

STALIN'S GHOST: WAS SLOBODAN MILOSEVIC A NEO-CONSERVATIVE?

Alexander Mirkovic*

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Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Serbia (1989-1997) and of the Rump Yugoslavia (1997-2000) became known to the world by the sobriquet “the butcher of the Balkans.”¹ As a person responsible for the deaths of thousands and the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands, one necessarily wonders what was his motivation, what made him “tick?” Was it the personal and pathological lust for power or was he a part of a larger ideological movement? Some scholars saw his motives mainly in psychological terms, emphasizing his traumatic upbringing as a child of parents who both committed suicide.² More commonly he is seen as someone who in a Machiavellian way revived the Serbian nationalist program of the 19th century and became the last nationalist dictator of the twentieth century.³ In this way Milosevic is classified as a neofascist and generally, there is a consensus that Milosevic was an ideological opportunist, a communist “apparatchik” who turned to nationalism in order to prolong the life of the communist elite or “nomenklatura.” The majority of

scholars and popular writers see the origins of Milosevic's ideology in the 1980s and in particular in the *Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts*, which, after a long interlude, revived the Serbian nationalist ideology of the nineteenth century. However, the historical links between the Serbian nationalism of the nineteenth century, and its crucial document *Nacertanije* formulated in 1844, on the one hand, and the revived nationalism of the 1980s on the other hand, is never traced, rarely even briefly sketched out. I believe that this common view is incomplete and might be the consequence of looking at the Milosevic enigma through the glasses of the Cold War, which tacitly assumes that all the Serbian and Yugoslav communists thought in the same way. The roots of Milosevic's ideology are not only in the 1980s and could be traced to the factional struggles within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the forties, fifties, and sixties.⁴ In this paper, by looking at the genealogy of his politics, I argue that Milosevic was a fairly creative Neo-Stalinist, or

* Arkansas Tech University, USA. E-mail: amirkovic@atu.edu.

¹ Graff, James L., Mader, William, J.F.O. McAllister, “Slobodan Milosevic: The Butcher of the Balkans” in *Time Magazine*, June 8, 1992.

² The best psychological study of S. Milosevic is Dusko Doder and Louise Branson, *Milosevic: Portrait of a Tyrant* (New York, Free Press, 1999). Less nuanced is Slavoljub Djukic, *Milosevic and Markovic: A Lust for Power* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

³ The view that Milosevic was a communist apparatchik turned into a rabid right wing nationalist is represented by Lenard J. Cohen, *Serpent in the Bosom* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 2001). This study takes as its starting point the political *salto mortale* of Milosevic who early in his career calling the Serb nationalism “a serpent in the bosom of Yugoslavia.” Most of the studies on the fall of Yugoslavia follow this line of argument. Here is just a selection: Silber, Laura; Little, Allan, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (London, Penguin, 1997), Ramit, Sabina Petra, , *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia From the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milosevic*, forth edition, (Bolder, Colorado, Westview Press, 2002) and Mertus, Julie, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started the War* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ Three studies that look for deeper historical roots of Milosevic's ideology are Lampe, John R. *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was A Country* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). Lampe explains the break up of Yugoslavia by the

even a Neo-Conservative, and as such he was an ideological pioneer in the post-Soviet era. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989 Milosevic was the first to show the way to the shaken communist “nomenklatura” how it was possible to stay in power while both criticizing the communist past, embracing the political and economic reforms demanded by the West, while at the same time leaving the security structures of the old regime in place. Slobodan Milosevic, out of his base within the Communist Party, created the new political movement in Eastern Europe and thereby, should be counted as one of the most important predecessor of current politics and policies of Vladimir Putin. Milosevic’s power base was the secret service and the police. From that power base he extended his influence within the Communist Party, blamed his factional opponents for the ills of communism, and again from his factional base built a coalition with the nationalist groups that were either still suppressed, or openly in opposition to the ruling Communists. It is a common mistake to think that Milosevic was a nationalist. Rather, Milosevic’s rise to power in the 1980s should be considered as a continuation of the factional struggle within the Communist Party, which began in 1948 with the split between Tito and Stalin, and continued with the split between centralists and federalists, occurring in the 1960s.

Stalinism is rarely considered a serious political ideology. It is either understood as a deviation from revolutionary Leninism or a personality driven system, which disappeared as soon as Stalin died in 1953. This is slowly changing and more and more Stalinism is treated as a coherent world view, a civilization, and an ideology. For example, Kotkin had shown that Stalinism, as an ideology, successfully revitalized the influence of the Com-

munist Party in the Soviet Union by explicitly tying “the building of socialism” with the tradition of Russian imperial history and “the importance of national strength.”⁵ In other words, Stalin, much like Milosevic, managed to unite two quite incompatible streams of intellectual and political tradition in Russia and Serbia, the revolutionary socialist tradition and the conservative nationalist tradition.⁶ Therefore, in this paper, I will argue two particular points, first that Milosevic’s political career was linked to a centralizing faction within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the supporters of the ousted chief of the secret police Alexander Rankovic. This fraction of CPY was commonly characterized in Yugoslav press the supporters of “state socialism.”

In the Communist newspeak, this was a code word for Stalinism. I will call them here the “centralists.”⁷ Second, from his base within the Communist Party, Milosevic forged a coalition with the nationalist forces, which promised to lay aside their oppositional activities as long as Milosevic was working to solve the Serbian problem in Yugoslavia. They kept their word, he did not. Very early in his career, beginning with his famous 1987 Kosovo speech, Milosevic gained support from Serbian nationalist groups, especially from the nationalist writer Dobrica Cosic, and influential intellectuals such as Matija Beckovic and Kosta Cavoski. These groups were not his political base, but the allies of the political faction that he managed to gather and organize within the Communist Party of Serbia. In the coming pages, I will briefly describe the origins of the two main factions in the Yugoslav communist party, the federalists, and the centralists, describe how Milosevic was patronized, at first, by the federalist Ivan Stambolic and the powerful Stambolic family, and how in the crucial

strain created by unequal economic development of various parts of the country. Woodward, Susan L., *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington DC, Brooking Institution Press, 1995) blames the lack of interest on the part of the Western Powers for the failure of Yugoslavia. Finally, Glenny, Misha, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (London, Penguin Books, 1996) see the machinations of the Great Powers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the main cause of Yugoslav disintegration.

⁵ Kotkin, Stephen, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berekley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 17.

⁶ The equivalent in the American politics would be Neo-Conservatism, a movement that originated from disillusioned left and liberal groups, but then embraced a fierce kind of nationalism, a cross pollination between the followers of Eugene Debs and Theodore Roosevelt. See, McGowan, John, *Liberalism: Interpretation for Our Time* (Chapel Hill: University of North Caroline Press, 2007), 124.

⁷ In Yugoslav Communist “Newspeak,” the phrase “state socialism,” stood for Stalinism. See, “The Specter of Separatism” in *TIME Magazine*, February 07, 1972.

moment of the struggle for power, Milosevic switched sides, became the leader of the centralist faction, and removed his mentor Ivan Stambolic, from the leadership of Serbian Communist party.

On August 20, 1983 Aleksandar Rankovic, longtime Tito's second in line, but removed from all party and state functions since 1966, died in the Adriatic sea-resort of Dubrovnik. At the time of his ousting, Tito himself made a comment that Rankovic's behavior "recalled Stalin's time."⁸ His funeral a couple of days later in Belgrade was the first public display of the public dissatisfaction with the CPY, a party that was dominated by the federalists. This funeral was not an official state occasion, even though Rankovic was once Tito's vice-president. However it was carefully orchestrated by elements in the secret services that encouraged massive attendance and succeeded in making the funeral a symbolic event and a crucial factor in creating a anti-Tito, centralist faction within the CPY. The funeral was crucial in the rise of Milosevic, from an apparatchik to an ideologue and eventually, with the help of Serbian nationalist, the leader of the Serbian nation. This was the crucial moment in Milosevic's rise to power, since Milosevic actually did what Rankovic never dared to do, namely organize a powerful opposition group within or outside the CPY. Tito never allowed factions to become visible outside of the party, and never allowed them to openly gain influence and publicity. However, after he died in 1980, factional struggle again become possible and Milosevic was the first to realize the possibilities this new reality opened. Rankovic, as a director of UDBA, the state security agency, and the minister of the interior, at his demise was the second most powerful figure in the Communist Party. Yet, after his demise in 1966, Rankovic remained silent and never even attempted to organize any resistance to Tito's rule, in spite of the fact that he had a lot of supporters. The reasons for this were probably personal and subjective, as well as objective. Namely, Rankovic was branded as "centralist," opposed to federalization of the country and an opponent of liberal eco-

nomic reforms espoused by federalists. Tito purposefully left him in a limbo. While he was removed from office, his personal privileges were left in place as long as he remained silent.

As a consequence of Rankovic's fall, the state security agency was broken in two pieces, the civilian (SDB later BIA) and the military branch (KOS). The military branch was directly subordinated to Tito, as the commander in chief of the armed forces. The SDB was nominally under the authority of the federal government and the parliament. In practice it was under the party control. The separation lasted till the 1980s, when a power struggle started between the SDB on the level of republics and the unified, federalist KOS. In 1992, Aleksandar Vasiljevic, the leader of the military branch (KOS) was confronted by Milosevic's front men of SDB, Jovica Stanisic. Vasiljevic was surprised that during one of the operations, the civilian branch (SDB) actually arrested one of the KOS operatives. He asked Stanisic "are we going back to the times before 1966?" Stanisic simply replied "it's going to be like that again."⁹ Plainly stating that the security agencies will be again under the control of one man such as it was under Rankovic. When the full documentation is made available to researchers, it will be essential to examine Milosevic's role in this power struggle, especially since we know the outcome.

As a rule, the federalists in CPY were more accommodating to the West; the centralists got the wind in their sails from the resurgent neo-Stalinism of Leonid Brezhnev, who became the general secretary of the CPSU in 1964. Rankovic must have understood that creating resistance to the current federalist and liberalizing course of the CPY along the centralist lines would be inevitably labeled as Stalinist. Rankovic, as a chief of state security, more than anybody knew what happened to those in the party who opposed Tito and supported Stalin.¹⁰ The burial of Rankovic was, in my opinion, for more important that the most commonly emphasized crucial moment in Milosevic's career when he visited Kosovo in early 1987 and uttered the famous phrase to the Kosovo Serbs "no one will ever

⁸ Borba (Belgrade), 2 July 1966.

⁹ B92 Insider, October 9, 2008.

¹⁰ Those who supported Stalin in 1948 against Tito were sent to a "rehabilitation camp" at the Dalmatian Island Goli Otok. Banac, *With Stalin*, 243-254. Rankovic personally supervised the "rehabilitation" procedures.

dare beat you again.” In other words, by the time Milosevic came out publicly against the official Yugoslav policy toward ethnic minorities in 1987, he already gathered the support of many of the closeted sympathizers of Rankovic.

Before Milosevic became a friend and a protégée of Ivan Stambolic and the powerful Stambolic family, he had a reputation of being an ideological zealot. Within the ruling circles of the Yugoslav communists, who consciously maintained the image of the most liberal of all the communist regimes, this usually meant a tendency toward Stalinism. Within the party Milosevic was known as “little Lenin” due to his excessive zeal for the party ideology, a nickname given to him by his protégée Ivan Stambolic. It might seem that within the Communist Party a nickname “little Lenin” would be a positive thing, but this was not the case. Actually it was practically synonymous with the expression “dull boy” in English. Such zeal was evident among the dissenting communist groups and people who had fallen from grace, but was not welcomed in the mainstream of the party.

Zeal was an indication of the willingness to change things, and the party believed that there was no reason to change the team that was winning. In the 1970s and 80s Communist Party of Yugoslavia was a privileged nomenklatura which, after defeating its opponents on the left, the Stalinists (represented, ironically, by Rankovic), and on the right, the Social Democrats (represented by Djilas), behaved confidently, had a firm grip on the society, look down upon excessive idealism, and expected to rule for ever.¹¹ The nickname “little Lenin” was not only a sign of excessive zeal, but also of ideological and moral purity characteristic of the earlier periods, especially under Stalin, when

marital chastity was highly praised.¹² In Tito’s Party officials of the nomenklatura were expected to have “fun” and occasionally have mistresses. It was a sign of their power and influence, and also that they were team players. The party worked as a good old boys network, with its tests of loyalty and hazing rituals. Ivan Stambolic was widely rumored to have had several extra-marital affairs, most notably with the famous folk singer Vesna Zmijanac; Milosevic was known for his unshaken devotion to his wife Mira, who was his first and only love in life.¹³ Milosevic was accepted into the closed group of the nomenklatura in spite of his marital chastity, mainly because he was a heavy drinker. In that way he managed to pass the test of the good old boys network. Characterization of Milosevic as a “good pedant bureaucrat” or a “good servant good servant but a bad master” that came from his enemies within the party is a mixture of arrogant Balkan bravado and sour grapes.¹⁴ Famously the opponents of Stalin portrayed him as a “gray, dull blank,” or a “bureaucrat without an opinion or even personality of his own.”¹⁵ Also famously, they were all skillfully outmaneuvered and eventually eliminated by a man without an opinion or even personality. How was it possible for Milosevic both to remain loyal to his “federalist” sponsor, Ivan Stambolic, and, at the same time, to organize a faction within the party, which would eventually oust Stambolic from power? Here, the help from his wife Mira Markovic was indispensable. For Mira, the factional struggle within CPY was a family affair. Her father was Moma Markovic, a very influential figure among the ruling “federalist” faction, who interestingly enough understood well that Milosevic couple were going after power by creating a faction, and directly opposed the efforts of his

¹¹ It is ironic that Rankovic was often referred to in the official speeches of the party functionaries as the representative of state-socialism, i.e. a Stalinist, because Rankovic, in addition to Tito, was one of the few people that was actually singled out by the Informbiro Resolutions and Soviet press as “dubious Marxists.” See *Izvestiia*, Sept 9, 1948, p.2. Also see Banac, Ivo, *With Stalin against Tito* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 158.

¹² A popular joke of the times goes like this, Marx, Engels, and Lenin are debating is it better to be with the wife or the mistress. Marx argues for the wife, Engels for the mistress, while Lenin suggests that one should have both at the same time, because the wife thinks that you are with the mistress, and the mistress thinks you are with the wife, while you can have peace, go to the library, and study the revolutionary struggle of the working peoples.

¹³ Matovic, Dragana, “Politicka Pornografija” in *NIN*, 2715, January 9, 2003. The author of this article jokes that the feud between Milosevic and Stambolic actually began when Milosevic complained to his best friend that it was inappropriate to have a mistress.

¹⁴ Doder, *Milosevic*, 17 and 27.

¹⁵ Service, Robert, *Stalin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.

daughter and son-in-law.¹⁶ Mira was always cool to her father, and idealized her mother, Vera Miletic. This was not an easy thing to do under the federalist dominated CPY, since Vera Miletic's first husband was Petko Miletic, who was a factional opponent of Tito since the 1930s and for awhile his main rival for the leading position in the party.¹⁷ Petko Miletic emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1940 and remained there to his death in 1971. It is possible that Stalin had Miletic in mind as Tito's successor.

Miletic's factions existed in CPY within the country, and it became especially strong after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948.¹⁸ Much like Petko Miletic, his wife Vera Miletic was ostracized from the party, allegedly for her "cowardly behavior" during torture by the German Gestapo in 1943. Vera Miletic was shot by the Gestapo in 1943. During the high days of the crisis over Tito-Stalin split, Rankovic himself characterized Vera Miletic as a cowardly traitor and a Stalinist by association.¹⁹ It seems that the factional struggle between the centralists and the federalists in CPY was a nationalist struggle disguised in the dress of Marxist rhetoric. Ivo Banac had already taken this line of argument and, furthermore, it was not the first time in Marxist history and practice that such a masquerading occurred.²⁰ One is reminded of the debate between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, namely between Stalin and Zhordania, over the issue of national identity and political and cultural autonomy.²¹ Furthermore, the debate between federalists and centralists is in many ways similar to the debate over the first constitutions of the Soviet Union in 1922.

Namely, between the Lenin's position that all soviet republics on the former imperial territory should be joined in the federation on equal terms

with the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Stalin, on the other hand supported the idea that all the other soviet republics be simply joined to the Russian SFSR as autonomous regions, in other words, as a part of the Russian federation.²² Stalin during the constitutional debate muted his opposition to the Lenin's proposal, mostly on pragmatic grounds. Stalin instinctively knew that it was far more important to focus on the succession struggle than on pure constitutional technicalities, especially in view of Lenin's failing health.²³ In CPY, as long as Tito was alive, the federalization of Yugoslavia had little practical consequences, since whatever steps were taken toward federalization (or con-federalization), the unity of the party, armed forces, and the country was guaranteed by Tito unchallenged and unchallengeable position. With Tito out of the picture in the 1980s, the issue of centralization or federalization became the central one. I do not know whether Milosevic ever read Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question*. As a good Marxist, the little Lenin," he probably has, since it was a required reading in the party seminars and political schools. I wonder, is it a stretch to believe that Milosevic understood and learned from the failure on Rankovic to organize the centralist faction? I believe that Milosevic certainly grasped this political opportunity and, furthermore, that he was on the fairly strong footing as far as Marxist tradition goes.

Therefore, it is not necessary to go back to the Serbian nationalist program of the 19th century, *Nacertanije*, to explain Milosevic's nationalism. It should not be forgotten, that Milosevic, initially wholeheartedly condemned the famous nationalist *Memorandum* of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which for the first time openly complained about alleged discrimination of the Serbian

¹⁶ At the party's crucial meeting in 1987, which deposed Ivan Stambolic, both Milosevic's father-in-law, Moma Markovic, and his brother Draza Markovic voted against Milosevic. See, Doder, *Milosevic*, 51.

¹⁷ Banac, *With Stalin*, 66-70.

¹⁸ Banac, *With Stalin*, 165.

¹⁹ "Nasuprot tim mnogobrojnim primerima heroizma, samopožrtvovanja i junaštva, treba pomenuti i slu ajeve kukavi kog, izdajni kog i provokatorskog držanja pojedinaca kao što su Ratko Mitrovi , Vasilije Buha, Vera Mileti i Andrija Hebrang" in, *Peti Kongress Komunisticke Partije Jugoslavije: Izvestaji i Referati*. Belgrade: Kultura, 1948.

²⁰ Banac, *With Stalin*, 256.

²¹ Service, Robert, *Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). 95-101.

²² *Izvestiya Tsentral'nogo Komiteta KPSS*, 9 (1989), 195-200.

²³ Service, Robert, *Stalin*, 194-5.

people in Yugoslavia, and labeled Serbian nationalism as “the serpent in the bosom” of the socialist Yugoslavia.²⁴ His alliance with the Serbian nationalist was slowly built over the years, but it was not the starting point of his policy. Everything that Milosevic needed to be able to create a viable and successful alternative to the federalist Stambolic was already there, in Stalin’s *Marxism and the National Question*. As far as federal organization of the Soviet Union, Stalin’s main argument was that the unity of the Russian

Empire needed to be preserved: cultural autonomy for the nations of the empire yes, but no political independence, and no splitting of the Empire. Milosevic followed the same line. There were three obvious advantages to this strategy. With one stroke, Milosevic was able to gain support from former Stalinists, not an insignificant group in Yugoslavia in spite of the vigilant effort of the regime to suppress them.²⁵ He also gained support of Rankovic’s men, who were still strategically posted in the secret service and the police. And last, but not least, he managed to obtain the support of Serbian nationalists, who agreed to put their opposition to the regime on hold as long as the Serbian national question in Yugoslavia was not satisfactorily resolved. The purpose of this article is not to make a biographical sketch of Milosevic, but to look at a possible political trajectory, a genealogy of an ideology. As a young man Milosevic was a

committed communist (“little Lenin”) who in the period of the stagnating communist system went through a political identity crisis. He was not alone in that, many idealistically oriented people despised the duplicity of Yugoslav communists, who retained the Marxist rhetoric, but lived as a privileged bourgeois class that successfully milked both sides in the Cold War between the East and West.²⁶ Like a typical Neo-Conservative, in the 1980s, during the Reagan-Thatcher revolution, he flirted with free market liberal reforms and was not the only politician who made a successful shift from the far left to the far right.²⁷ Politicians learn as they go about forming political coalitions and Milosevic was no exception. I would guess that, in his own mind, he remained true to his communist principles. These were not, however, the revisionist and federalist principles of Tito. Stalin’s theoretical contribution to practical politics and especially the nationalist question provided a useful alternative. I believe that Milosevic learned much from it and updated that legacy for the current generation of political leaders in Russia and Eastern Europe. In other words, Milosevic turned to nationalism, like many Neo-Conservatives did, but his political survival depended on a fragile coalition between former Stalinists and the support of traditional Serbian nationalist. Like Stalin he managed to keep both sides, if not happy, at least acquiescent.

²⁴ Cohen, Lenard L., *Serpent in the Bosom: The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milosevic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 66-7.

²⁵ Serbs and Montenegrins, accounted for 65% of all arrested Stalinists, even though they represented roughly 40% of the population. This is according to the estimate of Banac, which I believe are on the low side. See, Banac, *UIT Stalin*, 150.

²⁶ The pioneer in this regard was Milovan Djilas, *New Class: Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957).

²⁷ Milosevic rolled back most of the self-management reforms, curtailed the powers of worker’s councils, and enhanced the executive powers of managers. This left quite an impression on Lawrence Eagleburger, the US ambassador to Belgrade from 1977-1981, who saw him as a “liberal reformer.” See, Sell, Louis, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 141.