passed a number of laws restricting travel to Spain, yet police reports indicated that the flow of volunteers had not abated. The Ministry of Internal Affairs issued new instructions to the police on 8 February 1937, which declared that »our country must maintain strict neutrality towards the events in Spain at any cost, and therefore greater supervision over the issuing of visas must be expanded to prevent the recruitment of volunteers among our citizens.«<sup>31</sup> On 20 February, the Non-Intervention Committee, which had primarily concentrated on stopping the export and transport of war material to Spain, reached an agreement banning foreign volunteers from fighting in Spain. Nevertheless, thousands of Italian and German troops continued fighting on Franco's side, and the Republic's International Brigades received enough new recruits to allow them to bear the brunt of some of the most difficult battles of 1937.

The Committee's decision, as well as the news that the number of Yugoslav volunteers in Spain had grown so much that they had formed their own battalion, prompted Yugoslavia's minister of internal affairs, the Slovene Anton Korošec, to draft a new, comprehensive law regarding the situation in Spain on 3 March, named the »Decree on the Prohibition of Recruiting Volunteers and Collecting Contributions for Spain« (*Naredba o zabrani vrbovanja dobrovoljaca i skupljanja priloga za Španiju*).<sup>32</sup> The decree was essentially another legal tool used by the government against the communists, who were the main organizers of aid to the Republic and who were getting public attention thanks to their support of democratic Spain.

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31 Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 4134/37, 8.2.1937, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25.

32 Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije, no. 30, 10.3.1937.

The decree prohibited the following:

1. The recruitment of volunteers for Spain anywhere on Yugoslav territory.
2. The departure of volunteers for Spain from Yugoslavia.
3. The collection of money and other charitable contributions for either warring side in Spain.
4. The issuing of passports with a visa for Spain.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, in a document circulated along with the abovementioned decree, the Ministry of Internal Affairs declared that any Yugoslav citizen who had fought in Spain would lose their citizenship. This clause had severe consequences for Yugoslav veterans trapped in French camps after the defeat of the Republic in 1939.<sup>34</sup>

In April 1937, authorities compiling data on volunteers in Spain concluded that all Yugoslav citizens »who are fighting in the government's ranks have declared unanimously that they are communists, admitting that they came to Spain with the knowledge and approval of local communist sections or district communist committees.«<sup>35</sup> Whilst it is true that the KPJ organized the recruitment and transport of volunteers to Spain, and that it was prominent in the Yugoslav units of the Comintern-led International Brigades, the blanket conclusion that all volunteers were communists was a justification for the harsh tactics taken by the regime and was not an accurate portrayal of the volunteers.

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33 Kraljevina Jugoslavija, Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova, Odeljenje za državnu zaštitu I, br. 3992, 3.3.1937, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25. It was also decreed that all new passports issued after 3 March 1937 should have visibly stamped on them »Not valid for Spain«.

34 »Dostavlja se naredba o zabrani pomaganja sukobljenim stranama u Španiji«, Kraljevina Jugoslavija, Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova, Odeljenje za državnu zaštitu I, Pov. I br. 8121, 3.3.1937, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25.

35 »Jugoslavenski dobrovoljci u Španiji«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 10043/37, 7.4.1937, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25.

For Stojadinović's police apparatus, however, anything associated with Republican Spain was immediately considered to be communist activity. By early 1938, the Ministry of the Interior was convinced that the Republic was fully »Bolshevized«, and that »a victory for ›Republican‹ Spain would undoubtedly result in the legalization of communism and Bolshevism on the Iberian Peninsula, which would create a base for further expansion across Europe.«<sup>36</sup> Reports from the Yugoslav embassy in Madrid painted a similar picture, describing how »totalitarian Bolshevik actions are intensively continuing in collectivizing all the land, persecuting the Church, and brutally repressing everyone.«<sup>37</sup> While outwardly maintaining the façade of neutrality, the Yugoslav government had essentially sided with Franco and was using the Spanish Civil War as a pretext for repression against domestic antifascists. Flyers calling for the collection of aid to help refugees from Barcelona prompted the police to even crack down on this and similar humanitarian relief.<sup>38</sup> The perception of the Republic as being a Bolshevik dictatorship also influenced Yugoslavia's foreign policy. The Balkan Agreement, the result of a meeting between the leaders of Greece, Turkey, Romania, and Yugoslavia held in Ankara from 25 – 27 February 1938, reaffirmed those countries' commitment to non-intervention in Spain, but included a clause in which they stated they could continue to meet with Franco's representatives in order to protect their economic interests.<sup>39</sup>

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36 »Boljševizacija ›republikanske Španije«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 3302-1938, 3.2.1938, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 3, no. 62.

37 Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 37811/38, 23.9.1938, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 3, no. 44.

38 Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 56316/38, 23.12.1938, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 3, no. 42.

39 *Glasnik*, 5.3.1938, p. 1.

The Ministry of the Interior was aware that the communists intended to use Spain for both propaganda purposes as well as for the military training of its cadres. Suspecting that the KPJ was preparing »a cadre of future agitators and propagators«, the authorities concluded in a report that

»among various volunteer units on the Madrid front, communist and anarchist ideology is being systematically propagated, and at every opportunity the necessity of carrying out a social revolution on the Spanish model in other European states is emphasized. Communist agents are trying to create a legion of collaborators out of the foreign volunteers with the purpose of executing a global social revolution.«<sup>40</sup>

The KPJ leadership certainly imagined that its volunteers in Spain would one day lead the revolution back in Yugoslavia, as is evident in its illegal publications and internal documents. In his memoirs, Milovan Đilas, a member of Tito's inner circle who had been in charge of recruiting volunteers from Serbia, recalls Tito encouraging Yugoslav leftists to get involved in the issue of the Spanish Civil War because »Spain could serve as an excellent training ground for Party military and political cadres.«<sup>41</sup> Rodoljub Čolaković, a member of the Central Committee, reminded the Party in an article in *Proleter* that

»it is necessary to draw all lessons from the struggle in Spain that apply to other nations. One of the most important lessons is that we must learn military skills so with a mini-

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40 »Dobrovoljci trupa španske vlade«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 34112/37, 24.11.1937, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 27.

41 Milovan Đilas, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. Drenka Willen, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973, p. 265.

mal number of victims we can destroy the bloody enemy of humanity, fascism.«<sup>42</sup>

The KPJ tactic would indeed prove valuable, since after the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, the Spanish veterans would play a key role in resisting the fascist occupiers and their domestic collaborators.

## ›The Battle of Spain is Ours: Mobilizing Volunteers



The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936 gave the KPJ a public cause to rally around and invigorate its activities. Almost immediately after news of the Nationalist uprising spread throughout Europe, the KPJ began mobilizing its resources around the Spanish cause. In the socialist-era historiography, Yugoslav support for the Spanish Republic was portrayed as a spontaneous stand against fascist aggression, even though the KPJ was merely following Moscow's orders, which were pushing it to organize its cadres both in Yugoslavia and abroad. This does not mean that large numbers of Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and other Yugoslavs did not genuinely support the struggle of the legal Spanish government, but rather indicates how the role of the Soviet Union was minimized in post-war narratives in favor of the KPJ's own alleged initiative taken in directing its full attention on Spain. The Central Committee of the KPJ met on 8 August 1936 to discuss the significance of the war in Spain, and shortly thereafter issued a circular that claimed the anti-fascist struggle by the Spanish Republic »would have a great impact on the struggle for freedom in Yugoslavia. Thus, there can be no

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42 Proleter, vol. 13, no. 7, June 1937, p. 6.

room for passivity, silence, and neutrality.«<sup>43</sup> The Central Committee itself moved from Vienna to Paris during this period, and a number of its members were sent into Spain to coordinate the Yugoslav volunteers defending the Republic. In early August 1936, the International Committee for Aid to the Spanish People (*Comité International de l'Aide au Peuple Espagnol*) began work in Paris along with several other front organizations. Additionally, Red Help International initiated fund-raising drives and collections throughout Europe. In Paris, the KPJ also established the Yugoslav National Committee for Aid to Republican Spain (*Jugoslavenski nacionalni komitet za pomoć republikanskoj Španiji*), which initially collected humanitarian aid and supplies such as cigarettes, books, clothes, and other necessities for the Republican Army and the International Brigades.<sup>44</sup> Later the Yugoslav National Committee coordinated the transfer of Yugoslav volunteers across the Pyrenees and into Spain. Similar committees were set up in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and North America, which mobilized individuals from the Yugoslav economic migrant communities and directed them to Paris and eventually Spain.

On 18 September 1936, Milan Gorkić, the KPJ's general secretary, sent instructions to Party members based in Yugoslavia regarding actions to be taken in response to the escalation and internationalization of the war in Spain.<sup>45</sup> Communists were ordered to thwart aid to the fascists, collect aid for the Republic, and learn from the lessons of Spain, which according to Gorkić was the »most

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43 CK KPJ Okružnica br. 5, 8.8.1936, ARP KI-1936/278, reprinted in Čedo Kapor, ed., *Španija 1936–1939: Zbornik sećanja Jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca u Španskom ratu*, vol. 5, Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1971, p. 453.

44 A letter from the Yugoslav National Committee to Yugoslav volunteers in Spain (dated 2.12.1936) mentioned 10,000 francs worth of books and 300 boxes of Zeta cigarettes that had already been sent. ALBA/Moscow microfilm, Tamiment Institute, Opis 2, fond 78, p. 29.

45 Gorkić (1904–1937, real name Josip Čižinski) served as the general secretary of the KPJ from 1932 until his fall from power and execution in 1937.

difficult yet most important aspect« of their assignment.<sup>46</sup> Tito, who would eventually succeed Gorkić as general secretary, penned a directive to KPJ regional committees on 23 October that stated that Spain was

»the central question of all international politics. The struggle of the heroic Spanish people is not just a struggle which will result in the victory or defeat of democracy only in Spain, rather it is the beginning of an armed conflict between fascism and democracy the world over.«<sup>47</sup>

There was an emphasis on using the example of Spain to promote the creation of a Popular Front in Yugoslavia, and to use legal and semi-legal methods to organize support for the legal Spanish government among the public.

Communist actions in support of the Spanish Republic primarily assumed three forms: an information campaign making use of both legal and illegal publications, the collection of aid for the Spanish people, and the recruitment of volunteers for the International Brigades. After the fall of the Republic in 1939, the KPJ focused on helping the volunteers from Yugoslavia get out of the French internment camps, where they were trapped due to their loss of citizenship. Whereas pro-Franco supporters were generally tolerated by the regime, the authorities cracked down on anything which was intended to aid the Republic, largely because Stojadinović's neutrality policy essentially entailed tacit support for the Nationalists.<sup>48</sup> In

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46 Milan Gorkić, Instrukcija sekretara CK KPJ upućena u zemlju, reprinted in Kapor, Španija, vol. 5, p. 456.

47 Tito, Svim Pokrajinskim komitetima KPJ, in Pero Damjanović, ed., Josip Broz Tito Sabrana djela, vol. 3, Belgrade: Komunist, 1983, vol. 3, p. 30.

48 *Proleter* angrily protested how »the government obstructs the printing of the truth on Spain, but allows *Hrvatska straža*, *Slovenec*, and other reactionary newspapers to insult the legal Spanish government on a daily basis, and to sling mud on the heroic Spanish people.« *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 6, 15.5.1937, p. 4.

other words, the regime began using the Spanish Civil War as a justification for the even greater persecution of communists and their sympathizers.

To a large degree, the efforts relating to the KPJ's support of the Republic were calculated so as to generate support for the creation of a Popular Front, especially in Croatia. Spain was a powerful example cited in the effort to build support among Croats, since the KPJ characterized the Spanish Popular Front as a defender of democracy and of the national rights of Basques and Catalans. Although the origins of the national question in Spain differed greatly from the situation in Yugoslavia, there were many similarities between the Basque and Catalan struggles for national rights with those of Yugoslavia's own ethnic groups. During the Spanish Civil War, the Republic gave the Basques and Catalans significant autonomy that was in sharp contrast to the centralized state envisioned by the Nationalists. This federal concept of the state had many parallels with the KPJ's political platform, which was frequently emphasized in communist publications. It was during this period that Tito oversaw the creation of the Communist Parties of Slovenia (*KPS-Komunistička partija Slovenije*) and Croatia (*KPH-Komunistička partija Hrvatske*), which further strengthened the KPJ's claim that they fought for national liberation from the *Greater Serbian* bourgeoisie.

Although the KPJ ultimately failed to form a Popular Front in Croatia, or any part of Yugoslavia for that matter, the Party's actions during the 1930s in relation to Spain contributed to a steady growth in membership despite a massive number of arrests by the regime and a more cautious approach in accepting new members due to infiltration by police agents. While information available regarding the number of KPJ members remains patchy for certain years because of the conditions under which the Party was operating, it is estimated that the number of communists in Croatia increased from less than 800 at the end of 1934, to around 1,500 in 1939 (out



of a total of 4,000 communists over the whole of Yugoslavia).<sup>49</sup> One year later, the KPH had 2,544 members, out of a total of 6,455 KPJ members. Even more impressive was the growth of the KPJ's youth wing, the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ – *Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*), which boasted 17,800 members by 1940.<sup>50</sup> According to the historian Ivan Jelić, from 1937 onwards the communists in Zagreb were successful in expanding their organization to include groups other than workers, partly because of the broader appeals of the Popular Front.<sup>51</sup> However, the growth of the communist organization cannot be solely attributed to the KPJ's activities relating to the Spanish Civil War. Rather, the Party's public campaign and propaganda efforts during this period, which consistently emphasized democracy and national freedom, were instrumental in expanding its influence among those who had identified fascism as being a grave danger.

The communists took advantage of the relaxing of the regime's censorship policies after 1935 and published a number of legal and semi-legal publications in Croatia. *Proleter* (*Proletarian*) was the central publication of the KPJ. In the summer of 1936, after two years in Prague, its base of operations was moved to Brussels. Smuggling copies of this newspaper into the country was one of the main tasks undertaken by communists traveling back to Yugoslavia, and the large number of Croats who were working in Belgium and France were often chosen to take copies of *Proleter* with them when returning home. *Radnik* (*Worker*) was the leading legal weekly that

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49 Cited in Bosiljka Janjatović, *Politika HSS prema radničkoj klasi: Hrvatski radnički savez 1921–1941. godine*, Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost, 1983, p. 43; and Ljubiša Vujošević, ed., *Povijest Saveza komunista Jugoslavije*, Belgrade: Izdavački centar komunist, 1985, p. 155.

50 Janjatović, *Politika HSS prema radničkoj klasi*, p. 43.

51 Ivan Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske, 1937–1945*, vol. 1, Zagreb: Globus, 1981, pp. 233–234.

essentially served as the mouthpiece of the communist organization in the United Worker's Syndicalist Association of Yugoslavia (URSSJ – *Ujedinjeni radnički sindikalni savez Jugoslavije*), and which was occasionally confiscated when particularly inflammatory articles in favor of Republican Spain were printed. In addition, the KPJ was extremely active in publishing booklets, pamphlets, brochures, and flyers on specific topics including the Spanish Civil War, although these were often quickly confiscated by the authorities as they were more open in their support for communism.

In its publications, the KPJ always sought to portray the conflict not as an ideological struggle between communism and fascism, or communism and Catholicism, but as the defense of democracy against fascism. Another aspect of the Popular Front that was emphasized was support for Basque and Catalan autonomy. KPJ instructions specifically called for this to be articulated in order to show that the Popular Front was committed to solving the national question both in Spain and Yugoslavia. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the communists argued that the Spanish Civil War was of the utmost relevance to the oppressed Yugoslav peoples, and that there were valuable lessons and experiences to be gained from that conflict for the anticipated future revolution.

Taking its cues from Moscow, which sought to minimize the revolutionary aspect of the Republican side in order to win the support of the Western democracies, the KPJ press likewise omitted any references to communist revolution in Spain.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the Party's publications emphasized the struggle for democracy and

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52 The Spanish Communist Party and its Soviet advisors did not only omit revolutionary discourse in the media, they also actively sought to suppress the spontaneous revolutionary energy released during the first months of the war. Joel Olson, *The Revolutionary Spirit: Hannah Arendt and the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War*, in *Polity*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1997, p. 466.

national freedom. In their newspapers, the communists rejected the allegations that the Popular Front was a front for Stalinist dictatorship, taking pains to portray the legal government as a coalition of democratic forces.

Thus, in addition to solving the national question in Spain, the Popular Front was credited with improving the lives of both peasants and workers. For this purpose, the communists devoted many articles to practical policies enacted by the Republic that had boosted agrarian reform and improved workers' rights. Of all the KPJ's publications, *Radnik* consistently covered the war in the greatest detail. While *Proleter* outlined the Party leadership's decisions on how to organize support for the Republic, and gave information concerning the Yugoslav volunteers fighting in the International Brigades, *Radnik* provided detailed news reports about the events in Spain and the reactions of the Great Powers. Every week, in addition to special reports, *Radnik* printed a news column devoted to the Spanish Civil War, which would end with a quote from a member of the Popular Front government or a soldier from the front line. Spanish workers were described as »fighting for a democratic and free Spain«<sup>53</sup>, while the war was characterized as a »struggle between fascism and the working class«.<sup>54</sup>

## **The Collection of Aid**

Possibly the most visible public activity the KPJ undertook during the time of the Spanish Civil War was the collection of aid for Spanish civilians and workers. These activities were often channeled through the main trade union, the URSSJ. These efforts not only

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53 *Radnik*, 8.1.1937, p. 7.

54 *Radnik*, 26.2.1937, p. 7.

strengthened the KPJ's image as dedicated opponents of international fascism, but also laid the groundwork for a widespread illegal network that would later play a vital role in the Second World War. Money, clothes, and supplies for children were collected and donated to the International Red Cross and International Red Help. Communists also organized petitions in support of the Republic, and held demonstrations against Franco's uprising, although the latter were rare because there was a real danger of being arrested by the authorities.

Less than a month after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, flyers were distributed among URSSJ members and associated organizations, calling for contributions »to help workers in Spain, so that we can all persevere in the struggle against the rebels.«<sup>55</sup> In September 1936, the Central Committee of the KPJ told its members that aid would be most effective if it were »carried out legally through a union organization or some kind of inter-union committee.«<sup>56</sup> However, the Yugoslav authorities had already decided to prevent this kind of action from being implemented among the workers, so methods of aid collection had to be subtler. In early January 1937, a police report concerning aid collection for Spain noted that »the communists in their actions are resourceful in a number of ways and are using all manners of tricks to escape the detection of the organs of government.«<sup>57</sup> Several months later, police agents

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55 Sakupljanje pomoći među radnicima za revoluciju u Španiji, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 25383/36, 18.8.1936, HDA, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25. The police were instructed to prevent this kind of aid collection and to confiscate all of the money gathered by the workers.

56 Instrukcija sekretara CK KPJ upućena u zemlju, br. 6, 18.9.1936, ARP KI-1936/330, reprinted in Kapor, Španija, vol. 5, p. 453.

57 Prikupljanje pomoći za Španiju, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 1324/37, 16.1.1937, HDA, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 25.

were alerted to the distribution of special stamps featuring a child with the caption »for Spanish children«, intended to raise money for the children of Republican soldiers. They were ordered to immediately confiscate them and punish those found with them.<sup>58</sup>

Although the prohibitions on collecting aid nearly always included the phrase »for either side in the war«, the prohibitions were clearly directed toward pro-Republican activities, since the non-intervention policy principally harmed the Republic and the greatest number of civilian casualties occurred in cities attacked by Nationalist forces. The aggressive steps taken by the Stojadinović regime against the provision of even humanitarian aid for the Republic is indicative of its draconian anticommunist policies during the years of the Spanish Civil War. However, it was the pursuit of potential volunteers heading to Spain that became the main priority of the Yugoslav authorities, and conversely, the greatest challenge facing the KPJ in its efforts to support the Republic.

## **Mobilizing Volunteers**

The KPJ's operatives in Yugoslavia and France intensified their efforts at transferring volunteers in 1937 after it had become clear that Madrid was being successfully defended and that the International Brigades would play an official role in the Republican forces. The Yugoslavs, eventually organized into special Balkan units, were among the most praised soldiers and held numerous positions as officers and political commissars. More significantly, approximately 250 veterans who were able to return to Yugoslavia through a variety of illegal channels were crucial in the early stages of the Partisan

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58 Prikupljanje pomoći za decu španskih komunista, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 20964/37, 24.7.1937, HDA, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 1, no. 13.

Resistance Movement (see Section 7). The veterans were valued not only for their military skills, but for their political loyalty; most had gone to Spain simply as antifascists, but returned as committed communists.

The Comintern began mobilizing volunteers for Spain in September 1936 by establishing a clandestine International Committee for Volunteers in Paris under the direction of the veteran French communist Andre Marty. The Comintern had approved a resolution to send help to Spain in early August, but it was only after Stalin's final decision on 18 September that the secretariat issued instructions to »proceed with the recruitment of volunteers with military experience from the workers of all countries, with the purpose of sending them to Spain.«<sup>59</sup>

The leadership of the KPJ was also directly involved in the transfer of volunteers to Spain. Gorkić and his successor Tito both organized the flow of volunteers from their headquarters in Paris, Milovan Đilas was in charge of recruitment in Belgrade, and a number of other Party operatives worked in Yugoslav cities and abroad, such as Ljubo Vušović (Montenegro and parts of Dalmatia), Krsto Popivoda (Montenegro and Serbia), Pavle Zancer (transporting volunteers across the Yugoslav-Austrian border), and Pavle Gregorić (Zagreb).<sup>60</sup> Although subordinated to the Communist Party of Spain, the KPJ sent high-ranking members to oversee the Yugoslav cadres in the International Brigades: Blagoje Parović (until his death), Božidar Maslarić, and briefly Rodoljub Čolaković. Čedo Kapor, perhaps the most active of the Spanish veterans in post-war Yugoslavia, estimated that only one-fourth of those who tried to reach Spain actually made it.<sup>61</sup>

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59 Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, p. 157.

60 Savo Pešić, *Španjolski građanski rat i KPJ*, Rijeka: Izdavački centar Rijeka, 1990, p. 121.

61 Čedo Kapor, *Na frontu solidarnosti prije 50 godina*, in Boban, *Španjolska*, p. 9.

The mobilization of Yugoslav volunteers to Spain can be grouped into three categories: those who arrived from the USSR, those who had been students or economic émigrés in other countries, and those who came directly from Yugoslavia. The first group consisted of veteran communists, the majority of whom had spent time in Moscow, arriving in Spain directly from the Soviet Union. Numbering nearly ninety, these men generally held positions as political commissars, worked in the administration of the International Brigades, and were influential in the communist-dominated counter espionage body (SIM – *Servicio de Investigación Militar*).<sup>62</sup>

Since they had been ordered to go to Spain by the Comintern and the KPJ, it is somewhat misleading to call them »volunteers«, even though most communists saw the opportunity to serve in Spain as an honor, and a chance to be on the frontlines of the revolutionary struggle. It also allowed them to escape from Moscow as Stalin's purges increased in intensity at a time when the KPJ was on the verge of being disbanded. The Comintern organized counterfeit papers and travel documents for these individuals, who often learned that they were being sent to Spain less than twenty-four hours before they had to leave. In their memoirs they recall having to purchase new hats, shoes, and pajamas on their journeys to Paris since the Soviet fashions they followed would give them away as communist agents, rather than being simple tourists on their way to France.<sup>63</sup> Some of the leading Yugoslavs who came from the USSR included Vljako Begović, Karlo Mrazović, Božidar Maslarić, Ivan Gošnjak, Mate Vidaković »Kostaluka«, and Franjo Ogulinac »Seljo«. While the abovementioned individuals distinguished themselves on Spanish battlefields and later among the Partisans, a few others who

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62 Stanislava Koprivica-Oštrić, Jugoslavenski dobrovoljci u jedinicama španjolske republikanske vojske 1936–1939, in Boban, *Španjolska*, p. 140.

63 Ivan Gošnjak, Iz Sovjetskog Saveza u Republikansku Španiju, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 1, p. 304; and Vljako Begović, Iz Moskve u Španiju, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 1, p. 366.

had spent considerable time in the Soviet Union were held responsible for causing internal Party divisions (see Section 5).

The second group of volunteers, who came from over twenty-two different countries, tended to be Yugoslav workers (miners were the largest single group represented by profession) who had left their homeland for economic reasons and had been recruited through unions and other émigré organizations which had been infiltrated by communists. There were also a significant number of students - in particular there was a large group of Yugoslavs who had been studying in Prague and had come to Spain together in a show of solidarity with the Spanish people. The historian Mira Kolar-Dimitrijević has calculated that 892 Yugoslav economic and political émigrés fought in Spain.<sup>64</sup> The largest number came from France (over 400), followed by Belgium (nearly 200), Canada (83), the United States (57), and Czechoslovakia (43).<sup>65</sup> Unlike the veteran KPJ members or volunteers who had come directly from Yugoslavia, many of the émigré workers were able to be 'repatriated' back to the countries where they had been living and consequently did not fight as Partisans in the Second World War, especially those who had come from North America. Volunteers who traveled to Spain from countries other than Yugoslavia or the USSR included Ivo Rukavina, Vladimir Čopić, Većeslav Cvetko ›Flores‹, Stevan Mesaroš (also known as Steve Nelson), Veljko Vlahović (leader of the Prague student group), and Petar Drapšin.

The final group consisted of over 600 volunteers who made their way to Spain directly from Yugoslavia, either by stowing away

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64 Mira Kolar-Dimitrijević, *Sudjelovanje jugoslavenske ekonomske emigracije u španjolskom ratu*, in Boban, *Španjolska*, p. 157.

65 Koprivica-Oštrić, *Jugoslavenski dobrovoljci*, p. 140. See *ibid.*, pp. 143–145, for a breakdown of the occupational structure of the volunteers. For a detailed account of Croat volunteers from North America, see John Peter Kraljic, *The Croatian Community in North America and the Spanish Civil War*, unpublished MA thesis, 2002.



on ships or taking the dangerous overland route through a number of neighboring countries, more often than not illegally.<sup>66</sup> This group was probably the most diverse, including volunteers of mixed political and professional backgrounds, many of whom were recruited, whilst others simply desired to fight for a cause they believed was just. The KPJ initially attempted to organize large groups of volunteers to be sent to Spain all at once, but after the fiasco with the ship named *Le Corse* off the Dalmatian coast in March 1937 (see below), the Party switched to sending smaller groups of men, as this was harder for the Yugoslav authorities to detect. Prominent volunteers who left from Yugoslavia to go to Spain included Maks Baće, Marko Orešković ›Krtinja«, Kosta Nađ, Konstantin ›Koča« Popović, Peko Dapčević, Robert Domanji, and Nikola Car.

The KPJ's first and last attempt to send large numbers of volunteers took place in March 1937. The plan to send volunteers from Dalmatia and Montenegro on the ship *Le Corse* had been hatched by the KPJ's general secretary, Milan Gorkić (pseudonym ›Sommer«), in response to the Comintern's call to send men and aid to the legal Spanish government. Under Gorkić's leadership, the Central Committee of the KPJ asked Adolf Muk<sup>67</sup> and Anton Franović to arrange a ship for the volunteers being recruited in Yugoslavia, while Braina Rudin-Fos, a Latvian doctor married to a Yugoslav communist, traveled to Croatia and Montenegro with money to fund recruitment.<sup>68</sup> However, on 21 February, the Yugoslav government had joined the Non-Intervention Committee, and four days later reached the

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66 Koprivica-Oštrić states that at least 421 volunteers came directly from Yugoslavia, but this is based on information regarding the 1,300 individuals whose data is known, while the origins of 300 others can only be speculated on. Koprivica-Oštrić, *Jugoslavenski dobrovoljci*, p. 140.

67 Adolf Muk (1893–1943), a Montenegrin, was a member of the Central Committee of the KPJ.

68 Braina Rudin-Fos, *Pripreme za odlazak brodom La Kors*, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 1, pp. 437–440.

decision to prevent the departure of all volunteers for Spain, aware that Yugoslav communists were actively involved in recruiting and transporting men to fight for the Republicans. The Yugoslav authorities were therefore especially vigilant as regards suspicious activity when *Le Corse* was spotted off the coast of Montenegro, avoiding ports and loading up large quantities of food.<sup>69</sup> Approximately 150 volunteers waited near Split to board the ship to Spain, while several hundred others had planned to join them in Montenegro.

During the night of 3-4 March, the Yugoslav navy boarded *Le Corse* and arrested Muk and Franović, who made no attempt to hide even though they lacked the legal paperwork necessary to explain their presence on the ship. Both men quickly gave in when under interrogation, and revealed a great deal of information regarding the KPJ's organization and personnel to the police, leading to the arrest of numerous communists and many members of Dalmatia's regional committee.<sup>70</sup> Initially the KPJ expressed solidarity with Muk and other imprisoned communists in its publications and on flyers such as those distributed by students at the University of Belgrade,<sup>71</sup> but upon learning of his cooperation with the authorities, he was con-

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69 In April 1937, Gorkić and Tito compiled a report about the *Le Corse* catastrophe that was sent to the Comintern, in which they suspected that Italian spies had tipped off the Yugoslav authorities. They also blamed Muk for relying on untrustworthy peasants to send messages to other communists and failing to maintain secrecy during the operation. See Damjanović, *Tito Sabrana djela*, vol. 3, pp. 87–88.

70 Police records show that Muk revealed information about the Central Committee's location in Paris, as well as Gorkić's pseudonym »Sommer«. Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 14908-1937, 28.5.1937, HDA, fond 1368 (Kominternu), box 1.

71 With the title »Save the life of Adolf Muk«, the flyer also included the phrases »Long live freedom! Long live democracy! Long live amnesty!« Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 11303/37, 20.4.1937), HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 647.

demned in the Party press.<sup>72</sup> Although smaller groups of volunteers continued to travel to Spain, never again was such a large operation as this attempted. The Central Committee initially blamed Muk for the disaster, along with the Dalmatian and Montenegrin communists in charge of organizing the volunteers on the coast, but Gorkić was ultimately held responsible. On 3 July 1937, Gorkić told the Central Committee of the KPJ that he had been summoned to Moscow, and left Paris two weeks later.<sup>73</sup> Accused of being an English spy, he disappeared in one of Stalin's purges along with a number of other Yugoslav communists living in the Soviet Union.<sup>74</sup> Not only did Gorkić's liquidation force the KPJ to shift tactics as regards how to send volunteers to Spain - it also propelled Tito into the position of acting general secretary (he was not made the official general secretary until 1939).

Within the overall scope of the KPJ's operations regarding Spain, it is evident that much of the Party's energy and resources were spent on sending volunteers to Spain. The communists were successful in appealing to individuals outside of the KPJ, which was clearly part of their overall Popular Front strategy that came to be transformed so effectively into the People's Front during the Second World War. Although, on the one hand, the Party was operating in secrecy and many of the volunteers sought to hide their true identities by adopting pseudonyms, on the other hand the participation of

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72 Tito wrote two articles harshly denouncing Muk: The Incident of the Traitor Adolf Muk, in *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 13 (December 1937), p. 3; and: More About the Traitor Muk, in *Proleter*, vol. 14, nos. 1–2 (January–February 1938), pp. 8–9. Muk was given a long prison sentence and handed over to the Italians after the collapse of Yugoslavia in April 1941, who executed him in March 1943 after he refused to collaborate.

73 van Očak, Gorkić: Život, rad i pogibija, Zagreb: Globus, 1988, p. 319.

74 The Comintern archives indicate that Gorkić was arrested on 19 August 1937 (three weeks after arriving from Spain), sentenced to death on 1 November, and executed by a firing squad on the same day. Simić, Tito, p. 105.

Yugoslavs in the International Brigades fighting fascism was depicted in a number of publications. *Nuestros Españoles* (which included excerpts from the volunteer newspaper *Dimitrovac*, published in Madrid in 1937), August Cesarec's *Španjolski susreti: Knjiga susreta s ljudima i gradovima* (published in Toronto in 1938), and *Krv i život za slobodu: Slike iz života i borbe studenata iz Jugoslavije u Španiji* (published in Barcelona in 1938), popularized the experiences of the volunteers and were intended to inspire new recruits. Most of these publications never reached Yugoslavia, and those that did provided the vigilant police with information on who was in Spain illegally. All of these books were reprinted in socialist Yugoslavia as part of the revolutionary tradition connecting the war in Spain with the subsequent Partisan resistance movement.

Realizing the potential of artists such as Pablo Picasso or Juan Miro in drawing attention to the struggle of the Republic, the KPJ sought to use Yugoslav artists to rally support. The Belgrade artist Đorđe Andrejević-Kun volunteered to fight in Spain, but was commissioned to produce a series of drawings and woodcuts illustrating the plight of the Spanish people. In subsequent memoirs his compatriots recalled how he had wanted to hold a rifle in his hands but was told the Republic needed more artists.<sup>75</sup> Kosta Nađ remembered that

»[h]e just wanted to be a regular soldier. But his paintings, drawings, and talent were more important to us. Later, when he was in the headquarters of the 129th Brigade as a cultural worker, he made a number of excellent posters... we all highly respected this artist who marvelously and unselfishly transformed his talent into a weapon.«<sup>76</sup>

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75 Predrag Đuričić, *Španija u Kunovim likovnim impresijama*, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 3, pp. 242–243.

76 Archive of Yugoslavia (AJ), fond 724, Đorđe Andrejević-Kun, Šp. II-9, p. 23.

The original print run of 2,000 copies was confiscated by the Yugoslav police in 1938 and only reprinted in 1946, while many of the images were used to illustrate publications issued by Spanish veterans during socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>77</sup> Political commissars in the Yugoslav units encouraged the volunteers to »write as many letters as possible to people back home and in other countries in order to explain our struggle here«, although many of the letters fell into the hands of the police.<sup>78</sup>

The emotional intensity of the Spanish conflict and the youthful idealism meant that a large number of students, not only those in Zagreb and Belgrade but also those studying abroad, notably in Paris and Prague, volunteered to defend the Republic. The departure to Spain in early 1937 of a large group of Yugoslav students studying in Prague received significant attention in both the left-wing and right-wing press. They had been part of the Academic Society *Yugoslavia* in Prague, which was initially an organization with close ties to the Yugoslav regime, but by 1936 it had been taken over by pro-communist students supported by the KPJ. A letter dated 25 January 1937 and signed by nineteen of the students addressed the »Youth of all the Peoples of Yugoslavia« with the following message: »Leaving for Spain we believe it is our duty to send our greetings to you all, regardless of your political or religious beliefs, with the message that you must also persevere in the struggle for freedom and democracy.«<sup>79</sup> Ivan Turk, Lazar Latinović, Branko Krsmanović,

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77 A special edition of the twelve woodcuts was reprinted on the seventieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War in Belgrade with support from the Embassy of Spain. Đorđe Andrejević-Kun, *Za slobodu*, Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2008.

78 Stevan Belić Dudek, *U jedinicama internacionalnih brigade*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 2, p. 64.

79 The letter was printed as part of the article »To Spain, to Spain!« in: *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 3, May 1937, p. 7, although it is likely that it was distributed as a flyer at an earlier date.

Ahmet Fetahagić, Ivan Vejvoda, Lazar Udovički, and Matija Šiprak were among the students who came from all over Yugoslavia and who decided to »join the Spanish students, peasants, and workers«, arguing that in »defending their freedom we are defending the freedom of our own nations.«<sup>80</sup> Many students heeded the call of the Prague volunteers, and while quite a few made it to Spain, others were caught in their attempt to, or focused their efforts on raising support for the Spanish Republic at their universities.

Matija Šiprak, one of the students from Prague, may be considered an interesting example of a volunteer in Spain, precisely because he was no typical communist activist mobilized by the Party. He came from a relatively wealthy and devoutly Catholic family from the outskirts of Sisak, and »as a student of the deceased Stjepan Radić, he was a staunch supporter of the Croatian Peasant Party.«<sup>81</sup> He was also, however, a devoted antifascist, and joined his communist colleagues in traveling to Spain, where he was killed in battle at the Jarama River on 14 February 1937 as a member of the newly formed Dimitrov Battalion of the XV International Brigade.<sup>82</sup> In his eulogy, the leader of the Prague students, Veljko Vlahović (who lost a leg in the same battle in which Šiprak was killed), wrote:

»We are convinced that the entire Croatian nation together with us will solemnize and avenge your heroic death, helping us in our struggle against fascism and condemning that group of misguided children at the University of Zagreb, who think that politically and nationally they are closer to you, comrade

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80 Ibid.

81 Čedo Kapor (ed.), *Krv i život za slobodu: slike iz života i borbe studenata iz Jugoslavije u Španiji*, 4th ed., Belgrade: Unija-publik, 1978, p. 42.

82 Đuro Gajdek, *Španjolski borci Siska i Banije*. Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1985, p. 151. He is buried in a large family plot in a cemetery in Sisak, and his death in Spain is noted on his gravestone.

Šiprak, than us – followers of other parties and sons of different nations – and who extended their hand across your grave to the murderer of the Spanish people, the enemy of the Croatian people, General Franco. We are convinced that the entire younger generation of the Croatian people is not going to follow their example, but yours, comrade Matija. May your glory be everlasting, worthy son of the Croatian nation!<sup>83</sup>

Not only was the eulogy meant to stir up antifascist sentiment in Croatia, but it specifically addressed the situation at the University of Zagreb. On the one hand it appealed directly to Croatian nationalism, while on the other it reflected the KPJ's efforts to reach out to all of Yugoslavia's ethnic groups regardless of people's political persuasion, with the exception, of course, of the extreme right. Šiprak was one of the earliest examples of a Croatian student who died on the Spanish battlefields, and his martyrdom was used in communist propaganda addressed to university students throughout Yugoslavia.

The University of Belgrade, known for its tradition of left-wing activism, was a hotbed of pro-Republican mobilization during the Spanish Civil War. In February 1937, Belgrade students led a protest march in support of the Republic towards the Spanish embassy where they clashed with police. Furthermore, during the St. George's Day (*Đurđevdan*) festivities on Mount Avala, some 6,000 students, workers, and youth activists dedicated the day to the events in Spain.<sup>84</sup> Many University of Belgrade students corresponded with volunteers in Spain, whose letters were included in *Krv i život za slobodu*, and they intended to publish a similar pamphlet in Serbia before the editors were arrested by the police.

At the University of Zagreb, the students were divided between those with leftist ideals who passionately believed in the

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83 Kapor, *Krv i život za slobodu*, p. 42.

84 Vojo Kovačević, *Španija i beogradski univerzitet*, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 257.

Republican cause, and those who considered Franco to be the only true defender of Catholic Spain against the Bolshevik threat. Unlike the University of Belgrade, which had essentially become a communist stronghold because of its autonomous status within the city of Belgrade, which had protected the students from the police,<sup>85</sup> the University of Zagreb's student body was considerably more divided. In the charged atmosphere at the university after the events of April 1937, when leftist student Krsto Ljubičić was killed after street battles with right-wing nationalists, a wave of students volunteered to go to Spain. The thirty most active members in the Marxist student club *Svjetlost* responded to the death of Ljubičić by forming another legal organization at the university, the Action Committee of Leftist Croatian Students, which assisted volunteers heading for Spain.<sup>86</sup>

The group of Yugoslav students from Prague had published a call to arms in the June 1937 issue of *Proleter*. »Discussing and supporting democratic Spain only with words is still not enough«, the students wrote from the battlefield, adding that »in moments like this, it is necessary to give as much as one can, which means putting one's life on the line and going with a rifle in hand to fight against those who barbarously tried to choke and destroy justice and a nation's freedom.«<sup>87</sup>

Students and others with no police records used legal routes to travel to Paris, while communist activists familiar to the police and gendarmes were smuggled illegally across international borders. A police document from December 1937 on students volunteering for Spain noted that many had applied for passports to France

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85 Vojo Kovačević, a university student in the 1930s, recalled that »the University of Belgrade and its student movement was so politically active, progressively oriented, and organized that it was undivided in its commitment to Republican Spain.« *Ibid.*, pp. 251–270.

86 Vojo Rajčević, *Titova uloga u reorganizaciji SKOJ-a 1937*, in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1977, p. 26.

87 *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 7, June 1937, p. 12.



where they were allegedly planning on studying, but instead had crossed the Pyrenees to join the Army of the Republic.<sup>88</sup> Other students used the Paris Arts and Techniques Exposition (May–November 1937) as an excuse for seeking legal means to travel to France. Pavle Gregorić, a leading KPJ functionary known as ›Speedy‹ (Brzi), operated a bookstore in Zagreb which served as a cover for the dispatch of volunteers from all parts of Croatia and other Yugoslav regions to Paris and then eventually Spain.<sup>89</sup> Maks Baće, a philosophy student and communist activist at the University of Zagreb, recalled how he had wanted to volunteer for Spain after the death of Ljubičić, but had been ordered by the Party to continue working in Zagreb.<sup>90</sup> It was only after Baće graduated and signed his name on a communist publication (which, incidentally, he did not author) that his continued presence in Zagreb became too risky, convincing Gregorić to allow him to volunteer for the International Brigades.

However, it was not only communist students who were affected by the radicalization of the university. Franjo Puškarić, who had been a member of the HSS since he was nineteen and who was president of the HSS student organization at the University of Zagreb, volunteered to go to Spain in the aftermath of Ljubičić's

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88 »Dobrovoljci trupa španske vlade, način odlazak? naših studenata u Španiju«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 37807-37, 28.12.1937, HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 535.

89 Pavle Gregorić, Zagrebački punkt, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 237. The police suspected Gregorić of being involved in the illegal transfer of volunteers, searching his apartment and arresting him in December 1937 after finding lists of ›tourists‹, the code word the KPJ used to refer to volunteers. This disrupted the KPJ's operations for some time, and reveals the relative success of the Yugoslav police in shutting down communist efforts in transporting volunteers to Spain. See »Vrbovanje dobrovoljaca za Španiju«, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. br. 8089/38, 21.3.1938, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 3, no. 35.

90 Maks Baće, interview with author in Split, Croatia, 14 November 2003.

murder. Like Matija Šiprak, Puškarić represented those Yugoslavs who were not communists, yet who believed that the war in Spain was of international significance. Unfortunately, little information exists on what channels Puškarić used to get to Spain or of the details of his experience there, since he was killed on the Brunete front in July 1937, less than two months after his arrival. The KPJ used his decision to fight in Spain as further support for their efforts to create a Popular Front in Croatia, claiming that he »realized that party differences should not play any kind of role when it is a question of the struggle against fascism... a new and better life will spring forth from his blood not only on the fields of Spain, but also on the fields of Croatia.«<sup>91</sup>



### **Yugoslav Volunteers in the International Brigades**

Although hundreds of foreigners came to Spain during the Nationalist uprising, or crossed over the border into the country on their own initiative, Comintern agents working with the Republican government decided to facilitate the arrival of international volunteers in a more organized fashion. On 11 October 1936, the town of Albacete was chosen as the headquarters for the newly created International Brigades under Andre Marty's command. Before the creation of the Brigades, foreign volunteers had been scattered throughout various army units and anarchist militias. The International Brigades represented a conscious decision by the Comintern to form strict military units where discipline would be maintained via the prominent

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91 Kapor, *Krv i život*, pp. 61–62. Communist propaganda certainly took liberties with Puškarić's motivations for going to Spain, but he had been active in international student organizations, so it is not inconceivable that much of what the communists later wrote about him was close to his actual beliefs.

position of political commissars among the foreign volunteers.<sup>92</sup> As the volunteers came from over fifty countries, units were soon being organized in terms of national groupings whenever possible. By the late fall of 1936, the logistics required to organize the International Brigades were in place, and Communist Parties across Europe began recruiting volunteers in earnest.

As mentioned previously, the total number of Yugoslavs in Spain is difficult to calculate precisely because of the conspiratorial strategies required to enter the country, the incomplete records of the Republican army, and the various pseudonyms used by the volunteers. The most complete records come from the International Brigades, and particularly from the 129<sup>th</sup> Brigade, but not all Yugoslavs fought in these units, especially during the early phases of the war. For example, at least fifteen Yugoslavs were recorded to have fought in the northern theater of the war (the Basque lands), where there were no International Brigades.<sup>93</sup> The first comprehensive list of names, with information on 1,665 volunteers, was first published in the *Španija* collection (1971), and reprinted in Čedo Kapor's final book, *Za mir i progres u svijetu* (1999). The French historian Herve Lemesle, relying on new archival materials and updated lists from sources such as John Kraljic's work on North American volunteers, compiled an expanded database of Yugoslav volunteers that provides information on 1,910 volunteers.<sup>94</sup> Even with this updated list of names, complete biographical information is not available for all of them, and so data on nationality, how they arrived in Spain, and

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92 R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982, p. 29. Allegedly the initial idea for the International Brigades came from Maurice Thorez, the head of the French Communist Party.

93 Dudek, *Jugosloveni u Španskom građanskom ratu*, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 1, p. 222.

94 Herve Lemesle, *Des Yougoslaves engages au XXe siècle: itinéraires de volontaires en Espagne republicaine*, unpublished PhD thesis, 2011, pp. 1150-1213.

their place of death cannot be determined. Nevertheless, based on the existing data, it is possible to calculate that just under half of the Yugoslav contingent was born in present-day Croatia (both Croats and Serbs).<sup>95</sup> When analyzing the nationality of the volunteers, the greatest number (also just under half) were Croats, followed by Slovenes and Serbs. Fifty-one Yugoslav Jews fought in the Spanish Civil War, at least twenty-five of whom were communists.<sup>96</sup>

The KPJ had successfully tapped into the large number of émigré workers as a source of volunteers, and such efforts were made easier by the large number of French and Belgian workers who were going to Spain themselves. According to the available statistics, many of the volunteers arrived in Spain during the first year of the war; of the 1,185 volunteers whose date of arrival is known, nearly 800 (or 67%) had arrived in Spain by July 1937.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, based

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95 Lemesle has calculated that there were 601 volunteers from Croatia. Lemesle, *Des Yougoslaves engages au XXe siècle*, pp. 64-66. Ivan Fumić, the former president of the League of Antifascist Fighters of Croatia (*Savez antifašističkih boraca Hrvatske*), claimed there were 670 Croats who fought in Spain. Ivan Fumić, interview with author in Zagreb, Croatia, 5.9.2000. Goldstein asserts that 700 were from Croatia. Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918-2008*, Zagreb: EPH, 2008, p. 260. Vladimir Dedijer lists 651 (out of 1,490 for whom the place of origin is known) from Croatia. Vladimir Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*, vol. 2, Zagreb: Mladost, 1980, insert between pp. 336–337.

96 Marko Perić, *Jevreji iz Jugoslavije – španski borci*, in *Jewish Studies*, vol. 3, Belgrade, 1975, pp. 3-6; and Paul Benjamin Gordiejew, *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry*, Albany: State University of New York, 1999, p. 66. These sources had previously listed thirty-four Jewish volunteers in Spain, while Lemesle has calculated the number to be fifty-one. Lemesle, *Des Yougoslaves engages au XXe siècle*, p. 67. Ten of the Jewish volunteers came from Zagreb. Ivo Goldstein, *Židovi u Zagrebu, 1918-1941*, Zagreb: Novi liber, 2004, p. 293. Jews made up 0.5 % of the total Yugoslav population, but 3.5 % of the Yugoslav contingent in the International Brigades. As a comparison, one-third of the 2,600 American volunteers were Jewish. Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 18.

97 Koprivica-Oštrić, *Jugoslavenski dobrovoljci*, p. 141. It should be noted that even this figure is an estimate, since some of the dates are given only as the year and not the specific month. Relying on Spanish government statistics, which record information on only 809 of the volunteers, 510 (or 63 %) are known to have arrived in Spain by July 1937. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

on the data analyzed by Koprivica-Oštrić, out of 1,040 volunteers whose political affiliation we know, 561 were communists, while the others came from various (albeit leftist) backgrounds.<sup>98</sup>

The volunteers were not only men; fourteen Yugoslav women volunteered in Spain, and although Spanish women fought in the trenches in the early phases of the war, they were soon pulled back from the front.<sup>99</sup> The female volunteers served in the medical corps of the Republican army, even though only five of them had been either doctors or nurses before coming to Spain. Along with the male volunteers in the medical corps (nineteen Yugoslavs), they contributed their skills to the resistance movements in Yugoslavia and elsewhere after the Spanish Civil War.<sup>100</sup>

In most regards, the Yugoslav experience in the International Brigades was comparable to that of the other international volunteers. It should be remembered that, apart from the high-ranking communist members who were assigned to go to Spain, the others - as with the majority of Brigaders - were volunteers who chose to fight in what they believed was a struggle against the evils of fascism. Božidar Maslarić, the KPJ's highest ranking operative in Albacete, wrote to Tito on 9 March 1938 requesting that future volunteers »needed to be under forty, healthy, strong, and ready to complete all the tasks assigned to them here.«<sup>101</sup> Some earlier arrivals had spent too much time in hospitals or had refused to engage

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98 Koprivica-Oštrić, *Jugoslavenski dobrovoljci*, p. 146-148.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

100 For example, Dr. Adela Bohunicki participated in the Slovak resistance, Dr. Dobrila Šiljak-Mezić joined her husband in the French resistance, and Kornelija Sende-Popović was killed while serving in Partisan ranks during the first year of the war in Yugoslavia. See Vera Gavrilović, *Organizacija sanitetske službe u španskom ratu*, in Boban, *Španjolska*, pp. 170-179.

101 Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), Fond 724, šp. I-6/4, letter from Božidar Maslarić to Tito, 9.3.1938, p. 2.

in military activities, which resulted in the decision being reached to refuse unsuitable volunteers. In Spain, the story of the Yugoslav units followed a narrative similar to that of other national groups, with the exception that they fought in every battle that involved international volunteers, from the defense of Madrid to the final defense of Catalonia.<sup>102</sup> As with the International Brigades in general, Yugoslav units suffered high casualty rates, especially among officers, although these rates were even higher than those of most other national groups. The first volunteer who was killed in Spain was Radoslav Horvat, a sailor from the Croatian littoral who died in July 1936 in Huesca.<sup>103</sup> Approximately half of the Yugoslav volunteers were killed in Spain, compared to 16.7% who were killed in the International Brigades as a whole, while another three hundred Yugoslavs were wounded.<sup>104</sup>

The vast majority of volunteers served as infantry. Many were also in artillery or antitank units, such as the »Stjepan Radić Battery« and the »Petko Miletić Antitank Battery« (changed to the »Yugoslav Antitank Battery« after Petko Miletić was denounced by the Party leadership). A number of Yugoslavs also held important positions in the administration and the intelligence services (SIM). According to Beevor, Jose Moreno Lopes (real name Karel Hatz) from the Baranja region was in command of the counter-intelligence unit assigned to the International Brigades, a position he took over from Roman

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102 For a comprehensive overview of the chronology and battles of the IBs, including detailed maps, see Victor Hurtado, *Las Brigadas Internacionales*, Barcelona: DAU, 2013.

103 Pešić, *Španjolski građanski rat*, p. 125.

104 Confirmation of death is available for 545 Yugoslavs, while it is believed that several hundred more were killed during the course of the war. See: Uz spisak španskih boraca iz Jugoslavije, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 503. For information on casualty rates in general, see Michael Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994, pp. 105-106.

Filičev (›Fein‹) from Vojvodina and Vlajko Begović (›Stefanović‹).<sup>105</sup> Veljko Ribar (›Karel Anger‹) worked in the archives and historical section, while the Slovene Dragotin Gustinčić oversaw another ten Yugoslavs working in the postal and censorship services.<sup>106</sup>

A large number of Yugoslavs achieved high ranks over the course of the war. Two became lieutenant-colonels, eight were majors, thirty-five were captains, 105 were lieutenants, and eighty-six were non-commissioned officers.<sup>107</sup> Vladimir Ćopić (1891-1938), a veteran Croatian communist, held the highest rank as commander of the XV International Brigade. He was generally admired as a committed revolutionary by his fellow Yugoslavs,<sup>108</sup> but hated by a number of other international volunteers, especially the Americans, who held him responsible for the decimation of the American battalion at the Battle of the Jarama on 27 February 1937.<sup>109</sup> About half of the Yugoslavs were communists at the time they went to

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105 Pešić, *Španjolski građanski rat i KPJ*, p. 121. A total of fourteen Yugoslavs worked in various branches of the SIM around Spain.

106 Stevan Belić Dudek estimates that between fifty and seventy Yugoslavs worked in the IB administration at one time or another. Belić Dudek, *Jugosloveni u Španskom gradjanskom ratu*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 1, p. 225.

107 *Vojna enciklopedija*, 2nd ed., s.v., *Španski dobrovoljci*, p. 588.

108 Vlajko Begović, a fellow veteran of the war in Spain, described him as being »competent, a good organizer, experienced and level-headed; a person who knew how to keep his cool and be brave in the most difficult of situations.« Vlajko Begović, Vladimir Ćopić, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 5, p. 101. Kosta Nađ claimed that Ćopić was the man he most admired until he met Tito. *Vjesnik, Zagreb*, 30.7.1986, p. 8. Ćopić was executed after being summoned to Moscow in the summer of 1938 (likely due to Stalin's purges of KPJ personnel and not because of his leadership on the battlefield), but was rehabilitated in 1958. For an article on Ćopić in English, see John Kraljic, *New Material on Vladimir Ćopić*, in: *The Volunteer*, vol. 21, no. 4, Fall 1999, pp. 8-9.

109 For a description of the disastrous charge of the American Brigade at the Jarama on 27 February, see Carroll, *American Odyssey*, pp. 100-102.

Spain, which was about average for volunteers.<sup>110</sup> Maks Baće, who served as a political commissar in Spain, confirmed that most of the officers and commissars were well-schooled in Marxism, but that the average soldiers spent most of their time learning military skills and not Marxist theory.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, Baće agreed that Spain was a »big school« for the Yugoslavs who eventually fought in the Second World War, and most of the volunteers who endured the French internment camps from 1939-1941 became devoted communists after that experience.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the Partisans' reliance on guerrilla warfare during the Second World War, only a few Yugoslavs (notably Lazar Udovički, Ivan Stevo Krajačić, Božidar Maslarić, and Ljubo Ilić) had participated in guerrilla units in Spain. In general, the Republic failed to pursue a guerrilla strategy, despite the fact that the Spanish landscape and the sympathy of the peasantry for the Republican cause could have made guerrilla operations an effective way to disrupt Franco's war machine behind the front lines. However, Soviet agents in Spain insisted that all guerrilla units were to be under the command of communists, and ultimately the commando raids carried out by the XIV Guerrilla Corps were of minor importance in the overall Republican war effort.<sup>113</sup> The Yugoslavs who were active in the guerrilla units, such as Maslarić, were generally not the ones who led the uprisings in 1941.<sup>114</sup> Thus, while Spain was not so influential in providing les-

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110 Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows*, p. 88.

111 Maks Baće, interview with author, Split, Croatia, 14 November 2003.

112 Ibid. Much of the time in the camps was spent conducting political work using communist materials sent along with aid packages or smuggled in with the help of the French Communist Party.

113 Barton Whaley, *Guerrillas in the Spanish Civil War*, Detroit: Management Information Services, 1969, p. 3.

114 For accounts of Yugoslavs involved in guerrilla operations, see Božidar Maslarić, *U zemlji borbe*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 2, pp. 12-15; Lazar Udovički, *U gerilskim jedinicama*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 3, pp. 150-165; Pavle Vukmanović Stipe, *Akcije gerilskog odreda*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 3, pp. 262-268; and Ivan Hariš Gromovnik, *Na diverzantskim zadacima*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 3, pp. 355-369.



sons in guerrilla warfare, general military and organizational skills, as well as Party loyalty and discipline on the battlefield, were all crucial experiences gained by Yugoslav veterans of the Spanish Civil War.

The units in the International Brigades often carried the names of revolutionary or national heroes, such as Vasilij Ivanović »Chapajev« (1887-1919), a guerrilla leader of the Russian Revolution, not to be confused with the Hungarian officer of the same name who fought in Spain; Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882), an Italian revolutionary; Đuro Đaković (1880-1929), the former general secretary of the KPJ killed by Yugoslav police; Jaroslaw Dombrowski (1836-1871), a Polish revolutionary and one of the leaders of the Paris Commune; and Georgi Dimitrov (1882-1949), a Bulgarian communist and leader of the Comintern. The KPJ operatives in Spain were aware of the symbolic importance of the names for the volunteers as well as for audiences in Yugoslavia. In a letter to Tito, Maslarić described his reaction when a newly formed anti-tank unit consisting of a majority of Croats and commanded by Mirko Kovačević decided to name themselves after Vladko Maček:

»I was stunned as soon as I learned about this and immediately wrote to Mirko to suggest that they name the unit Stjepan Radić. S. Radić died as a leader and martyr of the Croatian people, and since he is now dead he can no longer make any mistakes. He enjoys the respect of all Croats and as a dead man has no chance of doing anything stupid... Because of this I advised Mirko to stick to dead men since they are less dangerous and they will not surprise us. The unit absolutely must bear a Croatian name, since news of this will spread among our masses, so I kindly ask that you respond to me regarding this issue.«<sup>115</sup>

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115 AJ, Fond 724, šp. I-6/4, letter from Božidar Maslarić to Tito, 9.3.1938, p. 1.

Volunteers from North America initially joined either Canadian (MacKenzie-Papineau) or US (Lincoln and Washington) battalions. Before the formation of the Yugoslav battalions in early 1937, the International Brigades that had participated in the defense of Madrid usually had Balkan companies. Along with the Brigaders<sup>116</sup> themselves, the KPJ leadership had an interest in organizing special units for the volunteers from Yugoslavia. In a letter to KPJ members in Albacete, Gorkić agreed that »by forming our own units (or together with the Bul[garians]) we will have a better opportunity for getting to know our cadres that are there, use them most effectively, and train them militarily and politically.«<sup>117</sup>

The two most important Yugoslav units were the Đaković and Dimitrov Battalions that were initially part of the XIII and XV battalions, respectively, but which were later combined into the 129<sup>th</sup> International Brigade. The Dimitrov Battalion was formed in January 1937 and assigned to the XV brigade just before the carnage which took place at the Battle of Jarama. In addition to Yugoslav volunteers, this battalion also included Bulgarians, Czechs, Romanians, and Greeks. Summing up the spirit of what motivated the volunteers in a letter to the Toronto newspaper for Yugoslav émigrés, *Slobodna misao*, a member of the Dimitrov Battalion declared that »We, volunteers from the lands of Yugoslavia, came here as the sons of all of our nations from all corners of the earth, regardless of national, religious, and political differences; we all came with the same passionate wish – to help the Spanish people liberate themselves from the global invasion offascism.«<sup>118</sup> The Balkan Company, which had been part of the Dombrowski Battalion of the XI International Brigade and

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116 Battalions generally consisted of three infantry companies and a number of support units numbering around five hundred men, while brigades had at least four battalions and accompanying batteries and staff units.

117 Letter from Gorkić (Sommer) probably dated January 1937. ALBA/Moscow microfilm, Tamiment Institute, Opus 2, fond 80, p. 25.

118 Letter published in *Slobodna misao* in 1938, reprinted as: Dobrovoljci iz bataljona »Dimitrov« svome narodu, in Kapor, Španija, vol. 3, p. 470.

contained many of the Yugoslav volunteers from the earliest days of the war, was not allowed to merge with the Dimitrov Battalion, and instead was constituted as the Đaković Battalion in May 1937.<sup>119</sup>

The first company of the Dimitrov Battalion was named Matija Gubec, after the leader of the sixteenth century peasant uprising in Croatia, which was mentioned in the communist press when reporting on the Yugoslavs in Spain. Although the Matija Gubec Company served as a useful propaganda tool, functioning as a symbol which could even be accepted by non-communist Croats, the actual unit had little to do with the peasantry, or revolutions for that matter, on the battlefields in Spain. However, the Gubec Company was, from a military perspective, involved in numerous crucial battles in the Spanish Civil War and provided invaluable combat experience for future Partisan leaders such as Ivan Gošnjak, Peko Dapčević, and Kosta Nađ.

On 7 February 1937, the first company of the Dimitrov Battalion, which had not yet at that time assumed the name Matija Gubec, was deployed to the south-east of Madrid along the Jarama River together with the rest of the XV International Brigade (including British, American, and Canadian battalions), led by the commander Juan Gal (Janosz Galicz)<sup>120</sup> and political commissar Vladimir Čopić. The Dimitrov Battalion participated in some of the heaviest fighting which took place during the Battle of the Jarama (6-27 February 1937), in an attempt by the Nationalists to sever the Madrid – Valencia Road. Although the first company of the Dimitrov Battalion had suffered heavy losses in the battles at the Jarama – Nađ states that

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119 See Miroslav Prstojević, ed., *Naši Španci*, reprint and translation of *Nuestros Españoles*, Sarajevo: Izdavačka djelatnost, 1984, pp. 37-38; and Belić Dudek, *Jugoslaveni u Španskom građanskom ratu*, pp. 236-239.

120 Described by Thomas as »incompetent, bad-tempered, and hated«, Colonel Gal was a Hungarian who had fought in the Russian Revolution. See Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 573.

there were only thirty-four Yugoslavs in fighting condition, a figure which was raised to around seventy with the arrival of Nađ and others who reached Spain in the spring of 1937 – they remained in the trenches for four months and succeeded in halting the Nationalist offensive.<sup>121</sup>

On 27 February, Ćopić was promoted to commander of the XV Brigade after Gal was made a general and transferred to Madrid.<sup>122</sup> *Proleter*, in the article »Madrid and Zagreb«, reported on Ćopić's promotion and emphasized the role of Croats in the Spanish Civil War:

»Croatian communists, who as volunteers are fighting before Madrid, are also defending our... white Zagreb. They are defending it, and not Mr. Košutić [the HSS vice president], who has been calling on the Croatian people to fight against communists. Zagreb is defended in front of Madrid by the Croatian communist Vlado Ćopić, at the head of the XV International Brigade, with hundreds of volunteers of all nationalities from Yugoslavia. They are not defending it with phrases, but with their bodies. They are not defending it as crooked and corrupt gentlemen, but as brave, committed, and far-sighted Croatian communists and antifascists.«<sup>123</sup>

The KPJ press was explicitly making the connection between the war that was being fought in Spain and the struggle of the Croatian people in Yugoslavia. *Proleter* was also using the same phrases

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121 Vjesnik, 30.7.1986, p. 8; and Ken Bradley, *The International Brigades in Spain 1936-1939*, London: Osprey, 1994, pp. 21-23. Lazar Latinović gives the figure of eighty men being fit for duty out of over 650 who had been in the Dimitrov Battalion at the beginning of the Battle of the Jarama. See Lazar Latinović, *Neka sećanja iz Španije*, in Enver Redžić, ed., *Jugosloveni u Španiji*, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1959, p. 147.

122 Ivan Očak, *Vojnik revolucije: Život i rad Vladimira Ćopića*, Zagreb: Spektar, 1980, p. 312.

123 *Proleter*, vol. 13, no. 7, June 1937, p. 4.

as the HSS leadership («white Zagreb»), in order to challenge the HSS claims that the communists would bring destruction to Croatia. Croatian communists were shown to be doing more to fight for «freedom» and «national rights» than the politicians who were denouncing them.

According to Ćopić's wartime journal, on 4 July 1937, during preparations for a new Republican offensive, the first company of the Dimitrov Battalion was officially named after the legendary peasant hero, Matija Gubec.<sup>124</sup> At that time the commander was Matija Vidaković «Kostaluka» from Vinkovci, and his second in command was Ivan Gošnjak, from Ogulin; both communists had arrived in Spain directly from the Soviet Union. As the Dimitrov unit marched into position for the Republican offensive at Brunete (west of Madrid), Blagoje Parović, the KPJ's highest level representative in Spain, met with the Yugoslav units. On 4 July 1937, he presented them with the flag of the Central Committee of the KPJ. According to Nađ, the flag was presented to the Matija Gubec Company and its commander Vidaković, while an article published in *Dimitrovac*, the newspaper of the Dimitrov Battalion, described how the flag was given to the battalion's commander, «comrade Čapajev».<sup>125</sup> Nađ recalls that Parović handed the flag to the Gubec Company commander, ordering him not to «taint the name of Matija Gubec». Vidaković accepted the flag and responded that «in the entire history of the Croatian people it is not possible to find a more meaningful name

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124 Dnevnik potpukovnika Vladimira Ćopića komandanta 15. Internacionalne Brigade, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 2, p. 269. Nađ claims that the company was given the name Matija Gubec in June 1937, after leaving Torrelodones (where the Dimitrov Battalion was re-supplied after the Battle of the Jarama) on a march towards the Guadarama River. *Vjesnik*, 30.7.1986, p. 8.

125 For Nađ's version of events, see his articles in *Vjesnik* and also Kosta Nađ, *U borbi za slobodu Španije*, in Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 3, p. 8.

than Gubec.«<sup>126</sup> »Tomorrow a Spanish unit with the same name«, added Vidaković, »will come to our homeland to crush fascism and to bring freedom to our people. Long live the Croatian Company of the National Spanish Army.«<sup>127</sup>

The Republican Brunete offensive, designed to take the pressure off the Basque front, began on 6 July 1937 and decimated the Yugoslav units of the XV International Brigade, which were used as a »shock force« against Nationalist defenses.<sup>128</sup> The losses among the commanders of the International Brigades were particularly high in these battles, as was the case throughout the Spanish Civil War. Parović, installed as the political commissar for the XIII International Brigade, was killed while leading an attack on Villanueva de la Cañada two days after presenting the KPJ's flag to the Dimitrov Battalion. The Gubec Company's officers were also put out of action during the fierce fighting: Vidaković was seriously wounded with two broken arms and a broken leg, Gošnjak, the second in command, was shell-shocked by a grenade, the political commissar Ivan Zagozda was killed, and Nađ, who took over command of the company, was shot in the hip while charging Nationalist defenses on Mosquito Ridge and had to be transferred to a hospital in Madrid.<sup>129</sup> Out of ninety-six soldiers in the Gubec Company at the start of the offensive, only thirty remained by 12 July.<sup>130</sup> The Đaković Battalion, formed in May 1937, had spent most of the offensive as a reserve unit, and saw action only in the final phases of the operation. New Yugoslav volunteers who had arrived in Spain during the summer were able

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126 Vjesnik, 30.7.1986, p. 8.

127 Vjesnik, 31.7.1986, p. 8.

128 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 690.

129 Nađ, *U borbi za slobodu Španije*, p. 10.

130 Belić Dudek, *Jugosloveni u Španskom građanskom ratu*, p. 243.

to replace the heavy losses suffered during the Brunete offensive, which failed to achieve its objectives due to the lack of experience of the Republican commanders, who had been unable to exploit initial gains on the battlefield.

The Dimitrov Battalion, with Mijat Mašković in command of the Gubec Company, was transferred to the Aragon Front as part of the 45th Division in August 1937 in order to attack the towns of Quinto and Belchite. Mašković was killed while leading a charge against Quinto, leaving the Gubec Company in the hands of his second in command, Gošnjak. In the difficult assault which ensued to take Quinto, both Gošnjak and Nađ, who had been promoted to the position of deputy commander of the Dimitrov Battalion, were wounded a second time, while many other Yugoslav volunteers fell in battles which resulted in little gain for the Republic at a heavy cost.<sup>131</sup> Gošnjak's wounds prevented him from continuing as commander, and for the rest of the Aragon offensive the Gubec Company was led by the future Partisan general Peko Dapčević. In the fall, news of Gorkić's arrest reached Spain, and during this period of political uncertainty Stevan Lilić (political commissar in the Dimitrov Battalion), Stevan Belić Dudek (political commissar in the Đaković Battalion), and Vlajko Begović (working for the intelligence services) were replaced.<sup>132</sup>

The exhausted Dimitrov Battalion was pulled from the front after the Republic's Aragon offensive, and was reorganized into the 129<sup>th</sup> Brigade along with the Tomaš Masaryk (mostly Czechs) and Đuro Đaković Battalions in February 1938. This was the first time that the majority of Yugoslav volunteers found themselves in one

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131 Nađ, *U borbi za slobodu Španije*, pp. 11-12. According to Štimac, the majority of the soldiers in the Gubec Company were either killed or wounded in the assaults on Quinto and Belchite. See Štimac, *Sjećanja iz Španije*, p. 55.

132 Vladan Vukliš, *Sjećanje na Španiju: Španski građanski rat u jugoslovenskoj istoriografiji i memoaristici 1945-1991*, Banja Luka: Arhiv Republike Srpske, 2013, p. 25

brigade, which they referred to as *naša brigada* [our brigade].<sup>133</sup> The 129<sup>th</sup> Brigade fought in a number of defensive battles during the Nationalist's offensive in Aragon and Levante during the spring of 1938, and despite valiant efforts by the Đaković, Dimitrov, and other units, the Republic was unable to prevent Catalonia from being cut off from central Spain. Battlefield losses and the arrival of new volunteers changed the ethnic composition of the company. Ivan Štimac, a Croat volunteer from Canada, recalls that during the time of the Aragon offensive

»there were Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Muslims, Macedonians, and Bulgarians in the Matija Gubec Company. National intolerance was never expressed. The solidarity between workers and students was exemplary.«<sup>134</sup>

The successful Nationalist drive to the sea separated the 129<sup>th</sup> Brigade from Barcelona and the majority of the other International Brigades. The heavy losses and dwindling flow of foreign volunteers resulted in a large number of Spaniards being recruited into this so-called »Mixed Brigade«. The Yugoslavs who remained on the Barcelona side of the Nationalist lines were reformed into the »Balkanico« and »Divisionario« battalions which, along with the 129<sup>th</sup> Brigade, fought on various fronts during the Battle of the Ebro (July-November 1938), suffering quite a high number of casualties.<sup>135</sup> In their memoirs the volunteers recounted the hellish battles against Nationalist forces; forces which had become significantly superior in terms of artillery and air power. Such advances in military technologies included the new Stuka dive bombers of the Condor Legion,

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133 Belić Dudek, *Jugosloveni u Španskom građanskom ratu*, p. 254.

134 Štimac, *Sjećanja iz Španije*, p. 53.

135 Hurtado, *Las Brigadas Internacionales*, pp. 58-62.



which mercilessly pummeled the Republican forces that had crossed the Ebro River and had become trapped on the barren terrain.<sup>136</sup>

On 21 September Prime Minister Negin addressed the League of Nations and announced that the International Brigades would be disbanded in a final attempt to win the support of the Western democracies. This resulted in all foreign volunteers being pulled from the front while the decisive battle at the Ebro still raged. The International Brigades participated in a final emotional farewell parade in Barcelona on 28 October 1938, but because they had lost their citizenship, several hundred Yugoslavs remained in Catalonia along with volunteers from countries such as Austria, Germany, and Italy. In January 1939, the remaining Yugoslavs created new units bearing the names of the Dimitrov Brigade and Đaković Battalion with Ivan Rukavina, Ivan Gošnjak, Vladimir Popović, Kosta Nađ, and Marko Orešković in leadership positions, but after a few defensive battles and the fall of Barcelona the Yugoslav volunteers crossed into France along with over 400,000 other Republican refugees, many of whom would spend years in internment camps and political exile.

## Internal Political Struggles

Beyond the heroism of the individual volunteers and the slogans of international solidarity, the International Brigades became a hotbed of intrigue and the settling of scores among communists who found themselves in Spain. Ivan Štimac noted that Yugoslav officers who had come from the USSR were divided over whether to »preserve the cadres« or to »harden them in battle« by sending them to the

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<sup>136</sup> Pešić, Španjolski građanski rat i KPJ, pp. 140-141; Boro Pockov Mirko, Borbe na reci Ebru, in Kapor, Španija, vol. 3, pp. 477-484; Marko Perić, Teški dani na reci Ebru, in Kapor, Španija, vol. 3, pp. 487-493.

front lines.<sup>137</sup> Political factors were often more important than sound military reasoning on a number of occasions, and since the Spanish Civil War coincided with Stalin's Great Purge in the Soviet Union, officers were more often concerned with obeying orders than with making good military choices.<sup>138</sup> The intrigues, political maneuverings, and betrayals taking place in Moscow extended to the various Communist Parties whose members were in Spain. The Stalinist atmosphere of paranoia enveloped the KPJ as well, and the factionalism that had debilitated the Party in the 1920s and early 1930s continued to play out in Spain. The KPJ leadership was particularly sensitive to the developments in Spain, since Stalin had been on the verge of dissolving the Party. In a new biography of Tito by Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, the chaotic situation encountered by the future communist leader both in Yugoslavia and among the Party leadership living abroad is clearly evident.<sup>139</sup> Tito's role during time of the Spanish Civil War is also, therefore, a key element of the internal struggles and subsequent controversies that continue to this day. As mentioned in the previous section, Tito, along with his predecessor Milan Gorkić, was responsible for helping to organize the Yugoslav volunteers traveling via Paris to Spain. He was in Paris briefly in 1936, and then spent the first half of 1937 mostly traveling around Yugoslavia, where he helped establish the Communist Parties of Slovenia and Croatia, in addition to reorganizing Party cadres decimated by police raids. In August 1937 Tito returned to Paris soon after Gorkić was recalled to Moscow, and stayed there more or less until the spring of 1938. These eight months were full of uncertainty, since Gorkić disappeared in Stalin's purges, the Comintern was not

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137 Ivan Štimac, *Sjećanje iz Španije*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 3, p. 59.

138 S. P. MacKenzie, *Revolutionary Armies in the Modern Era: A Revisionist Approach*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 123-126.

139 Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, *Tito*, Zagreb: Profil, 2015, pp. 131-182.

responding to Tito's letters, and the KPJ was forced to finance itself. There was also a struggle for control among communists in Yugoslavia's prisons, where Tito's main rival, Petko Miletić, was outmaneuvered by Moša Pijade after rumors emerged that Miletić had not held up as stoically to police torture as had previously been claimed. Nevertheless, Tito was able to maintain regular contact with the KPJ representatives in Spain, and also collect enough money to continue Party activities. He returned to Paris in late 1938, and twice more in 1939 to help with the transfer of volunteers out of Spain and the French internment camps, but most of his time was spent either in Moscow or back in Yugoslavia.

While Tito was beyond a doubt heavily involved in the Spanish Civil War from his headquarters in Paris, there are also suspicions suggesting that he had actually spent time in Spain, possibly as an NKVD assassin, according to right-wing historians. Tito never admitted to crossing over into Spain, and no former volunteer, even after Tito's death or subsequent splits with the Party, confirmed that Tito was there. While he was still alive, he would receive letters from people claiming that they remembered him from Spain, and occasionally foreigners would produce a photograph from the war with a person allegedly from the Balkans who they were convinced was the famous Partisan leader in his younger days. Ivo and Slavko Goldstein suspect that Tito might have gone to Madrid (and not Albacete) during 1937, but no definite proof has emerged to support this theory.<sup>140</sup> Historians such as Pero Simić have relied on flimsy evidence, comments taken out of context, statements given in informal settings, and conspiracy theories to suggest that Tito's mission in Spain was one of the KPJ's biggest cover-ups.<sup>141</sup> Simić also contributed an article to the magazine *Vojna povijest* which declared Tito to

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>141</sup> Pero Simić, Tito: fenomen stoljeća, Zagreb: Večernji list, 2009, pp. 82-84.

have been »the chief of liquidators in Spain«. The article featured a photograph of a naked man seen from behind in a camp shower as proof of Tito's presence in Spain, and this picture was reproduced on several conspiracy websites.<sup>142</sup> Besides the fact that the man's face is unrecognizable, this photograph was taken in the Gurs Camp (in France) after the fall of the Republic and had been reprinted in the fifth volume of the *Španija* series.<sup>143</sup> The goal of portraying Tito as an NKVD murderer serves not only to explain how he survived Stalin's purges when so many other experienced Yugoslav communists were killed from 1936-1939, but also aims to delegitimize both socialism and the Yugoslav project. The Russian historian Nikita Viktorović Bondarev argues that Tito's »denunciations« of fellow Yugoslav communists was typical of Comintern members, who were constantly writing reports about their comrades' characteristics, and so this does not necessarily associate Tito with the NKVD operations in Spain.<sup>144</sup>

In Yugoslav postwar historiography, the blame for the inter-party conflicts in Spain was always placed squarely on the shoulders of a small group of »liquidators« who had lived in the Soviet Union for a long time and who had »disgraced« the KPJ with their factionalist struggle.<sup>145</sup> In a report on the organization of the KPJ at the Fifth Party Conference in 1940, Tito noted that although Marty praised the bravery of the Yugoslav volunteers, »there were around seven or eight who, instead of going into combat, led a factional

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142 Pero Simić, Tito – šef likvidatora u Španjolskoj, in: *Vojna povijest*, no. 10, January 2012, online version at <http://vojnepovijest.vecernji.hr/clanak/broj-10/tito-sef-likvidatora-u-ratu-u-spanjolskoj-149>.

143 Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 28.

144 Nikita Viktorović Bondarev, *Misterija Tito: moskovske godine*, Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2013, pp. 205-206.

145 For example, see Zlatko Čepo, *Josip Broz Tito i rat u Španiji*, in Boban, *Španjolska*, p. 133; and Pešić, *Španjolski građanski rat*, p.132.

struggle and in that way disgraced our Party... they developed a theory of »preserving« their cadres, and often did not prove to be brave leaders in military units.«<sup>146</sup> Unlike the Spanish Civil War historiography in other Soviet bloc countries, history books in Yugoslavia were far more critical of the USSR's involvement in Spanish events, so as to reinforce the (alleged) independence of Yugoslav communists even before the split with Stalin in 1948. Although the Soviet role in the Spanish Civil War was never completely discredited, Yugoslav historians did not hesitate to point out problems. For example, *The History of Yugoslavia* (published in English in 1974) noted that »some of the Yugoslav commanders from the Spanish war brought Soviet concepts of discipline to Yugoslavia«, which constituted the »dangerous beginnings of bureaucracy« which »created the basis on which various expressions of nationalism and chauvinism could be revived.«<sup>147</sup>

Rumors have also occasionally circulated that certain KPJ leaders were sent to Spain because there was a good chance they would die in battle. Dedijer has suggested this was the case with Blagoje Parović (1904-1937), the senior KPJ representative who arrived in Spain in April 1937.<sup>148</sup> Parović was killed on 6 July 1937 during the Brunete offensive while serving as the political commissar of the XIII International Brigade, which had been suffering from low morale and a high number of desertions. His funeral was attended by the leading Yugoslav communists in Spain, and he came to symbolize the KPJ's sacrifice for the Spanish people, depicted in communist publications as yet another martyr in the Party's long struggle for

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146 See Tito, Izvještaj o organizacionom pitanju na V konferenciji KPJ 1940 god., in Damjanović, Tito Sabrana djela, vol. 6, p. 25.

147 Vladimir Dedijer, Ivan Božić, Sima Cirković, and Milorad Ekmečić, eds, *The History of Yugoslavia*, New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1974, pp. 623-625.

148 Parović was among those communists who were sent to Spain directly from the Soviet Union.

freedom.<sup>149</sup> While Parović continued to be accorded a place in the pantheon of KPJ martyrs, some speculated that darker motives lay behind his death. Todor Vujasinović posited, in a collection of documents and biographical essays on Parović, that he had been sent to the front lines in Spain as a result of Gorkić's machinations, as Gorkić was worried that Tito was a serious contender for the leadership of the KPJ and that he had gained the support of younger, charismatic Party members such as Parović.<sup>150</sup> Despite offering the theory that he had died due to rivalries present between Gorkić and Tito, Vujasinović nevertheless claims that Parović had been killed »fulfilling his revolutionary duty, charging far ahead of the soldiers in his brigade.«<sup>151</sup> Velimir Dedijer, meanwhile, has alleged that Parović was found with gunpowder scorch marks around the bullet holes in his back, suggesting that he had been killed from behind at close range.<sup>152</sup> The photograph of the dead Parović, taken by Vljako Begović the day after the battle, was subsequently claimed to not have been taken in honor of a fallen comrade, but as proof that the liquidation had been carried out.<sup>153</sup> Lazar Udovički, writing on behalf

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149 For example, the booklet *Nuestros Españoles*, about Yugoslavs in Spain, prominently featured a picture of Parović on the cover. The newspaper of the Yugoslav volunteers in Spain, *Dimitrovac*, which Parović helped establish, carried a large article and a page of photographs from Parović's funeral. See: Veljko Vlahović, ed. *Dimitrovac: List bataljona Dimitrov 1937*, Belgrade: Institut za izučavanje radničkog pokreta, 1968, pp. 32-33 (originally published on 23.7.1937).

150 Todor Vujasinović, ed., *Blagoje Parović: Gradja za biografiju*, Sarajevo: Narodna prosvjeta, 1955, p. 19. Kosta Nađ also noted that there was a rivalry between Gorkić and Parović, but cites an order from the International Brigade command, which insisted that political commissars set an example to their troops by personally leading attacks, an order which was responsible for Parović's death. See *Vjesnik*, 31.7.1986, p. 8.

151 Vujasinović, *Blagoje Parović*, p. 20.

152 Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*, vol. 2, pp. 319-320.

153 Begović's photo archive, mostly consisting of images of the XV International Brigade, can be accessed on ALBA's website, <http://www.alba-valb.org/>.

of a Spanish veteran organization, responded to Dedijer's claims in a letter to the newspaper *Borba*. He dismissed all allegations of an assassination plot and cover-up, arguing that Dedijer's source (Nikola Kovačević, aka »Nikita Mendes«) had not even been at the front and could not have seen the alleged gunpowder marks.<sup>154</sup> Kovačević was one of the »factionalists« who had arrived from the Soviet Union, and he was denounced as being cowardly by Maslarić in a Comintern report written in 1939.<sup>155</sup> There is no doubt that personal conflicts and power struggles characterized the KPJ operations in Spain, yet no other evidence has surfaced to support the claim that leading communists like Parović were murdered as part of Tito's plan to assume control of the Party. Despite these political machinations and the defeat of the Republic, the KPJ emerged as more unified and disciplined during the following years.

## **The Collapse of the Republic and the French Camps**

The end of the Spanish Civil War effectively buried the Popular Front policy, while the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) on 23 August 1939 reversed the explicitly antifascist position that had been the focus of communist activities over the previous four years.

The several hundred Yugoslavs that had continued fighting in the Republican army crossed over into France on 9 and 10 February 1939, along with the Republican units that had defended Catalonia, and a huge swell of civilian refugees. The French government sent the Yugoslav volunteers, along with other Republican soldiers and those refugees who were unable to find housing with friends or political contacts, to camps at Argelès-sur-Mer (70,000 refugees)

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<sup>154</sup> *Borba*, 12.1.1982, no page number, in OSA, HU-300-10-2, box 475.

<sup>155</sup> Reprinted in Duga, Belgrade, no. 403, 5–18.8.1989, p. 80.

and Saint Cyprien (80,000 refugees).<sup>156</sup> Both of these camps were located on the wind-swept sand dunes of the Mediterranean coast, where the refugees, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by Senegalese troops and members of the *garde mobile*, were forced to build their own shelters on the barren ground. Thomas describes how »men dug holes for themselves like animals«,<sup>157</sup> while Stjepan Polić remembers collecting a few scraggly weeds to build a fire and waking up to see people buried in the sand, »graves in which living people slept.«<sup>158</sup> Three months later, the international volunteers were moved to better conditions at another camp, Gurs, where they were able to organize themselves into groups based on nationality as they had in the International Brigades. While the majority of the volunteers who had come from Western Europe and North America were eventually repatriated, those from Yugoslavia, as well as Hungary, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the Baltic countries were forced to remain. The law passed by the Stojadinović regime in March 1937, which stripped all volunteers of their citizenship, remained in force, and prevented them from legally returning home. In the summer of 1939, there were 324 Yugoslavs interned in Gurs.<sup>159</sup> A number of the veterans had managed to avoid the camps and made their way to either Paris or Marseilles, where they had contacted KPJ cells in

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156 Ljubo Ilić, *Interbrigadisti u francuskim logorima*, in *Kapor*, Španija, vol. 4, p. 8.

157 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 855.

158 Stjepan Polić, *Živi grobovi u pijesku*, in *Kapor*, Španija, vol. 4, p. 112.

159 Ilić, *Interbrigadisti*, p. 14. Ivan Gošnjak gives the number of Yugoslav internees at Gurs as being closer to 400, and notes that another ten women from Yugoslavia were interned at a separate camp, fourteen volunteers were in various jails, and a small group of invalids who had been evacuated from Spain earlier were housed in a nearby camp, raising the total number of Yugoslavs in French camps to around 440. Ivan Gošnjak, *Život i borba Jugoslovena u francuskim logorima*, in *Kapor*, Španija, vol. 4, p. 39. Other sources give the number of imprisoned Yugoslavs as 520. *Naši Španjolski dobrovoljci*, p. xviii.



those cities and established committees to help other Yugoslavs escape, while others were smuggled into Yugoslavia. A small number were unlucky enough to remain imprisoned in Spanish concentration camps set up by Franco as part of the wide scale repression enacted against the defeated Republic.

The KPJ members among the prisoners effectively organized political and educational work during the period in Gurs, and were able to maintain high morale and discipline despite the difficult conditions, both physical and psychological, that characterized life in the French camps.<sup>160</sup> Because of the extent of the political activity taking place among the remaining prisoners, and the resistance of the veterans - particularly the Yugoslavs - to volunteer in the Foreign Legion or work brigades, in May and June 1940 the French authorities separated some 900 of the suspected leaders among the international prisoners and sent them to a camp in Vernet, while the remainder were returned to Argelès, which had been expanded over the course of the year following the first influx of refugees. At Vernet, the prisoners were no longer treated as Republican refugees, but as communists.<sup>161</sup> Political activity was severely limited, and letters home could only be written in German, French, or Spanish: not in any Slavic languages, as the prison authorities wanted to carefully screen all content.<sup>162</sup> The German invasion of France also sent new

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160 Most of volume 4 of Kapor's *Španija, 1936-1939* series contains recollections of daily life in the camps as experienced by the Spanish veterans. Malnutrition, abuse by camp guards and administrators, disease, and a sense of abandonment and despair took their toll among the internees, especially those who continued to suffer from wounds received in Spain.

161 Gošnjak, *Život i borba*, p. 54.

162 Letter from Gojko Borjan to his sister Lucija Borjan, dated 4.9.1940, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (*Španjolski dobrovoljci*), box 5, no. 118. Borjan was taken to Argelès, but had received word of the conditions at Vernet. At this time, according to Borjan's estimates, some 120 Yugoslavs were held in Vernet, while ninety were transferred to Argelès.

waves of refugees and political prisoners down to southern France, where they shared the camps with the Republican refugees.

The imprisonment of the Spanish veterans prompted the KPJ to begin their public actions with two goals in mind: to mobilize a campaign pressuring the Yugoslav government to facilitate their return, and to collect material aid for the internees. The first task was coordinated between the KPJ organization in Paris, and activists in Yugoslavia. The Committee of Former Yugoslav Volunteers in Republican Spain had already been established in Paris in February 1939, and it maintained direct contact with the internees through the assistance of the French Communist Party.<sup>163</sup> In Zagreb, the KPJ set up the Committee for the Aid and Return of Spanish Fighters (*Odbor za pomoć i povrat španjolskih boraca*) in the summer of 1939, which organized branch committees across Croatia and in other parts of Yugoslavia.<sup>164</sup> Through these committees and actions undertaken by individual members, the KPJ initiated a massive campaign of writing letters to government officials and collecting signatures in an effort to resolve the plight of the imprisoned veterans.

By as early as April 1939 the interior ministry received a flood of letters with hundreds of collected signatures criticizing the regime's position as regards the internees.<sup>165</sup> After the establishment of the committee for helping Spanish veterans, the KPJ instructed all of its affiliated organizations, such as the URSSJ, the leftist student associations at the Universities of Zagreb and Belgrade, and the

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163 Dobrovoljci iz španske republikanske vojske akcija za povratak u domovinu, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 8843/39, 23.2.1939, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 76. The Yugoslav police were aware that the KPJ was actively trying to secure the release of its Spanish veterans, and therefore closely monitored their fate.

164 Pešić, Španjolski građanski rat, p. 164.

165 Kolektivne pretstavke za Jugoslavenske državljane španske republikanske vojske, Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. II. D.Z. broj 14009/39, 24.4.1939, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 91.

Society for the Education of Women (*Društvo za prosvjetu žena*) to increase the pressure on both the Cvetković-Maček government in Belgrade and the Croatian Banovina administration, headed by Ban Ivan Šubašić.<sup>166</sup> The family members of the internees sent letters and met with government representatives.<sup>167</sup> KPJ sympathizers distributed flyers in Zagreb and other Croatian cities, because the majority of the internees were Croats. One such flyer, addressed to »the entire Croatian public«, appealed to Croatian patriotism by emphasizing that the Croats in Spain had fought in units bearing the names of Croatian national heroes:

»Do the volunteers and inheritors of the freedom fighting traditions of the Croatian people and other nations of this country, who heroically fought in the celebrated ›Matija Gubec‹ and immortal ›Stjepan Radić‹ companies, not deserve to be given the minimum honor: their free return to a free Homeland? We appeal to all public and cultural workers, as well as to the entire Croatian people, to seek the return of volunteers and prisoners to their dear country through interventions, telegrams, petitions, and requests directed at the responsible authorities.«<sup>168</sup>

Lawyers in Zagreb and Belgrade also joined in the efforts. The renowned Zagreb lawyer Ivo Politeo, who had represented communists and other political prisoners throughout the 1930s, sent Ban Šubašić an impassioned plea for the amnesty of the Spanish vol-

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166 Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske*, vol. 1, p. 332.

167 After feeling moved by the dramatic letters detailing the camp conditions written by Maks Baće, Beba Krajačić and Dina Zlatić met with a special case officer, identified only as ›Vlaisavljević‹, but realized that the Banovina was more interested in infiltrating the communist movement than in helping the imprisoned Croats. Archive of Yugoslavia (AJ), fond 724, Šp. X-2/46, statement by Krajačić and Zlatić, 10.9.1951.

168 Flyer dated 7.11.1939, reprinted in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 4, pp. 86-87.

unteers, noting that they had fought for the legal Spanish government which had once had normal diplomatic ties with Yugoslavia.<sup>169</sup> According to Jelić, by late 1939, efforts to facilitate the return of the Spanish volunteers was »one of the most significant components of the public political activities of the KPH.«<sup>170</sup>

The pressure on the government seems to have had some impact, and the authorities announced that relatives of the internees could apply for their release. More than twenty of the Spanish veterans, mostly students and intellectuals, were able to legally return to Yugoslavia through the intervention of relatives who had some kinds of political connections.<sup>171</sup> The authorities of the Croatian Banovina received a large number of requests for the amnesty of the Spanish volunteers, usually from family members, but the vast majority of them were rejected because of the suspected communist beliefs of the prisoners.<sup>172</sup>

The Yugoslav government also sent a representative, identified only as »Teodosić« in the memoirs, to the Gurs camp to offer the internees a set of conditions for their return. Ivan Gošnjak recalled the government's offer in his memoirs:

»[Teodosić] instructed every individual to write a request in which the following needed to be stressed: first, to repent for going to fight fascism in Spain, and second, to promise that upon returning home no political activity against the

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169 Letter to Ban Ivan Šubašić from Ivo Politeo, November 1939, HDA, fond 416 (Polit-eo), box. 51.

170 Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske*, vol. 1, p. 332.

171 Gošnjak, *Život i borba*, p. 41.

172 For example, the wife of Slavko Cenčić sent an appeal to the Banovina authorities after reading in the newspapers that relatives could apply for amnesty, but based on Cenčić's »previous work and political orientation«, the appeal was rejected. Letter from Dragica Cenčić to Croatian Banovina authorities, dated 16.11.1939, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 95. Negative reply dated 28.12.1939, same collection.

government would be undertaken and that we would be loyal citizens in future. After the Yugoslav government established these kinds of conditions, which were unacceptable and demeaning to us, it was clear that only some kind of dramatic political change in Yugoslavia, and the world in general, would enable us to leave the camps.«<sup>173</sup>

The willingness of the volunteers to continue to endure the hardships of the camps rather than betray the ideals that they fought for in Spain is testimony to how powerful the Republican cause was to these men. Kosta Nađ later wrote that the Yugoslav government's conditions amounted to »us spitting upon ourselves, our ideals, everything we had accomplished, everything that defined our personal and political beliefs... We immediately sent Teodosić packing.«<sup>174</sup> Although less than half of the volunteers from Yugoslavia were communists when they went to Spain, the experience of the war, and the subsequent hardships of many in the French internment camps, created a disciplined cadre of communist revolutionaries out of those who survived.

The failure to resolve the status of the majority of internees led to more public campaigns and actions by the KPJ in late 1939 and throughout 1940. On 10 December 1939, a letter from Delnice (in Gorski kotar), signed by four hundred individuals, was sent to Prime Minister Cvetković calling for the release of the internees.<sup>175</sup> One hundred and twelve names were signed on an undated letter sent to Cvetković, which claimed that the Spanish volunteers had »once again shown the world the bravery of Yugoslavia.«<sup>176</sup>

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173 Gošnjak, *Život i borba*, p. 41.

174 Kosta Nađ, *Ustanak*, Zagreb: Spektar, 1981, p. 6.

175 Letter to Dragiša Cvetković, dated 10.12.1939, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 100.

176 Undated letter to Dragiša Cvetković, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 100.

In addition to public appeals for the release of the Spanish volunteers, the KPJ collected a large amount of aid that proved to be of vital importance to the internees suffering in the miserable conditions of the French camps. Over the course of 1940, the Party was able to collect some 100,000 dinars in support of the internees, and sent them approximately 3,000 packets of supplies.<sup>177</sup> The conditions in the camps were harsh, and the internees were perpetually short of food and adequate clothing. As the war between France and Germany drew closer, the conditions deteriorated. Gošnjak describes how the internees were »turning into living skeletons«, spending most of the day lying in their bunks to conserve energy.<sup>178</sup> However, the KPJ attempted to send the prisoners as much aid as possible, and based on the testimony of a number of survivors, the Yugoslavs received more aid from home than any other group in the camps.<sup>179</sup> Based on correspondence sent by the internees to their families, the most common items requested included salted pork (*slanina*), melba toast (*dvopek*), soap, cigarettes, newspapers from Yugoslavia, clothes, and money.<sup>180</sup> A substantial library of communist books and other materials also made its way into the camps, which was then used for the political education of the internees, especially during the relatively easy period spent in the Gurs camp. The solidarity and discipline of the volunteers was reinforced by the communal use of all the material received.

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177 Jelić, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske*, vol. 1, p. 333.

178 Gošnjak, *Život i borba*, p. 56.

179 See *ibid.*; Ilić, *Interbrigadisti*, p. 29; and Vicko Antić, *Iz logora u logor*, in *Kapor, Španija*, vol. 5, p. 83.

180 A series of letters between Gojko Borjan and his family provides a fascinating insight into the life of an internee. Borjan repeatedly asks for salted pork instead of other kinds of food, which tended to go bad, and is concerned that a package of underwear never made it to him. Collection of letters, from 5.1.1940 to 28.10.1940, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 5, no. 118.

The internees were permitted to receive packets weighing up to one kilogram. At one point the regime, aware that the veterans continued to receive support from numerous sympathizers, attempted to prevent packets with food from being sent, citing customs violations. This prompted an immediate protest from the relatives of the internees, who sent letters to the National Bank of Yugoslavia (which handled customs regulations) and the Red Cross, eventually resulting in a reversal of the ban on food.<sup>181</sup>

While the campaign to collect signatures and aid seems to have had some success in pressuring the government, and providing the communists with a public platform to display their support of Republican refugees and the rights of political prisoners, the authorities immediately prohibited the collection of signatures in support of the internees. As was the case during the Spanish Civil War when any evidence of pro-Republican activity was considered a justification for search and seizure, the campaign for the imprisoned volunteers became the target of a police crackdown aimed at disrupting the communist movement. The authorities were convinced that the Yugoslavs in French camps were devoted communists, basing some of their conclusions on German propaganda. The police therefore treated public appeals for the release of the internees as communist activity.

The police in the Croatian Banovina were so determined to root out possible communists that in addition to arresting anybody caught collecting signatures, they often raided the homes of people who had merely signed one of the petitions. For example, in March 1940, everyone who had signed a petition in Karlovac asking the government to intervene on behalf of the internees was »placed under police surveillance and warned of the legal consequences of their

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<sup>181</sup> Letters to the National Bank of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Red Cross, dated 28.10.1940, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 5, no. 128.

actions.«<sup>182</sup> In addition to banning the collection of signatures, the collection of any kind of aid for the internees was punishable by law. A postcard containing a photograph of the Gurs camp was used to raise money for the veterans, but was quickly deemed illegal by the police.<sup>183</sup> Numerous police reports gave descriptions of suspected communists caught with money »intended for the communist Spanish volunteers.«<sup>184</sup> In early 1941, the Croatian Banovina authorities instructed all districts to intensify their efforts in shutting down »the collection of food and voluntary contributions for former Spanish volunteers.«<sup>185</sup> This order indicates that the campaign was still active nearly two years after the Spanish volunteers ended up in the French camps, and that the government was even willing to prohibit collections of goods which would satisfy only their most basic needs.

Although the prisoners managed to devise methods of escape and possessed the means to forge necessary documents, individuals were nevertheless discouraged from escaping, except for in a few cases.<sup>186</sup> Lazar Latinović served as the KPJ's contact in Marseilles, from where veterans could take a boat to either Split or Rijeka, and Lazar Udovički coordinated the KPJ's efforts as regards the war

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182 Španjolski dobrovoljci, Banskog vlasti Banovine Hrvatske, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. broj 206/1940, 1.3.1940, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 99.

183 Banskog vlasti Banovine Hrvatske, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. broj 15054/40 (26.3.1940), HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 113.

184 Several arrests took place on the island of Hvar in 1940, where one individual was caught with 383 dinars, and another with 575 dinars. It is not clear how the police knew that this money was specifically intended to be sent to France, other than the fact that one of the suspects had a flyer appealing for the release of the Spanish veterans. Banskog vlasti Banovine Hrvatske, Kabinet bana, Pov. broj 3273/40 (11.12.1940); and Pov. broj 3490/40, 17.12.1940, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 4, no. 97.

185 Banskog vlasti Banovine Hrvatske, Kabinet bana, Kab. broj 15018/41, 26.2.1941, HDA, coll. 1360, group XVII (Španjolski dobrovoljci), box 5, no. 132.

186 Čedo Kapor, Glavni zadatak – povratak u zemlju, in Kapor, Španija, vol. 4, p. 233.



veterans from Paris. The Party's leadership insisted that the veterans remain unified, so that »the cadres would be preserved and returned to the revolutionary movement.«<sup>187</sup> As a consequence of the new tactical ideas envisioned by Tito and his inner circle, it was believed that if the veterans attempted to escape on their own they would be dispersed and ineffective, and so the internees in the camps were instructed to stick together until a solution could be found for all of them. In his memoirs, Čedo Kapor criticized this course of action, since in his opinion it was riskier to wait for a group solution than to individually escape from the camps, believing that the veterans were experienced enough to be able to find their way back to Yugoslavia.<sup>188</sup> The lax security at Argelès and the ability of Udovički to establish a secure route home convinced the Party to instruct those internees who were capable of escaping to head to Paris; approximately eighty veterans from Argelès were sent to Yugoslavia with Udovički's help. However, some of the most experienced cadres remained interned in difficult conditions in Vernet.

The capitulation of France in June 1940 and the German need for a massive labor force provided the remaining Yugoslav prisoners with an opportunity. The KPJ instructed the internees to apply for transfers to labor camps in Germany, and by the summer of 1941 most of the Yugoslav veterans had been moved out of the Vernet camp.<sup>189</sup> The veterans who had been communists had torn up their membership cards upon crossing into France, and all of those applying to go to work in Germany denied that they had fought in Spain. They were instructed to claim that they were all Croats, since the Nazis had by that point helped to establish the collaborationist Independent State of Croatia (NDH – *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*)

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187 Ilić, *Interbrigadisti*, p. 19.

188 Kapor, *Glavni zadatak*, pp. 233-235.

189 Pešić, *Španjolski građanski rat*, p. 165.

and looked more favorably on Croats than Serbs and other Yugoslavs.<sup>190</sup> In Germany, the veterans were given relative freedom to move around, received better food than in the French camps, and were even paid.<sup>191</sup> Tito appointed Vjećeslav Cvetko »Flores«, a veteran of Spain himself, to organize the return of the Yugoslav group from Germany. The veterans used their weekend leave to travel by rail to Slovenia, given that half of the country had been directly incorporated into the Third Reich. From Slovenia, they crossed into the NDH on foot with guides, eventually reaching the rendezvous point in Zagreb.<sup>192</sup> Danilo Lekić, speaking at a meeting of Spanish Civil War veterans in Zagreb on 22 October 1985, reflected on how »today it seems totally impossible, or made-up, that a large number of Spanish veterans spent the summer months of the year 1941 here in the middle of Zagreb.«<sup>193</sup>

The impressive efforts made by the KPJ in supporting the Yugoslav volunteers imprisoned in the French camps was significant in maintaining a public presence in the aftermath of the Republican defeat and the demoralizing Nazi-Soviet Pact. The communists used much of the same rhetoric in calling for the release of the veterans

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190 Vicko Antić, Bjekstvo, in Kapor, Španija, vol. 4, p. 391. The internees were also instructed to claim that they were all married, in order to receive more supplies and funds while working in Germany.

191 Maks Baće, interview with author in Split, Croatia, 14.11.2003. Baće described that at one point while in Germany, when it was discovered that a group of Yugoslavs had been in Spain, they were briefly transferred to a concentration camp as punishment. However, the group was soon returned to the labor camp, which Baće interpreted as a warning in order to discourage any disobedience on the part of the prisoners.

192 About sixty veterans were returned to Yugoslavia in the summer of 1941 in this manner. Vlado Popović, Organizovanje povratka u zemlju naših drugova Španaca iz Nemačke, in Kapor, Španija, vol. 4, p. 282.

193 Archive of Bosnia-Herzegovina (ABiH), Collection Čedo Kapor, doc. II-3/444, Uvodna reč, Danilo Lekić, 22.10.1985, p. 2.

as they did during the war in Spain. The internees were described as freedom fighters who were struggling for the national rights of Spaniards, Catalans, and Basques as much as the rights of Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians, and other national groups in Yugoslavia. The plight of the internees in France was also connected to the KPJ's appeals for a general amnesty of all political prisoners in Yugoslavia. Branko Nikoliš, the brother of a volunteer in Spain, gave the example of his village – Sjeničak - as merely one case in which citizens were influenced by the campaign for the release of the internees:

»The results of those actions were not just visible in their material and moral effect in aiding the Spanish volunteers. Those actions were not just the result of a temporary consciousness and strategy directed towards something that represented justice. Their true worth became fully manifest in 1941, when Sjeničak was prepared for those fateful days and rose unanimously against the occupiers and quislings.«<sup>194</sup>

## »Španci and the People's Liberation Movement



Although the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had desperately tried to stay neutral in the European war that had been raging since 1939, a bloodless coup took place, carried out by pro-British officers on 27 March 1941, two days after Regent Paul had signed a Pact with the Axis powers. King Peter II, declared to be of age, quickly issued statements to the effect that all foreign treaties, including Yugoslavia's adherence to the Tripartite Pact, would be respected, but an infuriated Hitler immediately ordered plans for the invasion of Yugoslavia (Directive No. 25) to be put into motion. On 6 April 1941, Germany's

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<sup>194</sup> Nikoliš, »Selo Sjeničak«, p. 308.

Operation Punishment began, consisting of the bombardment of Belgrade and a multi-pronged invasion of Yugoslavia. After resisting the invasion for only twelve days, the Yugoslav Supreme Command capitulated on 17 April after the King and most of the government had already fled into exile.

Yugoslavia was carved up between its neighbors, and most of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were incorporated into the NDH under the dictatorship of Ante Pavelić's Ustaša movement. Hungary annexed the Međimurje and Baranja regions (today part of Croatia), and parts of Vojvodina. Bulgaria absorbed a large portion of Macedonia and parts of southeastern Serbia, while the Italian-administered Albania was given most of Kosovo and the western parts of Macedonia. Slovenia was divided between Germany (the northern half including Maribor) and Italy (the southern half around Ljubljana). Italy annexed parts of the Dalmatian coast, the area around Kotor bay, and most of the Croatian islands that had not already fallen under Italian control after the First World War. Italy also had occupational forces in Montenegro and the Dalmatian hinterland that was not directly annexed. The Germans occupied Serbia and installed a quisling regime under the command of General Milan Nedić. The German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June allowed the KPJ to abandon its passive position. On 27 June the Military Committee was transformed into the General Staff of the People's Liberation Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia (*Glavni štab narodnooslobodilačkih partizanskih odreda Jugoslavije*), and several days later, on 4 July, the Central Committee of the KPJ issued a call for a general uprising throughout occupied Yugoslavia.

It was during the early phase of the People's Liberation Struggle (NOB -*Narodnooslobodilačka borba*) that the Spanish Civil War veterans, often referred to as *naši Španci* (our Spaniards), played a crucial role. They were instrumental in creating effective guerrilla fighters out of untrained bands of civilians hiding in the forests. The

veterans had considerable military skills, but more importantly they were politically disciplined and loyal to the Party.<sup>195</sup> Some of the symbols and habits developed in the Spanish Civil War were adopted by the Partisans, such as the triangular (»Triglav«) hat introduced by the *Španci* in Croatia, along with the clenched fist salute.<sup>196</sup> Military organization, and the use of political commissars working closely with unit commanders, was based on the International Brigade model. Spanish Civil War songs were sung around campfires to raise morale and honor those who were the first to pick up a gun against the fascist threat. The model used for conducting political work in the military units of the Republican army was recommended for the newly formed Partisan forces, as illustrated by a report sent to Partisan command from Koča Popović, who was active in establishing and organizing Partisan forces in southern Serbia in the summer of 1941. He suggested that a »special party functionary« be designated to assist the political commissar, explaining »that such a division of duties was implemented in the Spanish Republican army, where it gave excellent results.«<sup>197</sup> Having already fought fascism in Spain, *Španci* had an almost legendary status among new recruits as well as among experienced communist activists who had never left Yugoslavia. The uprising in Serbia on 7 July was attributed in the postwar Partisan narrative to the unit formed by Žikica Jovanović »Španac« (1914-1942), who urged the peasants of Bela Crkva to join the Partisan resistance, and killed two gendarmes who came to arrest

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195 Vujošević, *Povijest saveza komunista*, pp. 160-161.

196 The Triglav hat was replaced by one used in the Soviet Union, called a »Tito« hat, after a decree was passed in April 1944. Velimir Vuksić, *Tito's Partisans, 1941-1945*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003, p. 21.

197 Report from Koča Popović on 28.8.1941, reprinted in *Zbornik: Dokumenta i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu Jugoslovenskih naroda*, vol. 1, Belgrade: Vojno-istorijski institut Jugoslovenske armije, 1949, p. 99.

him.<sup>198</sup> In Croatia, the General Staff of the National Liberation Army was founded on 26 October, and the commander, political commissar, and operations officer were all Spanish Civil War veterans – Ivo Rukavina, Marko Orešković, and Franjo Ogulinac. The First Proletarian Brigade, a mobile unit that included the best Partisan soldiers, was formed on 21 December, and was led by Koča Popović, another Spanish veteran. Popović and his fellow Španci Peko Dapčević, Kosta Nađ, and Petar Drapšin were the commanders of the four Partisan armies created by the end of the war in 1945.

The Španci were particularly important for the KPJ on the territory of the NDH because of the nature of the uprising taking place in response to the Ustaša violence. The Četniks, often led by prewar Serb politicians, likewise carried out their own reign of terror against Croat and Muslim civilians in a spiraling cycle of interethnic violence. The communists, whose political program was based on cooperation between Serbs and Croats within a renewed Yugoslav state (*bratstvo i jedinstvo* – »brotherhood and unity«), needed to restore trust between the antagonistic national groups in order to achieve their military, and eventually political, goals. Having served in integrated units composed of volunteers from all regions of Yugoslavia (and from over fifty other countries) in the International Brigades, the Španci were ideally suited to transform the spontaneous uprising into a communist-led liberation movement in the NDH, where most of the leadership of the resistance consisted of Croat communists, while the ranks were filled with Serbs fleeing the Ustaša terror.<sup>199</sup>

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198 Narodni heroji Jugoslavije, Belgrade: Partizanska knjiga, 1983, pp. 347-348.

199 By the end of 1941, Serbs comprised about one-third of the population of the NDH, but made up 95% of the Partisan units, while Zagreb had the largest number of communists of all Yugoslav towns, and Croats dominated the Partisan leadership. Marko Attila Hoare, »Whose is the Partisan Movement? Serbs, Croats, and the Legacy of a Shared Resistance«, in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2002, pp. 26-27. The ethnic structure of the Partisans in Croatia is also analyzed in Goldstein, *Srbi i Hrvati u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi*, pp. 247-265. For a discussion of the value of the international character of the Španci, see Velimir Velebit, *Tajne i zamke II. svjetskog rata*, Zagreb: Prometej, 2002, p. 13.

The KPJ therefore undertook an operation to return the remaining volunteers, most of whom were located in German labor camps, to Zagreb, from where they were dispatched to regions where uprisings were taking place. In his memoirs, Kosta Nađ recalled that upon escaping from Germany,

»not I, nor any of the other *Španci* who returned that celebrated, difficult summer of 1941, remained in the cities. The classical form of a revolutionary uprising, led by and spreading through cities, was rejected by Tito: he carried out a partisan war.«<sup>200</sup>

Tito's orders to his top commanders in the summer of 1941 reveal how important the *Španci* were in the KPJ's strategy of taking control of the uprisings. He instructed Rade Končar (the head of the KPH) and Vlado Popović (a veteran of Spain who was in charge of assigning the *Španci* once they arrived in Zagreb) to »immediately send ten *Španci*« to various critical areas in Croatia and Bosnia where the nascent uprising needed communists with military experience. Tito wrote:

»Those *Španci* must go there as commanders, political commissars, and to offer political help. The Partisan movement is developing rapidly, but they must be given competent commanders and political commissars.«<sup>201</sup>

Interestingly, Tito ordered all Serb veterans from Spain to be sent to the partisan units around Sarajevo and not to Croatia, because

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200 Kosta Nađ, *Reporti vrhovnom komandantu*, Zagreb: Naša djeca, 1979, p.7.

201 Instructions given to Rade Končar and Vlado Popović, dated mid-August 1941, in *Damjanović, Tito. Sabrana djela*, vol. 7, p. 81.

he realized the importance of including more Croats in the Partisan movement in the NDH. If the vast bulk of guerrillas as well as their leaders were Serbs, it would confirm Ustaša propaganda stating that the Partisans were the same as the anti-Croat Četniks.<sup>202</sup>

Some were sent to their home regions, such as Maks Baće, who was instrumental in reorganizing Partisan units in the Dalmatian hinterland during October and November 1941 after the initial groups had nearly been destroyed due to the incompetence of their commanders.<sup>203</sup> Marko Orešković, a native of Široka Kula in Lika, was also sent to the region in which he was born because of the difficult situation that existed there between Serbs and Croats. Milan Đilas, whose perceptive judgment of character is displayed in *Conversations with Stalin* and his biography of Tito, made the following observations regarding Orešković in his memoirs:

»In Spain Marko proved himself to be a miracle of heroism and initiative. He was in fact a man for direct armed battle. Full of revolutionary passion, he was able to arouse the masses. After the end in Spain he wrote to us explaining that the battle in the Pyrenees had been lost, but that he was coming back to Yugoslavia to start a new one.«<sup>204</sup>

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202 Orders given by Tito, dated 4 September 1941, in Damjanović, Tito. *Sabrana djela*, vol. 7, p. 112. For a view on the problems of including more Croats in the Partisan ranks, see the orders given to the Partisan high command in »Bilten Vrhovnog štaba NOPOJ«, nos. 7-8, 1.10.1941, reprinted in Damjanović, Tito. *Sabrana djela*, vol. 7, pp. 136–138.

203 Maks Baće, interview with author in Split, Croatia, 14.11.2003. See also Šibe Kvesić, *Dalmacija u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi*, Split: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Dalmacije, 1979, pp. 185–204; Drago Gizdić, *Dalmacija 1941. Godine*, Split: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Dalmacije, 1972, p. 78; and Vicko Krstulović, *Memoari jugoslavenskog revolucionara*, Belgrade: Most art, 2012, pp. 201, 264–267.

204 Milovan Djilas, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. Drenka Willen, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, p. 273.



As a high-ranking member of the KPH, Orešković worked tirelessly in organizing Partisan units, teaching basic military skills, appointing the most promising recruits as unit commanders, building the Party's political structure in order to channel the scattered uprisings into the greater antifascist struggle, and most importantly, convincing Serbs not to hate Croats because of the Ustaša terror.

His murder on 20 October 1941, allegedly at the hands of Četniks, remains a controversial event in the development of the first stages of the uprisings, and the blurring of lines between Partisans and Četniks. According to Gojko Polovina, one of the leaders of the Partisan movement in Lika, Orešković's »personal conflicts from Spain« complicated his relationship with the KPH and other Spanish veterans operating in Lika, namely Vladimir Popović and Vlada Četković.<sup>205</sup> Despite the resurgence of conspiracy theories in memoirs and interviews conducted during the 1980s (including a version arguing that Tito disapproved of Orešković's refusal to follow orders), during the war Orešković became a powerful symbol for the Partisans in Lika. The Party declared him a People's Hero in 1945, and one of the most renowned brigades from Lika was named after him.

Other *Španci* were sent to regions that were completely unfamiliar to them, tasked with the same assignment: to create a disciplined guerrilla force that was loyal to the KPJ. For example, Ćiro Dropuljić »Joža« (from Imotski in the Dalmatian hinterland) and Vicko Antić »Pepo« (from the coastal town of Crikvenica) were sent to the Psunj mountain region of Slavonia in November 1941, an ethnically mixed area where a rudimentary resistance was forming against the Ustaša regime. Their assignment was to »unite the existing armed Partisan groups«, take command of all the units, and reorganize them based on the model of platoons [*vod*] and sections [*sekcija*]

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205 Gojko Polovina, *Svedočenje: sećanja na događaja iz prve godine ustanka u Lici*, Belgrade: Rad, 1988, pp. 123, 138.

used in Spain.<sup>206</sup> One of the veterans of the Partisan units on Psunj recalled the work of Dropuljić and Antić:

»Most of us knew little about war and warfare. The arrival of the Španci was very important, and they contributed a lot to the development of our military units. As experienced soldiers and communists they helped many Slavonian Partisans in the first months of the armed struggle.«<sup>207</sup>

In subsequent memoirs, Dropuljić notes that in addition to military training, the two veterans from Spain were »engaged in very intensive political work, held meetings, formed National Liberation committees [the foundations of the KPJ's revolutionary government], and in that manner created the conditions for the further and broader development of the [resistance] movement.«<sup>208</sup> Along with Pavle Gregorić (who had helped organize volunteers for Spain in his Zagreb bookstore) as the political commissar and Karlo Mrazović (another Spanish veteran) as a member of the headquarters, Dropuljić commanded the First Slavonian Battalion and later the First Slavonian Detachment as the Partisan movement grew in strength.<sup>209</sup>

However, as the case of the above-mentioned uprising in Lika illustrates, the experience and authority of the Španci was not always welcomed by local Partisan commanders. As Polovina recalls in his memoirs,

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206 Testimony by Ćiro Dropuljić in Nada Lazić and Milan Vranešević, eds., *Dokumenti i materijali o radničkom i narodnooslobodilačkom pokretu na novogradiškom i okučanskom području 1918-1945*, Slavonski Brod: Historijski institut Slavonije, 1971, pp. 182-183.

207 Slavica Hrečkovski, *Prilog gradnji za historiju narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta u Slavoniji 1941. godine*, Slavonski Brod: Historijski institut Slavonije, 1965, p. 220.

208 Lazić and Vranešević, *Dokumenti i materijali*, p. 185.

209 A biography of Dropuljić was published in *Poruka borca* (Split), 1.7.1985, p. 20.

»we communists in Lika, who met [Marko Orešković] Krttija shortly after his return from Spain, were pleased with how clearly he understood and explained the differences between the conditions, causes, and development of the civil war in Spain and our NOB. In contrast to him, the other Španci we met surprised us with their inability to grasp these differences, and in particular the specific conditions in Croatia. Sometimes they even violently imposed their experiences from Spain even though it was not appropriate for our situation.«<sup>210</sup>

Vicko Krstulović, the legendary commander of the Partisans in Dalmatia, also praised the Spanish veterans for their bravery and battle experience, but noted that some individuals, such as Maks Baće, were upset at not always being given commanding positions in the Partisan units.<sup>211</sup>

The examples cited above offer only a few glimpses into the activities of the Spanish veterans upon their return to Yugoslavia. It has been estimated that about 350 veterans were able to return to Yugoslavia, of which over 250 joined the Partisans.<sup>212</sup> Some of those who returned who did not join the Partisans were invalids who had suffered grievous wounds in Spain and therefore could not actively participate in another war. Of those Španci who fought in the NOB, around 130 were killed, while thirty were promoted to the rank of

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210 Polovina, *Svedočenje*, p. 77.

211 Krstulović, *Memoari jugoslavenskog revolucionara*, p. 201.

212 Kapor, *Španija*, vol. 5, p. 503. Others returned to countries where they had been émigrés before the war (where they joined the resistance forces on a number of occasions, notably in France) or remained imprisoned throughout the course of the war, such as a group of Slovenes who had been interred in Dachau and were put on trial for being spies in 1948. A substantial number died in German concentration camps, especially at Mathauzen. See Bogdan Džuver, ed., *Naši Španci 1936–1939*, Zrenjanin: Gradska narodna biblioteka Žarko Zrenjanin, 1986, pp. 66–68 for a complete list of veterans who fought in foreign resistance movements or died in camps.

general. Fifty-nine, or one out of every four, became People's Heroes, the most prestigious honor a Partisan fighter could possibly gain. Unlike in Spain, where the Yugoslav volunteers left as members of a defeated army, in 1945 they were at the head of the victorious Partisan army that quickly began implementing a socialist revolution.

## **Spanish Volunteers and Their Role in Building Socialist Yugoslavia**

After the Second World War, the Spanish veterans held many high-ranking posts in Tito's Yugoslavia. Twenty veterans were members of the Central Committee of the KPJ/SKJ,<sup>213</sup> several were vice presidents of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ – *Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija*) and ministers of defense and internal affairs, while many others were ambassadors and directors of various state organizations.<sup>214</sup> Ivan Krajačić and Maks Baće were instrumental in setting up the intelligence and security service, OZNA, which functioned from 1944-1946. A number of veterans found themselves on the wrong side of the Stalin-Tito split in 1948, and thirty-six ended up imprisoned on the infamous island of Goli otok along with other Stalinists.<sup>215</sup>

These former volunteers from the Spanish Civil War were thus not only lauded for their heroism in Spain and during World War Two, but also became key figures in developing post-war Yugoslavia. It was their status as the epitome of Yugoslav revolutionary dedication that earned them a privileged place in society, both materially and symbolically. In 1946, about four hundred Spanish veterans

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213 The Communist Party of Yugoslavia changed its name to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (SKJ – *Savez komunista Jugoslavije*) in 1952.

214 Džuver, *Naši Španci*, pp. 69-70.

215 Dragan Marković, *Josip Broz i Goli otok*, Belgrade: Beseda, 1990, p. 253.

attended the founding congress of the Association of Yugoslav Volunteers of the Spanish Republican Army 1936-1939 (*Udruženje jugoslovenskih republikanskih dobrovoljaca Španske republikanske vojske 1936-1939*), the body that coordinated all of the activities which related to *naši Španci*. According to Slavko Goldstein, these individuals represented »a model of morality and the pride of our left-wing movement... [and] the ideals of revolutionary self-sacrifice and moral strength.«<sup>216</sup>

From the end of the Second World War until the 1960s, most of the active *Španci* were involved in the various political positions mentioned above. It was only two decades later that they shifted their focus more towards the memorialization of the war in Spain, as described in the following section. However, like SUBNOR - the overarching veterans' organization - the Spanish veterans sought to nurture the legacy of the revolution through the actions of their association. On 26 September 1971, Tito awarded the Association of Spanish Volunteers the Order of the People's Hero, making it one of four veteran organizations to hold that prestigious honor. In December 1972, the Yugoslav Federal Assembly enacted a special Law on the Basic Rights of Veterans of the Spanish National Liberation War and Revolution (1936-1939), which gave individuals who had fought on the Republican side in Spain and had proven »a continuity of revolutionary work from 1941 to 1945« privileges equal to those of Partisans holding the commemorative medal of 1941 (*Partizanska spomenica 1941*) – a medal given to Partisans who had fought since the beginning of World War Two.<sup>217</sup> The members of the association

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216 Letter from Slavko Goldstein to the editor of *Danas*, 31.10.1984, reprinted in Čedo Kapor, ed., *Za mir i progres u svijetu*, Sarajevo: Savez udruženja boraca narodnooslobodilačkog antifašističkog rata Bosne i Hercegovine, 1999, pp. 95-97.

217 Čedo Kapor, ed., *Četvrti kongres Udruženja jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca španske republikanske vojske*, Belgrade: Udruženje jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca španske republikanske vojske, 1973, pp. 135-143.

were given the power to determine whether or not a veteran had expressed »revolutionary continuity«, since not all of the Spanish volunteers had subsequently fought in the Partisan units; some had fought in other resistance movements in Europe, spent the war in internment camps, or suffered health problems that made physical participation in the Partisan army impossible. According to the report by the Spanish veteran Lazar Udovički at the association's Fifth Congress in 1976, »it was perhaps a unique case wherein a civic organization has had such a decisive role in implementing the law«. The report also noted that the commission in charge of determining revolutionary continuity had found that only a few veterans failed to qualify.<sup>218</sup>

As the veterans increasingly retired from active participation in politics, their organization, also referred to as the Association of Spanish Veterans, became more active in its work in promoting the memory of the Spanish Civil War and of the Yugoslav role in that conflict. After Yugoslavia dropped out of the Soviet orbit, coming to occupy a neutral position between the West and East blocs of the Cold War, it nevertheless did not establish ties with Franco's Spain. According to a 1957 article in the *New York Times*, »nowhere in Europe is the memory of the Spanish Civil War kept fresh with more official reverence than in Communist Yugoslavia.«<sup>219</sup> It was not until 1969 that an economic agreement was signed between the two countries, and full diplomatic relations were not restored until 1977, forty years after they had been cut.<sup>220</sup> The Association of Spanish Veterans played a key role in perpetuating the boycott of Franco's

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218 Čedo Kapor, ed., *Peti kongres Udruženja jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca španske republikanske vojske*, Belgrade: Udruženje jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca španske republikanske vojske, 1977, pp. 88-89.

219 *New York Times*, 16.11.1957, p. 6.

220 *Los Angeles Times*, 28.1.1977, p. B17.

regime, indicating its influence among the levers of power in Yugoslavia.<sup>221</sup>

As the Yugoslav communist system and the Party leadership came under increasingly intense criticism throughout the early 1980s – from dissidents, the media, and Kosovo Serbs in particular – one of the only remaining pillars of unquestioning loyalty remained the Yugoslav People's Army and associated veterans' organizations, including the Association of Spanish Veterans. Following the founding congress in Belgrade in 1946, the Association of Spanish Veterans held congresses every five years (Belgrade, Split, Ljubljana, Belgrade), but after 1981 the veterans organized meetings every year in a different city on the anniversary of the formation of the International Brigades.

During the annual meeting on 22 and 23 October 1984 in Sarajevo, the main theme discussed by the veterans and other participants was the economic and political situation in the country. The Association's president, Lazar Udovički, argued that »changes were first of all necessary in the League of Communists, in order for it to become a unified force for all of society.«<sup>222</sup> Asserting that as veterans of the International Brigades they »should not and cannot stand idly by as observers or helpless participants of this crisis«, the Španci held the leadership of the SKJ politically responsible for the abandonment of revolutionary morale and offered three recommendations to the Central Committee in a letter drafted during the congress.<sup>223</sup> First, the letter called for an extraordinary congress of the SKJ to be held as soon as possible to address the crisis, with democratically elected delegates from the working class and youth

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221 From the report by Lazar Udovički presented at the annual meeting in Sarajevo on 22.10.1984, reprinted in Kapor, ed., *Za mir i progress*, p. 25.

222 Kapor, ed., *Za mir i progres*, p. 63.

223 ABiH, Collection Čedo Kapor, doc. II-3/405, letter to CK SKJ, 22.10.1984, pp. 2-3.

organizations. Second, it suggested that the period of time before the extraordinary congress should be used for a broad public discussion with complete freedom of expression and no »a priori exclusion or labeling of anyone« when discussing possible solutions. Finally, the letter recommended that those individuals responsible for major political and economic mistakes should be held accountable for their bad decisions.

The SKJ Central Committee reacted quickly. It used the state-run press to run a smear campaign denouncing the Spanish veterans without even once printing the letter, even though it had been standard practice to publish texts at the heart of political debates in Yugoslavia's relatively liberal media. The counterattack was spearheaded by an article in the widely read and highly respected Zagreb weekly *Danas*, which accused the *Španci* of acting like »loose cannons« (*slobodni strijelci*).<sup>224</sup> The Central Committee (Ali Šukrija, Dragoslav Marković, and Mitija Ribičič) summoned the leadership of the Association of Spanish Veterans to two meetings in Belgrade on 29 October and 5 November 1984, where they accused the *Španci* of »enemy« activity and berated them for working against the interests of the SKJ.<sup>225</sup> They rejected the recommendations of the letter, and put pressure upon the veterans to renounce the criticism directed at the SKJ. On 8 November, all newspapers published a statement from the Presidency of the SKJ Central Committee in which the Party rejected the »untrue and unacceptable evaluations of the Spanish veterans«, who had ignored all of the positive results achieved since the Twelfth Party Congress. The statement also explained that representatives of the *Španci* had agreed to work with the SKJ in order to prevent further »confusion among the ranks of the working class and other citizens« caused by their critique.<sup>226</sup>

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224 *Danas*, 30.10.1984, p. 10.

225 ABiH, Collection Čedo Kapor, doc. II-2/31, transcript of the meeting between CK SKJ and the Association of Spanish Veterans, held in Belgrade 29.10.1984, pp. 1-2.

226 *Vjesnik*, 8.11.1984, p. 3.



The conclusions reached by the afore-mentioned statement, alongside the behavior of the SKJ leaders confirmed to the Spanish veterans that their critique of the political situation was more than justified. However, the *Španci* could do little to counter their public dishonoring which took place at the hands of the SKJ leadership. Ultimately, the veterans agreed not to engage in any further public polemics, and focused their attention on planning for the fiftieth anniversary which was to be held in the summer of 1986. As Ivo Goldstein has observed, the degrading means by which the Spanish veterans, who up until that moment had been »undoubtedly a moral force and authority in Yugoslav society«, had been publicly shamed, revealed the depths of the political crisis in the country and served as a warning to any other groups which might question the ability of the SKJ to solve the crisis, creating an even greater social apathy and sense of inertia.<sup>227</sup> The ability of the Spanish veterans to actively influence the political future of socialist Yugoslavia had come to an end, just as the country they had helped create collapsed in the bloody ethnic wars of the 1990s.

## **»Španija moje mladosti«: Remembering the Spanish Civil War**

The Spanish Civil War featured prominently in the socialist-era historiography, both in general history books as well as in books focused specifically on the role of the KPJ in Spain. Although the history of the Spanish veterans was written within the ideological framework of communist Yugoslavia, and was therefore subject to romanticization and teleological interpretations, the efforts made by the Association of Spanish Veterans to publish memoirs and reprint publications from the 1930s allow historians to supplement archival

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<sup>227</sup> Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918-2008*, p. 597.

material with personalized accounts of why they fought in Spain. The most detailed account of the historiography of the Spanish Civil War in Yugoslavia, which explains the political shifts and main controversies, can be found in the historian Vladan Vukliš's *Sjećanje na Španiju* (2013).

Immediately after the Second World War and the communist revolution which was carried out by Tito's Partisans, the regime had to rewrite the history of the Yugoslav peoples in accordance with their new ideological perspective, as well as inform the general public of the Party's struggles, martyrs, and activities during the long period of illegality during the interwar years. Even if people had been aware of the Spanish Civil War, relatively few knew the details of Yugoslav involvement in the International Brigades. The first books to be published about the *Španci* were about individual martyrs and heroes who had fought and died for the Party long before it came to power in 1945. The heroic narrative present in biographies about fallen communists such as Marko Orešković-Krntija (1953), Franjo Ogulinac-Seljo (1954), Blagoje Parović (1955), and others as described in Rodoljub Čolaković's *Susreti i sjećanja (Encounters and Memories, 1959)* cast the Spanish volunteers as archetypes of virtue and morality.<sup>228</sup> Published in 1959, *Jugoslaveni u Španiji (Yugoslavs in Spain)*, was the first book devoted specifically to the history of volunteers from Yugoslavia, once again told through the biographies of leading communists who had fought in Spain.<sup>229</sup> The Spanish Civil War veterans were always included in the broader Yugoslav narrative of the KPJ and the People's Liberation War.

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228 See Josip Barković, Narodni heroj Marko Orešković, Likovi narodnih heroja Hrvatske, Vol. 2, Zagreb: Izdavačko poduzeće ›27 July‹, 1953; Ljubo Pavešić, Narodni heroj Franjo Ogulinac-Seljo, Likovi narodnih heroja Hrvatske, Vol. 16, Zagreb: Izdavačko poduzeće ›27 July‹, 1954; Vujasinović, ed., Blagoje Parović: Građa za biografiju, Sarajevo: Narodna prosvjeta, 1955; and Rodoljub Čolaković, *Susreti i sjećanja*, Zagreb: Naprijed, 1959.

229 Enver Redžić, ed., *Jugoslaveni u Španiji*, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1959.

By the 1960s, the Spanish veterans' association began taking a more active role in publishing histories of their role in the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. *Naši Španci* (1962) provided an overview in several languages, including English, as well as a large assortment of photographs and documents.<sup>230</sup> The veterans' organization also published numerous memoirs and reprints of materials from the 1930s, some of which were reprinted in as many as eight editions. As Vukliš notes, professional historians avoided writing about the events in Spain due to their lack of language skills, their difficulties in accessing documentary material (most of it was locked away in the Comintern archives), and the sensitivity of issues relating to the KPJ during this period.<sup>231</sup>

In addition to criticism of the Soviet Union resulting from internal Party conflicts and the split with Stalin in 1948, the promotion of Tito's personality cult resulted in an emphasis on his role in the Spanish Civil War while Gorkić virtually disappeared from the narrative (but not the documentary evidence). Individual memoirs, by veterans such as Božidar Maslarić (*Moskva - Madrid - Moskva*, 1952), Veljko Kovačević (*U rovovima Španjolske*, 1958), Marko Perić-Velimir (*Doživljaji jednog Španca*, 1963), Stevan Belić (*Na bojnim poljama Španije*, 1970), Veljko Vlahović (*Sabrani radovi*, 1981), Gojko Nikoliš (*Korijen, stablo, pavetina: memoari*, 1981), Aleš Bebler (*Kako sam hitao: sećanja*, 1982), and Marko Orešković's posthumously issued autobiography (*Autobiografija*, 1950), personalized the struggle against fascism in Spain and tied it to the Partisan struggle, as all of these veterans continued their revolutionary activity in Yugoslavia (with the exception of Vlahović, who lost a leg in Spain and spent World War Two in Moscow).

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230 Aleš Bebler, ed., *Naši Španci: Zbornik fotografija i dokumenata o učešću jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca u španskom ratu 1936-1939*, Ljubljana: Španski borci Jugoslavije, 1962.

231 Vukliš, *Sjećanje na Španiju*, pp. 37-40.

The most valuable collection of documents and memoirs is the five-volume set edited by Čedo Kapor, *Španija 1936-1939*, which includes an impressive amount of documents, interviews, press clippings, and historical reflections organized by the veterans' organization. These books are meticulously indexed, and include biographical information on 1,664 volunteers from Yugoslavia. Kapor (1914-2004) was one of the most active Spanish veterans, responsible for reprinting many publications and promoting an awareness of the legacy of Spain, particularly in schools. The most scholarly volume published during socialist Yugoslavia was based on the proceedings of an academic conference on the Spanish Civil War held in Zagreb in 1986. The book (*Španjolska 1936-1939: prilozi sa znanstvenog savjetovanja*) was published in 1989 and edited by Ljubo Boban, and while it represented the pinnacle of Yugoslav research on the Spanish conflict, many of the chapters remain embedded in socialist interpretations and need to be read critically.

History books were of course not the only medium through which the narrative of the Spanish Civil War was transmitted to society. Novels, memoirs, newspapers, and films reached a broader audience than dense scholarly monographs. The documentary films *Španija naše mladosti* (*The Spain of our Youth*, 1967) and *Povratak u Španiju* (*Return to Spain*, 1977) looked upon Yugoslav participation in the civil war nostalgically. *Španija naše mladosti* in particular attempted to take an artistic approach in romanticizing the past (often including archival footage which had nothing to do with the actual Yugoslav units in Spain) interwoven with images of contemporary Yugoslav society. At key anniversaries relating to the conflict, newspapers were full of personal recollections, interviews, and reports about the various commemorative activities organized by the Association of Spanish Veterans. Streets, schools, and even army bases - such as the one in Rijeka - were named after the Spanish volunteers. Partisan veterans raised a memorial in honor of the International

Brigades in Belgrade in 1956, while individual *Španci* were remembered through monuments across the former Yugoslavia: Nikola Car (Crikvenica), Marko Orešković (Korenica, Belgrade), Robert Domanji (Plaški), Blagoje Parović (Nevesinje), Žikica Jovanović Španac (Valjevo, Radanovci), and many others.

The Spanish Civil War was famous for the generation of poets, authors, intellectuals, artists, and activists that become passionately involved in the Republican cause. August Cesarec, a Croatian writer and communist, wrote *Španjolski susreti* (*Spanish Encounters*) after visiting Yugoslav volunteers in the fall of 1937. While similar in style to Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Cesarec's book paints a much rosier picture of the communists in Spain. As a result of the political situation in Yugoslavia at the time, *Španjolski susreti* was published in Toronto in 1938, and smuggled into the country. It was reissued in 1961 in Zagreb, with illustrations by Đorđe Andrejević-Kun. The description of those participating in the Yugoslav Brigades in the book, including some of the most famous heroes of the People's Liberation War, reinforced the myth of the purity of the Republic and the nobleness of the volunteers.<sup>232</sup> While Cesarec was the most well-known domestic author to write a book about the Spanish Civil War, foreign novels were very popular and widely distributed. Whereas Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), which was critical of the communists in the International Brigades, was banned, for example, in East Germany until 1967,<sup>233</sup> in Zagreb alone at least eleven editions of the book were published between 1952 and 1989.<sup>234</sup>

Although no Yugoslav feature films were specifically made

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232 For example, see Cesarec's description of the Dimitrov Battalion and his conversations with Vladimir Čopić in: August Cesarec, *Španjolski susreti: Knjiga susreta s ljudima i gradovima*, Zagreb: Zora, 1961, pp. 92-103.

233 Arnold Krammer, The Cult of the Spanish Civil War in East Germany, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2004, p. 554.

234 Other editions were published in Ljubljana, Novi Sad, and Belgrade.

about the Spanish Civil War, an archetypal character often found in Partisan films was precisely that of a veteran of the war in Spain. Often simply referred to as *Španac*, this character portrayed an older, experienced revolutionary who had already proven his loyalty to the Party in Spain. In the film *Kozara* (1963), for example, a Spanish veteran calms down frightened Partisans on sentry duty before an expected attack by telling them stories from the failed Spanish revolution, and he teaches them Spanish songs to boost their morale. Songs sung by the International Brigades were as popular among the Partisans as were newly composed songs of their struggle (e.g. *Po šumama i gorama*) and traditional folk songs. The contrast between the hardline, uncompromising *Španci* and the commanders who lacked experience but understood local conditions was powerfully depicted in Bata Čengić's film *Glavi barut* (*Silent Gunpowder*, 1990), which was one of the last Partisan films produced before Yugoslavia disintegrated. The film centers on the tension between a *Španac* sent by the Party to organize the resistance in an isolated Bosnian Serb village in the early stages of the war, and the local commander - a former member of the royal Yugoslav Army. The Spanish veteran, played by Mustafa Nadarević, insists on pushing forward a revolutionary agenda, even though this angers many villagers, provokes attacks by local *Četniks*, and eventually costs the *Španac* his life. However, his sacrifice serves as an inspiration to the local commander, who definitively abandons his previous wavering between the options of either staying with the Partisans or siding with the *Četniks*. The local commander then becomes fully committed to the revolution. The *Španac* character (incidentally also played by Nadarević) in the film *Duga mračna noć* (*Long Dark Night*, 2004) by Antun Vrdoljak is likewise shown to be a good organizer, but is uncompromising and brutal towards all those who challenge the Party's authority. While the movie displays scenes of atrocities committed by German and Ustaša troops, it also chronicles the estab-

lishment of the postwar authoritarian system and the development of the dreaded secret police, OZNA, in which the *Španac* plays a key role.

The representation of the past, especially as the Yugoslav socialist experiment began to seriously deteriorate in the 1980s, became increasingly idealized in the recollections of veterans who were likely disappointed with the revolution and society they had constructed. The defeat of the revolution in Spain, however, forever remained in the sphere of »what could have been« and was thus subject to excessive sentimentalization by the old veterans. As Mitja Velikonja notes in his book *Titostalgija*, »nostalgic constructions never consist of irrefutable facts, but rather emotions and interpretations... [t]he past nostalgics desire never actually existed: it is a question of desire for something that never was, a sentimental return to the non-existent, dreams about former dreams but never about reality.«<sup>235</sup>

During the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1986, the Yugoslav cultural space was used to promote and celebrate the Spanish veterans, and by extension, the Yugoslav revolutionary tradition. Museums across Yugoslavia prepared exhibits to commemorate Yugoslav volunteers' participation. The Spanish Civil War, with its associated myths and romanticized heroic narrative, was seen as a tool used to rekindle revolutionary consciousness in the younger generations. The official brochure for the exhibit in Zagreb's Revolutionary Museum of the Peoples of Croatia (*Muzej revolucije naroda Hrvatske*) referred to the International Brigade members as a »symbol« and as »legends«, stating that their decision to volunteer was a »heroic deed par excellence.«<sup>236</sup>

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235 Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgija*, trans. Branka Dimitrijević, Belgrade: XX. vek, 2010, pp. 33, 36.

236 Rat u Španjolskoj 1936-1939. i jugoslavenski interbrigadisti, Zagreb: Muzej revolucije naroda Hrvatske, 1986, p. 1.

In addition to the exhibit in Zagreb, cities across Croatia and Serbia organized similar displays. Museums in Sisak («Spanish Fighters from Sisak and Banija»), Pula («Our Spaniards»), and Livno («Livno Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War») commemorated volunteers from specific Croatian regions. The Vojvodina Museum of the Socialist Revolution in Novi Sad held the exhibit «Spain 1936-1939», and Belgrade's Revolutionary Museum of the Peoples and Nationalities of Yugoslavia displayed an exhibit named «Yugoslav Volunteers in the Spanish War 1936-1939». Dragica Bojović, the organizer of the Belgrade exhibit, emphasized that the Spanish Civil War had the «character of a national liberation and revolutionary war», a wording which was identical to descriptions of Yugoslavia's own Partisan struggle.<sup>237</sup> As in the other exhibits, connections between the volunteers' experiences in Spain and their subsequent participation in the Partisans was highlighted. Press coverage of the exhibits also noted this connection. An article about the «Naši Španci» display in Pula concluded that «this internationalist contribution from the Istria - Rijeka - coastal region was in fact a preparation for the national liberation struggle and revolution which took place in our country.»<sup>238</sup>



## Lessons from the Spanish Civil War

Although the post-Yugoslav debate over memory has largely bypassed the Spanish Civil War due to the predominance of the Second World War on the mnemonic battlefield in the former Yugoslavia, the ghosts of Spain are known to periodically haunt the former Yugoslavia. For those on the Left, the battle for the Republic remains

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237 Jugoslovenski dobrovoljci u španskom ratu 1936-1939, Belgrade: Muzej revolucije naroda i narodnosti Jugoslavije, 1986, p. 1.

238 Vjesnik, Zagreb, 1.12.1986, page unknown.



a romanticized »lost cause«, despite the grim revelations of the Soviet archives. However, the ideals and reasons behind why so many volunteers traveled to distant Spain from all over the world remain unsullied by the machinations of Stalin and his repressive apparatus. The Spain that those in the Brigades experienced was one of both incredible hardship, yet also one of international solidarity, hope, and the struggle for social justice. This comes through in the letters, diaries, interviews, and memoirs written not only by the Yugoslav volunteers, but also in the rich body of world literature dealing with the Spanish Civil War. The nationalist revisionism which has characterized historiographical debates in the former Yugoslavia has not left the events of the Spanish Civil War untouched, as right-wing historians continue to try and delegitimize the antifascist struggle by connecting it exclusively with post-war crimes such as the Bleiburg massacres or Tito's alleged role as an NKVD liquidator. Yet many of the lessons remain valid today, given the rising xenophobia, nationalist intolerance, and rehabilitation of fascist ideology in the post-Yugoslav region and throughout Europe. Spanish anarchists remain an inspiration to a new generation of anti-globalization activists, while the legendary phrase »No pasaran!« has not faded from use by NGOs, leftists, and occasionally politicians (notably Zoran Milanović of the Croatian Social Democratic Party). The volume *Antifašizam pred izazovima savremnosti* (2012) addresses many of these contemporary challenges to antifascist values, although some authors tend to romanticize the Spanish struggle without maintaining the kind of critical perspective offered by more recent historical analyses.<sup>239</sup>

The lessons the veterans brought with them from Spain unfortunately fell on deaf ears in the late 1980s and 1990s as socialist Yugoslavia disappeared in a maelstrom of ethnic warfare. On 22 Oc-

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239 Milivoj Bešlin and Petar Atanacković, eds., *Antifašizam pred izazovima savremnosti*, Novi Sad: AKO, 2012.

tober 1991, while the war in Croatia was already raging, the Association of Yugoslav Volunteers in the Spanish Republican Army issued a final plea to stop the conflict:

»We are openly telling you that we are on the edge of the abyss of the greatest human tragedy to befall our peoples. This is the last chance to decidedly and uncompromisingly take a stand against this present madness. With a feeling of honor and pride we use this opportunity to emphasize that we went to help the noble and freedom loving people of Spain in their armed struggle against the first fascist aggression in Europe. That is why now, in these difficult times, we are calling upon all younger generations who hold these values close to their heart to join in the struggle for peace, human rights, and freedom.«<sup>240</sup>

As is well known, this plea did not succeed in stopping the violence tearing apart the country, and in fact the following year the war spread to Bosnia-Herzegovina resulting in even greater destruction.

Many of the symbols and memory sites associated with the Spanish Civil War veterans were removed along with those of the Partisans, as the anti-communist revisionism swept them aside equally. For example, despite the protests of local Partisan veterans, the authorities in Nevesinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, removed the large monument of Blagoje Parović from the central square bearing his name in 2009 as part of the general nationalization of public space in the successor states. However, in the village of Perjasica, Croatia, in 2013, the son of the Spanish veteran Izidor Štrok helped to renovate the Partisan memorial located there that honored the resistance movement that the returning Španci helped organize in

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240ABIH, Collection Čedo Kapor, doc. II-3/627, open letter appealing for peace, 22.10.1991.

the difficult first months of the war. While understandings of the Spanish Civil War from a Yugoslav perspective have been practically obliterated due to the ferocity of the memory debates over the Second World War and the war in the 1990s, the volunteers' ideals still have the emancipatory potential to inspire those who believe in antifascist values.

As many observers of the political situation in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the other Yugoslav successor states have commented, nationalist rhetoric and tensions seem to be on the rise, and the specter of renewed violence is again looming. Croatia and Serbia have engaged in a diplomatic war of words over issues from the Second World War (relating to Archbishop Stepinac, Jasenovac, Ustaša symbols), Serbia has witnessed the rehabilitation of Draža Mihailović, Milan Nedić, and possibly Slobodan Milošević, while Bosnia-Herzegovina seems to be in a state of permanent paralysis over symbolic politics, such as the insistence of Republika Srpska on celebrating the controversial entity's Independence Day on 9 January. Can the antifascist paradigm of the Partisan resistance serve as an inspiration to young citizens of these countries saddled with economic crises, where there are limited opportunities for youth employment, political elites feeding off nationalism, and unhealed traumas from the past conflict. Can the lessons of international solidarity and cooperation that arose during the Spanish war help these societies tackle the issues of immigration and social inequality? Spain itself is certainly divided over the legacy of the civil war from eighty years ago, but the passionate desire to help others defend their freedom, which was the driving force for most of the volunteers from Yugoslavia who traveled across Europe to fight fascism, can serve as a powerful beacon in an otherwise dark global environment at present.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Eighty years after rebel army officers began an uprising that plunged their country into a bloody fratricidal conflict, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) continues to spark passionate debates both in Spain and internationally. What initially seemed to be a local conflict on Europe's periphery quickly drew in other countries and exploded into an ideological battlefield gripping the world's attention. Tens of thousands of antifascists flocked to defend the Republic against Franco's Nationalists, many of them joining the legendary International Brigades. This publication chronicles the involvement of nearly 2,000 Yugoslav volunteers who joined this heroic struggle to fight fascism in Spain as Europe increasingly slid towards total war. Drawing upon unpublished archival documents, interviews, memoirs, and contemporary newspapers, *Yugoslav Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* recounts the dangerous journey of Yugoslav volunteers to Spanish battlefields, the military and political conflicts they faced, their experience in French internment camps, and their final return to their homeland to fight in the ranks of Tito's Partisan forces. Additionally, this volume offers insights into controversies surrounding Tito's role in organizing the Yugoslav volunteers, provides an overview of the latest research on the Spanish Civil War, and reflects on why this conflict still resonates today.



The Yugoslav volunteers in the Spanish Civil War was a contingent of volunteers from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that fought beside the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War. Originating in the various nations that made up the then Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Yugoslav residents around the world, eventually totaled 1 664 fighters, of which is estimated to have died in combat around 800. According to the Spanish statistics, 148 of them obtained the degree of officers throughout the conflict. Yugoslavs, who fought as volunteers in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side, are called "Spanish fighters" or "Yugoslav Spaniards." Belgrade Association of Spanish troops is in possession of information that there were 1.755 volunteers from Yugoslavia in international brigades and other units of the Spanish Republican Army, of which 595 were killed in Spain, and 116 were killed later in the National Liberation Struggle. National identity was not important, but the available data suggest that the majority of the Yugoslav fighters were Croats (48 %), followed by Slovenians (23%), Serbs (1 The Yugoslav volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, known as Spanish fighters (, , / Španski borci) and Yugoslav brigadistas ( ), was a contingent of volunteers from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that fought beside the Republican side (in support of the Second Spanish Republic) in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). An estimated 1,664[1] "Yugoslav brigadistas" fought in the war, out of whom c. 800 were killed in action. According to the Spanish statistics, 148 Yugoslav volunteers received the officer rank during the conflict. Most of them fought in the battalions Dimitrov and Āuro ĀakoviĀ of t