

YUGOSLAV-HUNGARIAN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE END OF WORLD WAR II AND THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956

Vukašin Marić

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Sabina Halupka-Rešetar

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Corresponding Email: halupka.resetar@ff.uns.ac.rs

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Abstract

The article represents a detailed overview of the complex relations between the new neighbouring socialist countries of Yugoslavia and Hungary in the first decade after World War II. Bilateral relations between the two countries in the years leading to the Hungarian Revolution were influenced by various factors, stemming both from the sphere of international relations and the specific internal development of both states. On the level of international relations, Yugoslav-Hungarian relations until 1948 were developed within the Soviet sphere of influence. This period was marked by mutual cooperation between Belgrade and Budapest, which benefited from close ties established between the party leaders of the two countries. However, the Yugoslav-Soviet split in 1948 made developing a friendly and autonomous foreign policy between Yugoslavia and Hungary impossible. During the following years Yugoslav-Hungarian relations witnessed a steep decline, embodied in propaganda efforts and border incidents, only to lead to a full diplomatic breakdown in 1952. Normalization was to happen only after the death of USSR leader Joseph Stalin in 1953. From that point, internal developments in Hungarian politics played an increasingly important role in the formation of the country's foreign policy toward Yugoslavia. The reformist government led by Imre Nagy pursued the course of normalization of relations with its southern neighbour, which stopped in 1955 after Nagy was replaced with Mátyás Rákosi as head of government. The thawing of relations eventually resumed after Rákosi was deposed during the next year in the whirlpool of events leading up to the Revolution of 1956.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, Hungary, Yugoslav-Hungarian Relations, Socialism, Soviet Union, International Relations.

INTRODUCTION

The article represents an interpretative overview of the history of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations from 1945 to 1956. Those time points were chosen as important demarcations not only of the historical development of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations but also as boundaries of broader historical flows that affected the region and the world in that period. Also, the selected time span was a period of important processes both in the history of the Cold War and in the history of socialism in the twentieth century. The article attempts to situate Yugoslav-Hungarian relations in the specific context of the post-World War II era and examine the way in which they developed while combining the influences of internal and external political factors for both countries. The main hypothesis of the research is that bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and Hungary during those years were primarily shaped by the dynamics of power politics of the Soviet Union in the early Cold War. While that proved to be true, the article also shows that those

politics had their limits. The agency of leaders and people from both Yugoslavia and Hungary and their answers to the different challenges before them yielded unexpected and sometimes contradictory results. The article is divided into three parts: the first focuses on the immediate postwar years, from 1945 to 1948; the second concentrates on the period from 1948 to 1953; while the third centers on the years from 1953 to 1956, followed by a brief conclusion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study on Yugoslav-Hungarian relations between the end of World War II and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 largely relies on secondary sources to explore the political, diplomatic, and ideological dynamics between the two countries during the post-war period. The research is structured to address the complex and shifting interactions that shaped bilateral relations, focusing on key events, decisions, and influences that impacted both nations.

The secondary sources consulted include existing literature on post-war Yugoslav-Hungarian relations, focusing on the Cold War context, the ideological differences between Tito's Yugoslavia and the Soviet-aligned Hungarian People's Republic, and the geopolitical tensions of the period. Works offering foundational perspectives will be critically approached and reviewed within this comparative analysis. Books and journal articles detailing the broader political histories of Yugoslavia and Hungary after World War II provide essential background information, particularly regarding the impact of Soviet policies, the rise of communist governments in both countries, and their respective roles in the Eastern Bloc. These secondary sources are used to frame the analysis within a broader regional and global context. In addition to this, secondary literature on Titoism, Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, and the broader Cold War struggle informs the theoretical and ideological context within which Yugoslav-Hungarian relations unfolded. This includes analysis of the rift between Tito and Stalin in 1948 and the effects of the Soviet model on Hungary, culminating in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Special attention will be given to specific moments of crisis, such as the Yugoslav-Soviet rift, its aftermath and Hungary's political purges, as these events heavily shaped the relations between the two countries. The methods of diplomatic engagement and negotiations during these crises are also compared.

The research methodology described above allows for a nuanced understanding of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations during the early Cold War. By integrating diplomatic, ideological, and political perspectives with secondary sources, the study aims to offer a comprehensive examination of the complex interactions between these two neighbouring socialist states, as well as their relationship to the broader geopolitical landscape of post-war Europe.

The analysis is organized chronologically, beginning with the immediate postwar period (1945-1948), when Yugoslavia and Hungary were rebuilding their political systems. It then moves onto the period of rift between the two countries and its consequences (1948-1953), followed by a period of gradual normalization of relations (1953-1956) just before the Hungarian Revolution.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Postwar Years, 1945-48

The end of World War II marked a new stage in the history of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations, but the position of the two countries in 1945 was radically different. Led by the People's Liberation Army (PLA, *Narodnooslobodilačka vojska*) and the Communist Party (CPY, *Komunistička partija*), Yugoslavia emerged from the war as one of the victorious states. The restoration of state sovereignty was accompanied by the process of consolidation of communists in power and the beginning of the construction of a new

socialist order.¹ As Marie-Janine Calic² points out, it was “the most ambitious and encompassing attempt up to that point to combat the excesses of capitalism through industrial progress and social justice and thereby to actually bring about modernity in Yugoslavia in the first place”. On the other hand, Hungary saw the end of the war on the side of the defeated. After signing an armistice with the Soviet Union in January of 1945, control over the country was effectively taken over by the Allied Control Commission (ACC), chaired by Marshal of the Red Army Kliment Voroshilov, which “operated as an organ of the Soviet military command” and “played a decisive role in Hungary’s political and economic life” for the next two years.³ By the time the ACC terminated its activities in Hungary in September 1947, the Hungarian Communist Party (HCP, Magyar Kommunisták Pártja) with full-fledged Soviet support had firmly entrenched itself in power. With the unification of communist and social-democratic forces in the newly formed Hungarian Working People's Party (HWPP, Magyar Dolgozók Pártja) under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, by 1948 the communist takeover in Hungary was complete.⁴ However, although the endpoint of postwar turbulences in both Yugoslavia and Hungary was the formation of new socialist governments it must be noted that there were stark differences in the two countries' paths to socialism. In contrast to the “genuine communist takeover in Yugoslavia”, the first postwar years in Hungary can be seen as a road from “genuine democratic coalitions” created immediately after the end of the war, through “bogus coalitions of the people's democracies” to the introduction of a monolithic system of state socialism in the wider process of transformation that the Central and Eastern Europe under the Soviet control experienced.⁵ The differences between the way communists came to power in the two countries and the role the Soviet Union played in their ascension played an important role in the relations between Yugoslavia and Hungary during the next decade.

During the final phase of World War II and its immediate aftermath, Yugoslav-Hungarian relations were mostly managed via communist parties of both countries. As Milovan Đilas⁶ notes, multiple unofficial meetings were held between the two sides in Belgrade during which Hungarians were almost exclusively led by Rákosi, usually accompanied by Ernő Gerő. He also points out that from among the countries within the Soviet sphere of influence members of the HCP Central Committee showed the most initiative for cooperation with Yugoslav communists and describes relations with them as “very good, even cordial” (ibid, p. 170). Such relations were the result of possible mutual benefits: for Rákosi, contacts and good-neighborly relations with Yugoslavia were a means to achieve internal political goals, i.e. advancement to power; for Josip Broz Tito and his associates, on the other hand, the normalization of relations with Hungary and the support of the HCP would lead to the establishment of a closely aligned socialist country on the northern Yugoslav border.⁷

Nonetheless, some friction did exist between the two countries. The most important source of this friction was the position of Yugoslav and Hungarian national minorities in the two countries. The question of the status of ethnic Hungarians in Yugoslavia was first to be addressed. The liberation of the territory of Vojvodina during the autumn of 1944 and the subsequent militarization of the administrative authorities in Banat, Bačka and Baranja led to the implementation of harsh policies of the new Yugoslav authorities towards national minorities, primarily Germans and Hungarians. Mass liquidations and reprisals, which included abuse, rape, arrests and robbery against persons of Hungarian nationality were of the highest

¹ Petranović, Branko, *Istorija Jugoslavije, 1918-1988. Treća knjiga. Socijalistička Jugoslavije, 1945-1988*. Nolit, 1988.

² Calic, Marie-Janine, *A History of Yugoslavia*. Purdue University Press, 2019.

³ Borhi, László, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945-1956. Between the United States and the Soviet Union*. CEUPress, 2004.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Berend, Ivan T., *Centralna i istočna Evropa, 1944-1993. Iz periferije zaobilaznim putem nazad u periferiju*. Kairos, 2001.

⁶ Đilas, Milovan, *Vlasti i pobuna*. EPH Liber, 2009.

⁷ Vukman, Peter. “Living in the Vicinity of the Yugoslav-Hungarian Border (1945-1960): Breaks and Continuities. A Case Study of Hercegszántó (Santovo).” *History in Flux* 2 (2020): 9-27.

intensity in the first month after the introduction of military administration.⁸ However, that policy was soon terminated and the new authorities determined that, contrary to the idea of collective guilt, “the attitude towards Hungarians should be determined based on how they treated the Slavic population”.⁹ This change enabled the beginning of the integration of the Hungarian population into Yugoslav society, although the immediate reasons for it have not been fully clarified.¹⁰ During the following years integration turned out to be a slow process, hampered by the violence of 1944 which acted as a “scar on the soul of the Hungarian national minority” in Yugoslavia and “it is not an exaggeration to say that these very scars were one of the main obstacles for the Vojvodina Hungarians to fully integrate into socialist Yugoslavia”.¹¹ Anyhow, the Hungarian government was aware of these developments, but the question of responsibility for the crimes committed was never officially raised. Moreover, Yugoslavia was praised by the Hungarian authorities for its treatment of its national minorities.¹² This was probably a consequence of the Yugoslav condition that their treatment of the Hungarian minority should be removed from the agenda in the process of re-establishing normal relations between the two countries.¹³ This was confirmed in subsequent years, when the Hungarian leadership did not have any meaningful say in the improvement of the living conditions of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia, as the Yugoslav leadership saw the question of national minorities, including the Hungarian one, as a completely internal matter.¹⁴

The position of the Yugoslav minority in Hungary was publicly raised in Yugoslav papers during the winter of 1945/46.¹⁵ This was a direct consequence of the Hungarian parliamentary elections in November 1945, in which the Independent Smallholders’ Party (ISP, Független Kisgazdapárt) dominated the polls. Although the official statements of Yugoslav politicians showed some restraint, the press did not hold back. As part of the anti-Hungarian campaign, leading newspapers wrote about the revival of revisionist tendencies in Hungary and voiced fear for the position and future of the Yugoslav minority in the country. They reported about the alleged terror that was being carried out on the Yugoslav population and about protests of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina against the policies of Budapest. The census conducted in January 1946 in the areas where the Yugoslav population lived was also viewed as suspicious, its preparation and execution were criticized, as well as the lack of guarantees regarding the safety of the population.¹⁶ The pacification of the campaign on this issue, which followed during the spring of 1946, was the result of the actions of both the HCP led by Rákosi and the conciliatory overtures of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Ferenc Nagy (member of the ISP).¹⁷ Rákosi proved to be particularly receptive to various Yugoslav stances,¹⁸ a fact that can be understood more easily if viewed in the context of the relations and

⁸ Janjetović, Zoran, *Kofrontacija i integracija. Nacionalne manjine u Srbiji, 1944-1964*. Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2022.

⁹ Kasaš, Aleksandar, *Mađari u Vojvodini, 1941-1946*. Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu, 1996.

¹⁰ *Loc.cit.*, Janjetović, Zoran

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Šajti, Enike, *Mađari u Vojvodini 1918-1947*. Forum, 2010.

¹³ Tot, Agneš. 2016, “Jugosloveni u Mađarskoj 1945-1948.” In *Hungarians and Serbs on both sides of the changing boundaries 1941-1948*, edited by A. Hornjak, Z. Janjetović and L. Biro. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2016.

¹⁴ Vukman, Peter. “Lazar Brankov: the first leader of the Cominform émigrés in Hungary and “Tito’s most determined agent.” *A life between two emigrations (1949–1956)*.” *Securitas Imperii* 2 (2022): 98-122.

¹⁵ Kovačević, Katarina M., *Jugoslovensko-mađarski odnosi, 1953-1956*. PhD Dissertation. University of Belgrade, 2019.

¹⁶ See Hornyák, Arpad. “Jugoslavenski teritorijalni zahtjevi prema Mađarskoj i susjednim zemljama i planovi za njihovu primjenu nakon Drugog svjetskog rata.” *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 1 (2010): 23-54. See also Hornjak, Arpad. “Pitanje granica i Jugosloveni u Mađarskoj u mađarsko-jugoslovenskim odnosima posle Drugog svjetskog rata.” In *Hungarians and Serbs on both sides of the changing boundaries 1941-1948*, edited by A. Hornjak, Z. Janjetović and L. Biro. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2016.

¹⁷ *Loc.cit.*, Kovačević

¹⁸ Vukman, Peter. “Jugoslovenski politički emigranti u Mađarskoj (1948-1949).” In *Hungarians and Serbs on both sides of the changing boundaries 1941-1948*, edited by A. Hornjak, Z. Janjetović and L. Biro. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2016.

tactics between the HCP and the CPY, which sometimes transcended the common bilateral relations of the diplomatic representatives of the two countries. Still, the minority question was not resolved. The Yugoslav side soon initiated talks about possible population exchange. After several months of negotiations between the two sides, which culminated at the Peace Conference in Paris, in September 1946, an agreement was finally reached: it provided for a voluntary reciprocal exchange of population while preserving the minority rights of those who did not decide to relocate,¹⁹ although it was never realized. Still, as this overview of the question of minority rights, population exchange or border disputes shows, neither Yugoslavia nor Hungary shied away from using national minorities as a diplomatic instrument during the postwar years.²⁰

The development of bilateral relations during this period was at first closely related to the activities of the Yugoslav military mission at the ACC. Before the establishment of official diplomatic relations, the mission functioned as the Yugoslav representative office in Budapest. PLA Colonel Obrad Cicmil led it, while Captain Lazar Brankov, secretary of the mission and trustee of the CPY played an important role.²¹ Although it dealt with the minority and border issues, the most important task of the Yugoslav mission was to conclude an agreement on the payment of war reparations. This mission was achieved by the Agreement on Reparation Deliveries of Hungary to Yugoslavia signed in Budapest on May 11, 1946. With that settlement, the Hungarian state was obliged to deliver seventy million dollars' worth of goods to Yugoslavia over the next five years.²² In September of 1946, the two countries renewed diplomatic relations and soon the first agreements on trade exchange were signed. The following period was a time of very intense and fruitful cooperation between Yugoslavia and Hungary.²³ The intensification of economic relations was followed by developments in the diplomatic sphere. At the beginning of 1947, full diplomatic relations between the countries were established and deputies were exchanged. Karlo Mrazović was the Yugoslav deputy, while Zoltán Szántó was his Hungarian counterpart, both of them long standing members of their respective communist parties.²⁴ Cultural ties were also strengthened and there was an exchange of writers, artists, and opera performers. It should be borne in mind that this rapprochement was significantly influenced by the fact that the HCP was taking more and more control of the Hungarian state, which the Yugoslav side regarded with approval. The highest state officials visited each other's capital cities. The Hungarian Prime Minister Lajos Dinnyés was in Belgrade with several ministers in October 1947, while Tito visited Budapest with representatives of the Yugoslav government in December of the same year. During the stay of the Yugoslav delegation in Hungary, The Agreement on friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance between the FPRY and the Republic of Hungary was signed.²⁵ This marked the zenith of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations in the immediate postwar years.²⁶

The Rift and its Consequences, 1948-1953

The intensification of the conflict between Belgrade and Moscow during the spring of 1948 radically affected Yugoslav-Hungarian relations. As a result of Stalin's desire to create a monolithic communist block of states,²⁷ the break with Tito isolated Yugoslavia from other countries of "people's democracy", which, following the Soviet Union, launched sharp attacks on the Yugoslav state and its practice of

¹⁹ Loc.cit., Janjetović, Zoran

²⁰ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2020

²¹ Loc.cit., Kovačević

²² Ibid

²³ Loc.cit., Hornyák

²⁴ Loc.cit., Kovačević

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2020

²⁷ See Rajak, Svetozar, "The Cold War in Balkans, 1945-1956." In *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*. Vol. I, edited by M. P. Leffler, and O. A. Westad. Cambridge University Press, 2010. See also Gibianski, Leonid. "The 1948 Soviet-Yugoslav conflict and formation of the 'socialist camp' model." In *The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, 1945–89*, edited by O. A. Westad, S. Holtmark and I. B. Neumann. Springer, 1994.

socialism. In this regard, Hungary did not lag behind the other states of the Eastern Bloc. After the Cominform Resolution in June 1948²⁸ Yugoslavia was expelled from the organization and found itself under a complete political, economic, traffic, and military blockade by the Soviet Union and other countries of the Eastern bloc. Faced with an extremely difficult international position, the Yugoslav state began the process of tactical rapprochement with the Western powers. The result of this foreign policy turn was the economic and military cooperation of Yugoslavia with the United States, Great Britain and France.²⁹ Equally important, the Yugoslav-Soviet rift opened a series of complex ideological-theoretical and practical-political issues, among which the possibility of different paths to socialism and the relationship between socialist states were the most important.³⁰

The leadership of the CPY and the HCP took opposite paths after the Cominform resolution. While Tito's party was expelled from the Eastern European communist bloc, Rákosi's organization sided with the Soviet Union without much consideration. As Borhi³¹ suggests, Rákosi's zeal in confirming his loyalty to the Soviets was probably reinforced by the desire for his previous pro-Titoist policy to be forgotten. In any case, the complete split between Tito and Stalin was followed by the complete split between Tito and Rákosi³² and the relations between their parties and states followed a same path. The events leading up to the Cominform Resolution have already hinted at future developments in Yugoslav-Hungarian relations. In response to the Hungarian support for Soviet policy during March 1948, the CPY challenged "the moral and political right of Rákosi and his comrades to irresponsibly attack the Yugoslav party" and assessed their actions as a "slandorous statement" and a "deep insult".³³

In the aftermath of the Cominform Resolution Yugoslav-Hungarian inter-party and inter-state relations were reduced nearly to zero.³⁴ This was visible in all areas of previous cooperation. During the summer of 1948, the Hungarian side stopped delivering reparations to its southern neighbour. Formally, it was a response to Yugoslavia's rejection of Hungary's request to reduce the reparation debt but reports from the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest confirmed that it was a political decision. Although there were several attempts on both sides to restart negotiations regarding the regulation of the remaining obligations, they never materialized. After the Hungarian government cancelled its hospitality to the Yugoslav reparations commission in May 1949, Yugoslavia brought the reparations dispute before the signatories of the peace treaty with Hungary. Until that moment, Hungary had paid the Yugoslav state only eight percent of the obligations agreed upon in the 1946 Agreement on Reparations. By the end of 1949, the economic ties between the two countries almost completely died out as the Hungarian government cancelled a series of agreements on economic and trade cooperation.³⁵ Yugoslav-Hungarian political treaties followed the same fate.³⁶

From the Yugoslav viewpoint, Hungary, along with other Cominform countries, also started displaying numerous forms of political aggression towards their country. As characterized by the Yugoslav lawyer Milan Bartoš, these included the violation of diplomatic immunity, violation of the rules on non-interference in the internal relations of a sovereign state, organizing terrorist actions, systematically causing border incidents and intimidation through the unilateral cancellation of political agreements.³⁷ Forty

²⁸ Loc.cit., Petranović

²⁹ Bogetić, Dragan. "Jugoslovensko približavanje zapadu u vreme sukoba sa Kominformom." *Istorija 20. veka 1* (1998): 61-68.

³⁰ Dimić, Ljubodrag. *Jugoslavija i Hladni rat. Ogledi o spoljnoj politici Josipa Broza tita (1944-1974)*. Arhipelag, 2014.

³¹ Loc.cit., Borhi, László

³² Loc.cit., Kovačević

³³ Loc.cit., Petranović

³⁴ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2020

³⁵ Loc.cit., Kovačević

³⁶ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2020

³⁷ Loc.cit., Kovačević

diplomats, embassy officials and other Yugoslav representatives were expelled from Hungary between 1948 and 1950 and the Yugoslav side reciprocated, which led to the suspension of regular diplomatic relations. Finally, in November 1952 the Hungarian government requested the withdrawal of the Yugoslav chargé d'affaires Miljan Komatina, after which Yugoslavia canceled hospitality to his counterpart in Belgrade, József Kovács, which completely froze bilateral relations.³⁸ In Yugoslavia, there was also a fear of a possible Soviet invasion with the help of Hungarian and Romanian troops. Later research, however, showed that the Hungarian army did not prepare for the invasion of Yugoslavia and that its main role was to repel a possible enemy attack in the event of a potential world war.³⁹ However, the Yugoslav-Hungarian border was far from a peaceful area. During the summer of 1950, the Hungarian government additionally secured the border by installing barbed wire around the entire perimeter, which was soon followed by a system of landmines. This did not stop numerous incidents. According to Kovačević,⁴⁰ during the hostilities between Yugoslavia and the Cominform countries the Yugoslav-Hungarian border was the location where the conflicts were most frequent, although serious incidents were more frequent on the frontier with Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria.

The border was not only a place of separation. It also connected the territory of the two countries and some of the citizens of both Yugoslavia and Hungary tried to improve their position by crossing it. As the Soviet Union's call for the CPY members to oppose their leadership created a split within the Yugoslav party,⁴¹ party members who supported the Soviet Union, the so-called *ibeovci* or Cominformists, soon found themselves under the attack of the Yugoslav repressive apparatus and many of them sought refuge in emigration. Some of the Cominformists emigrated to Hungary, although their number remains disputed. While some Yugoslav sources speak of a total of 4,982 emigrants in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Bloc, of which there were 455 in Hungary, the Hungarian sources are far more conservative: for example, a list made for internal needs mentions the number of 148 emigrants who had fled to Hungary by October 1952 (80 of them requested asylum in the period between July 1, 1948 and June 1, 1949).⁴² Vukman's⁴³ research of Hungarian records identified 132 *ibeovci* who were parts of the Yugoslav emigrant community between 1948 and 1953. They were involved in various anti-Yugoslav activities: writing political texts, participating in radio shows that were broadcast in Yugoslavia, conducting subversive actions, as a source of information.⁴⁴ The emigrant community was especially strengthened after Lazar Brankov, Yugoslav chargé d'affaires in Budapest, defected to Hungary together with six other diplomats.⁴⁵ There were also defections to the other side. According to Yugoslav data between 1948 and 1955 more than two thousand Hungarian citizens crossed into Yugoslavia. In the Yugoslav press, the case of György Újhelyi, the second lieutenant of the Hungarian intelligence service, who emigrated to Yugoslavia in 1952, was particularly highlighted and used as a tool for anti-Magyar propaganda.⁴⁶ But some border crossings were made under duress. In November 1952, the Hungarian authorities arrested a certain László Bálint in

³⁸ Loc.cit., Kovačević

³⁹ Ritter, László. "Introduction. War On Tito's Yugoslavia?" In *War On Tito's Yugoslavia? The Hungarian Army in Early Cold War*, edited by L. Ritter, C. Nuenlistand A. Locher. Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP), 2005. https://phpisn.ethz.ch/lory1.ethz.ch/collections/coll_tito/introf72e.html?navinfo=15463 (accessed: 25.11.2024.)

⁴⁰ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁴¹ Banac, Ivo, *With Stalin Against Tito. Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism*. Ithaca, 1988.

⁴² Vukman, Peter. "Jugoslovenski politički emigranti u Mađarskoj (1948-1949)." In *Hungarians and Serbs on both sides of the changing boundaries 1941-1948*, edited by A. Hornjak, Z. Janjetović and L. Biro. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2016.

⁴³ Vukman, Peter. "Social Composition and Everyday Life of Cominform Emigrants in Hungary (1948-1980)." *Istorija* 20. veka 1 (2018): 133-46.

⁴⁴ Vukman, Peter. "Political activities of *ibeovci* emigrants in Hungary (1948-1953)." *Tokovi istorije* 1 (2017): 35-58.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Loc.cit., Kovačević

an attempt to kidnap and return one ibeovac to Yugoslavia. Bálint had already done this once at the end of the summer of the same year, but this time he was caught and sentenced to death.⁴⁷

Although Yugoslav newspapers falsely described the Bálint trial as a farce, in the years following the Cominform resolution a series of staged trials took place in Hungary. These processes, which took place in all countries of the Eastern Bloc,⁴⁸ were simultaneously used as a means of pressure on Yugoslavia and of Soviet hegemonization of the international communist movement. The case against László Rajk, former Hungarian Minister of Interior, was the most prominent of them. In “a monstrous, internationally publicized anti-Titoist trial”⁴⁹ organized in September 1949 Rajk was accused of being a Western spy, planning Rákosi’s murder and plotting for Hungary to leave the Eastern bloc. The trial, remembered as the culmination of anti-Yugoslav hysteria in Hungary,⁵⁰ aimed to remove the popular Rajk from the political scene and confirm the loyalty of the HCP leadership to the Soviets.⁵¹ Rajk was convicted of treason and hanged, fourteen more people received a death sentence, while eleven were sentenced to life imprisonment. Staged trials continued in Hungary during the following years. Some of them occurred as a result of internal party conflicts and the removal of political enemies. In addition, part of the process was directed against prominent members of the Yugoslav minority and officials of the Democratic Union of South Slavs (DUSS, Délszlávok Demokratikus Szövetsége). This was part of wider pressures on the political representatives of the Yugoslav minority, which began immediately after the adoption of the Cominform resolution. Over time, the previous management of the DUSS was replaced by more suitable individuals. According to the estimates of the Yugoslav authorities, the anti-Yugoslav policy in Hungary resulted in the arrest of about five thousand members of the minority community, of which about a hundred were interned, while sixty ended up on trial.⁵² On the other side of the border, the events surrounding the Cominform split led to increasing pressure on the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia.⁵³ Several officials of Hungarian nationality were arrested for expressing solidarity with the Cominform resolution and the same fate befell members of several illegal groups that have been formed.⁵⁴ Hungarian minority organizations in Vojvodina were soon transformed in order to make it easier for the authorities to control them and were forced to take a pledge of allegiance to the Yugoslav state.⁵⁵ Although the Hungarians in Vojvodina were afraid of a possible repression, like the one they had experienced at the end of World War II, their fears never materialized. Due to its defensive posture on the international stage and its search for internal stability, the Yugoslav state soon relaxed its policy toward the Hungarian minority in an attempt to demonstrate tolerance and earn its loyalty.⁵⁶

Normalization and its contradictions, 1953-1956

The death of Joseph Stalin on March 5, 1953, marked the beginning of major internal changes in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. The spring days brought “thawing” and reform of the system established in Eastern Europe after World War II. In the Hungarian case, this led to personnel changes at the top of the state. At the June talks in Moscow, the Soviet authorities harshly criticized Rákosi and his closest political associates and forced the general secretary of the HWPP to cede the position of prime minister to Imre Nagy. Nagy, the Minister of Agriculture in Hungary’s first post-war government, was kept away from

⁴⁷ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁴⁸ Loc.cit., Petranović

⁴⁹ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2020

⁵⁰ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁵¹ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2020

⁵² Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁵³ Vukman, Péter. “A magyar-jugoszláv kapcsolatok és a délvidéki magyarok a békekötés után.” In *A magyar kisebbségek 100 éve*, edited by K. G. Kovács. Komp-Press Kiadó, 2023.

⁵⁴ Loc.cit., Janjetović, Zoran

⁵⁵ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2023

⁵⁶ Ibid

important positions in the state after a conflict with Rákosi's leadership over collectivization policy a few years earlier. He wholeheartedly accepted his new role. A true reformer, a "representative of the communist enlightenment movement" and a "leader of democratic, national reform communism", as described by Ivan Berend,⁵⁷ Nagy immediately began to implement the policy of the New Course. It envisioned an economic policy focused on the consumer and agricultural sectors, stopping forced collectivization, closing internment camps, and freeing political prisoners.⁵⁸ There were also changes in the foreign policy of the Eastern Bloc countries. The process of policy normalization towards Yugoslavia started soon after the thawing of Yugoslav-Soviet relations began, and Hungary was the first country after the Soviet Union to launch an initiative with Yugoslavia for a renewed exchange of diplomatic representatives.⁵⁹ One more detail can help in understanding the rapidness of the new Hungarian government in establishing regular diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia. The process of de-Stalinization significantly contributed to the rise of the reputation of Tito's Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav model of socialism within the bloc. After spending the previous five years ostracized by most of the world's communist movement, the Yugoslav state gained the sympathy of many reform-minded communists because it conflicted with Moscow. Nagy was one of them. In his treatise *On Communism*, written during the summer of 1955, he pointed out that the political principles of Yugoslav communism cannot be viewed as a deviation from Marxism-Leninism, but rather as its creative application, and precisely this flexibility, as opposed to dogmatism, should be the recipe for the world victory of socialism.⁶⁰ It seems reasonable to suggest that Nagy understood the policy of the New Course in the context of the possible diversity of paths to socialism and its specific developments in Yugoslavia, thus giving him another reason for advocating rapprochement with the Yugoslav state.

In any case, Stalin's death did not mean immediate Yugoslav-Hungarian reconciliation. During April 1953, over two hundred incidents were recorded at the border.⁶¹ However, in the following months, the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries began. Sándor Kurimski, a former minister in Albania and major general in the Hungarian police, was suggested as the Hungarian deputy in Belgrade. Kurimski's position in the Hungarian police caused some delay by the Yugoslav government, but he received an agrément at the end of August, and in November 1953 he received credentials during a short conversation with Tito. In the meantime, the career diplomat Dalibor Soldatić was appointed as the Yugoslav deputy in Budapest without similar complications.⁶² During the summer of 1953, the personnel of the Yugoslav Embassy also reported to Belgrade about the improvement of the Hungarian attitude towards them.⁶³ Around that time, negotiations between the two sides on resolving border issues began and at the end of August, an agreement concerning the prevention and investigation of incidents at the common border was signed. It entered into force after ratification during the fall of 1953 and the next year witnessed a considerable decrease in the number of incidents.⁶⁴ During the following months, progress was also visible regarding the process of marking the border itself and the first treaty on this matter was signed in January 1954.⁶⁵

During the first half of 1954, Yugoslav-Hungarian trade exchange was re-established and in January of the following year, the Agreement on Commodity Exchange and The Payment Agreement between the two countries were signed in Belgrade.⁶⁶ Both treaties were finally ratified at the beginning of autumn. The normalization of relations between the two countries also had an impact on the current problems in the

⁵⁷ Loc.cit., Berend, Ivan T.

⁵⁸ Loc.cit., Borhi, László

⁵⁹ Cvetković, Vladimir. "Normalizacija diplomatskih odnosa Jugoslavije sa Mađarskom i Bugarskom 1953-1954." *Tokovi istorije* 3 (2009): 117-35.

⁶⁰ Nagy, Imre, *On Communism*. In *Defense of the New Course*. Praeger, 1957.

⁶¹ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁶² Loc.cit., Cvetković, Vladimir.

⁶³ Loc.cit., Cvetković, Vladimir.

⁶⁴ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

transport sector. Attempts were made to resolve disputes over river traffic on the Tisza, railway networks between the two countries, and air transport.⁶⁷ The painstaking and lengthy negotiations on the financial claims that the Yugoslav government had towards Budapest were finally brought to an end with the signing of the Agreement on the Regulation of Unsettled Financial and Economic Issues between the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia and the People's Republic of Hungary in Belgrade on May 29, 1956. According to the Agreement, Hungary committed to deliver goods to Yugoslavia worth 85 million US dollars over the next five years.⁶⁸ Similar progress was visible in the field of culture and sports. The revived cooperation in the field of culture included film exchanges, mutual visits of folklore societies, theater and opera performances and scientific cooperation. In the field of sports, the participation of Hungarian chess players in the international tournament in Belgrade in November 1954, and the visit of football player Ferenc Puskás to the same city were especially noteworthy. It should be added that the Yugoslav side had a somewhat tougher approach when organizing this type of cooperation. As Kovačević⁶⁹ points out, group guest visits in sports were rejected due to the fear that "the other side could use them for political propaganda". Politics continued to take precedence over any form of cultural or sports cooperation in the relations between the two countries. The year 1954 also witnessed the suspension of anti-Yugoslav propaganda in the Hungarian media. Although it officially stopped in October, during the previous summer decline was already visible.⁷⁰ With this came the cessation of activities of *ibeovci* in Hungary and their subsequent marginalization.⁷¹ The normalization of bilateral relations was also accompanied by a certain change in the policy of the Hungarian communists towards the Yugoslav minority and the loosening of previous control. However, the Yugoslav representatives were not completely satisfied with the situation on the ground and some reports speak of a formal, rather than a substantial change, which the Hungarian authorities denied.⁷²

The normalization of diplomatic relations necessarily affected both inter-party relations and events within the HWPP. The leadership of the party headed by Rákosi, the Yugoslavs believed, did not have a clear explanation for the change in diplomatic course. The most common response to such dilemmas in the HWPP amounted to general explanations according to which bad relations did not benefit either of the states.⁷³ Thus, Yugoslav-Hungarian relations were slowly being thrown into turmoil within the Hungarian state, where Rákosi patiently waited for the opportunity to return to power. As the conflict between Nagy's and Rákosi's factions intensified at the end of 1954 and 1955, both sides looked for support among the Kremlin power structures,⁷⁴ which did not escape the attention of the Yugoslav representatives in Budapest. When the party finally came to clarify its policy towards Yugoslavia, it was indicated that Yugoslavia is considered as a "country of bourgeoisie democracy" and that "normal relations, like with any other capitalist country" should be cultivated with it.⁷⁵

When in January 1955 the Prime Minister of the Soviet Government Georgy Malenkov, who was the most important protector of Nagy in Moscow, resigned, it became clear which side would prevail. Under pressure from Soviet emissaries, Imre Nagy resigned from the post of prime minister in March, which was followed by his expulsion from the HWPP Politburo, and then from the party itself.⁷⁶ The new Prime Minister András Hegedűs emphasized that Hungary supports the continued development of friendly relations with Yugoslavia,⁷⁷ but the Yugoslav leadership did not seem ready to cooperate with the new-old

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Loc.cit., Vukman, 2018

⁷² Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Loc.cit, Borhi, László

⁷⁵ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁷⁶ Loc.cit, Borhi, László

⁷⁷ Loc.cit., Kovačević

Stalinist set in power. In Belgrade, Rákosi was labeled as the “protagonist of the anti-Yugoslav stance” and it was considered that “we cannot establish closer relations with Hungary while Rákosi is at the helm”. Instead, the Yugoslav “line should be aimed at weakening his positions, and at giving support to those forces that are in favor of the progressive development of Hungary itself and for positive relations with Yugoslavia”.⁷⁸ With the signing of the Belgrade Declaration in June 1955, which recognized the legitimacy of the Yugoslav path to socialism, Rákosi’s group found itself in a difficult position. Before long the Hungarian authorities agreed with the decisions of the declaration, but there was no doubt that it helped the strengthening and consolidation of Rákosi’s opposition.

Due to further Yugoslav pressures, Yugoslav-Hungarian relations became an issue of vital importance for the further development of the internal situation in Hungary. During a speech in Karlovac in July 1955, Tito pointed out that there are people in “some neighboring countries who do not like (Yugoslav-Soviet V.M.) normalization... especially in Hungary there are such people”. Although Rákosi tried in his response to present Gábor Péter, the former head of the Hungarian secret police, as the main person responsible for spoiling Yugoslav-Hungarian relations, the Yugoslav leadership finally took the position that there would be no further rapprochement with Hungary while Rákosi was the head of the state.⁷⁹ Devising plans to weaken his positions soon began, as part of which the possibilities of revising the Rajk process and the approachment to the so-called middle line in the party, represented by János Kádár and István Kovács, were examined.⁸⁰

Nikita Khrushchev’s speech On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences, which condemned Stalin’s policy and his cult of personality at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, further shook Rákosi’s position. The Yugoslav deputy in Budapest, Soldatić, reported to Belgrade about the growing gap between Rákosi and the membership of the HWPP.⁸¹ The leader of the HWPP was soon forced to rehabilitate Laszlo Rajk and his comrades, although all the blame was placed on Gábor Péter. At the same time, the conflict between the reformist and conservative streams in the party became more and more open.⁸² The reformists formed a parallel political center around Nagy, while part of the opposition was gathered around the Petőfi Circle and the League of Writers.⁸³ The mutual affection of these circles with Yugoslavia led to the organization of an evening of Yugoslav literature by the Petőfi Circle in mid-August 1956.⁸⁴ Among the opposition, the Yugoslav model of socialism was increasingly emphasized as the most suitable for the Hungarian society.⁸⁵ The alarming situation in Hungary forced Moscow to react and on July 13, Anastas Mikoyan arrived in Budapest in order to bring the situation under control.⁸⁶ A month earlier, during a visit to Moscow, Tito warned the Soviets that with Rákosi as the head of the state, Hungary would not be able to resolve the current crisis,⁸⁷ thus effectively siding with the opposition. All these circumstances had an effect on the final result of Mikoyan’s mission – Rákosi was forced to resign, and Ernő Gerő took his place as the First Secretary of the HWPP.

A personnel change in the position of the first man of the HWPP enabled a new period of normalization of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations. Although the Yugoslavs were not particularly satisfied with the choice of Gerő as Rákosi’s successor, since he was one of his closest associates, he was accepted

⁷⁸ Loc.cit., Dimić, Ljubodrag

⁷⁹ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁸⁰ Loc.cit., Dimić, Ljubodrag

⁸¹ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁸² Loc.cit., Borhi, László

⁸³ Loc.cit., Berend, Ivan T.

⁸⁴ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Gibianski, Leonid. “Sovjetsko-jugoslovenski odnosi i Mađarska revolucija.” *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis* 1-2 (1996): 151-70.

⁸⁷ Loc.cit., Kovačević

in agreement with the Soviets as the least painful solution at that moment.⁸⁸ With Mikoyan's consent, the HWPP Politburo sent a letter to the leadership of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY, Savez komunista Jugoslavije) with a proposal to restore normal relations between the two parties. The idea was to use the close relations of the HWPP with the LCY as a method to weaken the opposition movement and strengthen the authority of the regime in the country.⁸⁹ In fact, this tactic formed the basis of Hungarian policy towards Yugoslavia during the following months. Thus, during the second half of the summer, the Hungarian press wrote very positively about Yugoslavia's foreign policy and internal affairs, Yugoslav and Hungarian cities were starting to collaborate and the exchange of various delegations of experts was underway. At the end of August, the Yugoslav side agreed to the Hungarian request to raise diplomatic missions to the level of embassies, which was implemented at the beginning of October. The new representative of the Hungarian state in Yugoslavia, Ferenc Münnich, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, soon arrived in Belgrade, and at the same time, the way was being paved for the arrival of the new Yugoslav representative in Budapest, Jovo Kapičić.⁹⁰

In September 1956 the LCY accepted the HWPP's proposal for the next meeting of representatives of the two parties, although the exact date was not agreed upon. The date was agreed on unexpectedly at the meeting between Tito and Gerő during the Yugoslav leader's visit to Khrushchev in Crimea.⁹¹ The Soviets surprised the Yugoslav president by bringing Gerő to the meeting, essentially pressuring him to have a meeting of the party delegations as soon as possible. Moscow saw the rapprochement of the Yugoslav and Hungarian parties as a way to stabilize the situation in Hungary and discourage Nagy's supporters, who boasted about Yugoslav support.⁹² It was becoming clear that something had to be done since Gerő was increasingly losing legitimacy in the state. The funeral organized on October 6 for the victims of the process against Rajk and his comrades turned into mass demonstrations.⁹³ As Berend⁹⁴ describes, in those days "the air was filled with unbearable tension, but there was no explosion yet". Amid such a situation, Gerő departed for Yugoslavia on 15th October. If one considers that for him the improvement of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations served the function of affirming his position within Hungary, an eight-day trip to the southern neighbour in the midst of the ongoing crisis should not be surprising. During the visit, the Hungarian delegation, which included Prime Minister András Hegedűs, Deputy First Secretary of the HWPP János Kádár, President of the Patriotic Front Antal Apró, and member of the Politburo István Kovács, met and discussed numerous issues with the highest Yugoslav representatives, including Josip Broz Tito, the president of the FNRJ and the LCY, and members of the Central Committee of the LCY Aleksandar Ranković, Svetozar Vukmanović, Moša Pijade. Among the most prominent topics discussed were state and party relations, press writings, economic cooperation, and Yugoslav experience in managing a socialist state were the most prominent topics. In addition to Belgrade, the Hungarian delegation also visited Subotica, Vinča, Smederevo, Sarajevo, Zenica, Zagreb, Rijeka, Ljubljana, Osijek, visiting various companies and factories in these cities. The official result of the visit was a joint declaration of friendship and cooperation between the two parties on an equal basis, with the aim of building socialism.⁹⁵ This declaration would soon be put to the test. On the same day that Hungarian representatives returned to Budapest, 23rd October 1956, the Hungarian uprising began.

⁸⁸ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁸⁹ Loc.cit., Gibianski, Leonid

⁹⁰ Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁹¹ Loc.cit., Gibianski, Leonid

⁹² Loc.cit., Kovačević

⁹³ Loc.cit, Borhi, László

⁹⁴ Loc.cit., Berend, Ivan T.

⁹⁵ Loc.cit., Kovačević

CONCLUSION

As the detailed analysis of the development of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations from the end of the Second World War to the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 shows, the policy of the Soviet Union towards Hungary and Yugoslavia was the most important factor in the two countries' mutual relationship. However, this does not mean that everything went according to Moscow's ideas. The split between Stalin and Tito in 1948 enabled the Yugoslav state to implement an autonomous, or at least semi-autonomous, foreign policy concerning the Soviet Union. The development of the specific Yugoslav path to socialism played an important role in the course of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations, especially in the period after 1953, when the reform movement in Hungary had a strong influence and when mass politics in this country ran counter to the efforts of the Soviets. The intertwined internal and external political dynamics of the two countries can shed light on important issues from the history of the early Cold War, the history of socialism, and the history of international relations in the second part of the twentieth century.

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