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**SLOVENIAN  
RESISTANCE  
MOVEMENT AND  
YUGOSLAVIA  
1941–1945**

**INTRODUCTION**

“Today we can already say that the monarchy has been liquidated, even if the final decision has been put off until after the war. National oppression is over, and feudal remnants that lingered in Yugoslavia even after 1918 have been eliminated. Although we cannot equate the liberation struggle with the bourgeois-democratic revolution, we can nevertheless say that within our struggle for liberation, the stage of the bourgeois-democratic revolution has already been largely completed. And if it has not yet been completed, the conditions are ripe for its immediate elimination. This has primarily been made possible by the fact that although the bourgeoisie still retains its economic standing, it has already lost its political

clout.”<sup>344</sup> These are the words of Edvard Kardelj, one of Tito's closest associates alongside Aleksandar Ranković and Milovan Đilas and the person in charge of Slovenia and Croatia in the Politburo of the CK KPJ from early 1942 onward, explaining the situation of the resistance movement regarding the issue of Slovenian nationality in Spring 1944. The resolution of the national question within the unitary and centralist Kingdom of Yugoslavia that would be based on the self-determination of nations has been an important, even crucial point of the Communist policy since the 1920s.<sup>345</sup> Kardelj's confident assessment was based on a series of ongoing processes that culminated at the second AVNOJ session in Jajce on 29 November 1943, when an ordinance declaring that Yugoslavia would be a federal country was adopted on the basis of the formal and legal right of nations to self-determination. In its plans for the post-war period, the resistance movement thus officially and formally abolished the pre-war centralist and unitarist system of government.

However, the road to such resolution was not always straightforward, but went through a number of contradictory phases that depended on various factors. In this context, the attitude of the Slovenian resistance towards Yugoslavia varied as well, but the resistance always remained part of the Yugoslav movement led by J. B. Tito. In the above-mentioned lecture, Kardelj explained the reasons for these changing attitudes: “When we were in the middle of an offensive against reactionary forces in 1941–42 with Draža Mihailović as our main adversary, we did not emphasize Yugoslavia much as it was the main rallying cry of these reactionary elements. We mainly focused on the self-determination of the Slovenian nation and especially its right of secession. With this slogan, we destroyed the Mihailović reaction and won the masses to our side. The situation after the Italian offensive was different. At that time, Mihajlović's supporters embarked on a path of open treason. Our course was to win over the centre. This prompted us to change tactics and put the Yugoslav question on the agenda. This tactic allowed us to win over part of the centre and neutralize the rest. Our tactics always followed the needs dictated by the overall development. Therefore, we sometimes focused on secession and at other times we emphasized unification.”<sup>346</sup> Kardelj's explanation contained all the key elements of the wartime genesis of the Slovene resistance movement's attitude towards Yugoslavia.

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344 Vida Deželak Barič: Osvobodilni boj kot priložnost za izvedbo revolucionarnih ciljev [Liberation Struggle as an Opportunity for the Realisation of Revolutionary Goals]. *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, 1995, No. 1-2, pp. 158–159.

345 Perovšek et al. (eds.), *Razprava o nacionalnem vprašanju*.

346 Deželak Barič, Osvobodilni boj kot priložnost, pp. 161–162.

## I

“The Fascist occupying forces failed to ensure that the division of Yugoslavia and Slovenia would also shatter KPJ and KPS. Today, KPJ is the only party with organizations all over the Yugoslav territory and the only party under a unified leadership,” stressed Franc Leskošek, Secretary of the CK KPS, in his article “Let Us Expand and Bolster Party Organizations” (“Razširimo in učvrstimo partijske organizacije”) published in the August (1941) issue of *Delo* (The Work), a newsletter of the CK KPS.<sup>347</sup> Although attitudes towards Yugoslavia were somewhat ambiguous among Croatian and Macedonian Communists, it was certainly crucial that the KPJ remained a unified organization throughout the division and occupation of Yugoslavia, with Partisan forces likewise being united under the Supreme Command headed by Secretary-General of the KPJ, Josip Broz Tito. Another constant was the fact that the KPS was always directed against the leaders of the pre-April regime, whom the Communists claimed to be “the people responsible for the April catastrophe and for all evil that has befallen the Slovenian nation and all the nations of Yugoslavia after its collapse”.<sup>348</sup> Although such judgements of the Slovenian pre-war political elite by the Slovenian Communists must be considered in light of their fundamental ideological motives, the actions of the majority of pre-war party leaders upon the Axis powers' attack on Yugoslavia actually fit this description quite well, a fact that the majority of the population also agreed with. That is, based on the assessment that the war would be won by the Axis powers, the pre-war political elite headed by Ban of the Drava Banovina Dr. Marko Natlačen reacted accordingly to their aggression. Convinced that the break-up and annexation of parts of the Yugoslav territory by different Axis powers was a good long-term solution, the elites tried to negotiate – first with Germany, and after they were turned down, with Italy – a favourable outcome for the Slovenians in the context of the nazis “new order”, following the examples of Tiso's Slovakia and Pavelić's Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and establishing the Slovenian state as a protectorate of the Axis powers. Hitler's refusal led to the division of Slovenian territory and the pre-war elite agreeing to the annexation of the so called Province of Ljubljana to the Kingdom of Italy, the most public manifestation of which was the departure of a delegation of the Consulta (a consulting body of the Italian fascist government in the Province of Ljubljana, whose membership consisted of representatives of the Slovenian public life) to visit Mussolini and the Pope in Rome. From Yugoslavia's point of view and its legislation – the Government and the King had emigrated and were

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347 *Delo* 1941–1942, p. 64.

348 *Delo* 1941–1942, (May 1942), p. 117, Delavcem, kmetom, vsemu delovnemu ljudstvu Slovenije!.

still considered the legitimate representatives of the country by the Allied forces – this was an unacceptable, prosecutable act, and from the perspective of long-term benefits for the Slovenians, the acquiescence to the partition of the Slovenian territory as a permanent solution represented the lowest point of Slovenian modern political history, as the majority of the population considered the situation a national catastrophe.<sup>349</sup> Due to these actions, a large part of the population – as well as allies, who thought it was totally unacceptable – considered the majority of the Slovenian pre-war party elite to have become politically disqualified, which gave legitimacy to new political powers and allowed them to take the centre stage of the future Slovenian political arena. Among these new political entities, the Liberation Front was the first to distinguish itself by calling for an immediate armed resistance against the occupying forces, and it did so with considerable success. The Liberation Front was established at the Communist's initiative; however, it was initially structured as a coalition (prominent members other than the Communists included Christian Socialists and Slovene orientated members of Sokol, a liberal organization for sports and education) and very soon became an important political entity in the Slovenian political arena.<sup>350</sup>

Following the official armistice of the Royal Yugoslav Army (17 April 1941), Slovenian Communists mainly focused, as evident from the pronouncement made by the CK KPS in late April 1941, on the liberation and reunification of the Slovenian nation (i.e. the realization of the “United Slovenia” (“Zedinjena Slovenija”) programme drafted in the revolutionary year of 1848), which remained their objective at all times. In addition, they also emphasized the kinship of the Yugoslav and other Balkan nations.<sup>351</sup> This shows that the framework of the country to which the future United Slovenia would belong was not yet precisely determined. Furthermore, the first item of the “Tenets of Our Liberation Struggle” (“Gesla našega osvobodilnega boja”), published by Slovenski poročevalec on 22 June 1941, underlined the Slovenian nation's right of self-determination, including the rights of secession and unification with other nations.<sup>352</sup>

Statements made by members of the resistance movement regarding their attitude towards a Yugoslav country became more concrete when the Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Decisions adopted on 16 September

349 Bojan Godeša: *Čas odločitev. Katoliški tabor in začetek okupacije* [Time of Decisions. Catholic Camp and the Beginning of the Occupation]. Ljubljana, 2011, pp. 189–258.

350 Bojan Godeša: *Kdor ni z nami je proti nam. Slovenski izobraženci med okupatorji, Osvobodilno fronto in protirevolucionarnim taborom* [You're Either With Us or Against Us. Slovenian Intellectuals between the Occupiers, the Liberation Front and the Counter-Revolutionary Camp]. Ljubljana, 1995, pp. 121–126.

351 *Dokumenti ljudske revolucije v Sloveniji* [Documents of the People's Revolution in Slovenia], I/ 6. Ljubljana, 1962, pp. 28–29.

352 *DLRS, I/10*, p. 42.

1941 at the third session of the Supreme Plenum of the LF, which elected the Slovenian National Liberation Committee (SNOO), included the following (Article 3): “realizing the fellowship and unity of Yugoslav nations, the SNOO forms a permanent association with similar representative organizations of other Yugoslav nations”<sup>353</sup> At the same time, SNOO adopted an ordinance stating that the “military muster of the Slovenian Partisan forces becomes part of the National Liberation Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia (NOPOJ) and operates under the leadership of the Supreme Command (SC) of the NOPOJ”<sup>354</sup> Furthermore, SNOO sent a salute to Serbian, Croatian and Montenegrin Partisans, expressing admiration of their “selfless struggle against the occupying forces” and stating “that your heroic struggle for freedom is now joined by the Slovenian Partisan forces fighting with a rifle in hand for our common aim”<sup>355</sup>

However, in November 1941, Slovenian Communists were forced to issue a communiqué responding to a series of allegations of their anti-Yugoslav tendencies that were at the time being disseminated by their domestic adversaries. Regarding their attitude towards Yugoslavia, the communiqué issued by the command of the KPS stated the following: “After Yugoslavia's defeat, KPJ remained, at least within Yugoslavia, the only organizational and political connection between the divided Yugoslav nations for a long time. Even today, KPJ remains the only organizational and moral/political force reaching across the whole Yugoslav territory. KPJ was the first to uphold and actively bolster the motto of the fellowship and unity of Yugoslav nations.”<sup>356</sup> On the other hand, Boris Kidrič, who was considered to be a driving force of the Liberation Front, i.e. the political wing of the resistance, published an article titled “Half a Year of the Liberation Front” wherein he argued his opinion at that time, which was quite different from what was claimed by the representatives of leading pre-war parties: “The Liberation Front has found a new, different manner of asking the question of the union of Yugoslav nations, which stands in stark contrast with the sad and harmful tradition. The question is now based on an active foundation, i.e. founded in the unified and coordinated struggle of the Yugoslav nations against our accursed enemies. Many of those who used to foam at their mouths with 'Yugoslavic' phrases still do not understand that the former conceptions had been thoroughly shattered, both practically and politically, but that the armed resistance of Yugoslav nations is giving birth to a new, popular conception of the national community of the Yugoslav nations tied together by their joint casualties and shared brotherly blood.”<sup>357</sup>

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353 *DLRS, I/38*, p. 116.

354 *DLRS, I/40*, p. 118.

355 *DLRS, I/45*, p. 123.

356 *DLRS, I/75*, p. 170.

357 *DLRS, I/76*, pp. 173–174.

At the fourth session of the Supreme Plenum of the Liberation Front on 1 November 1941, at which the main points of the Liberation Front's programme were adopted, the stance towards a Yugoslav state was described under Item 3: "In line with our view of a natural and destined community of Yugoslav nations, the Liberation Front shall not acquiesce to the break-up of Yugoslavia and shall do everything in its power to preserve the fellowship and unity of its nations. At the same time, the Liberation Front strives toward an association of all Slavic nations under the leadership of the great Russian nation, based on the right of every nation to self-determination."<sup>358</sup>

However, the celebration of 1 December, i.e. the day of the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918), put the command of the resistance movement in a difficult position, as the liberal political competitors threatened to take the initiative.<sup>359</sup> However, the Liberation Front was able to beat the liberals with its appeal to celebrate the Yugoslavian national holiday, and its decision to do so was accompanied by the following clarification included in the flyer: "As the Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation decides to do so, we also clearly state that our liberated future must never again see the situation that had prevented the nations of Yugoslavia and the working classes from sincerely participating in the celebrations of 1 December in the past few years, the situation that has, ultimately, ruined Yugoslavia. The Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation will liberate the Slovenian nation and guarantee all rights demanded by the Slovenian national individuality. By establishing a consistent people's democracy, the Liberation Front will guarantee the Slovenians all their human rights. We are calling upon Slovenians to celebrate 1 December in the spirit of profound and determined solidarity with their southern brothers, in the spirit of an intense struggle against the oppressors, but also with the awareness that Slovenian casualties must result in all our Slovenian and people's rights."<sup>360</sup> Kardelj, who was at the time in Bosnia together with the central Yugoslav leadership headed by Tito, thus wrote a letter to the Slovenian CK on 1 January 1942 reproaching the Committee for "giving concession to the reactionary elements in London and straggling behind the petite bourgeoisie" and adding that this was also proven by the celebration of 1 December; Kardelj then went on to say: "While we do not consider the celebration of 1 December to be negative or wrong in itself, the mere fact that you were forced into it is proof that your previous political battles failed to destroy the influence of the Greater Serbian elements and conceded to them instead."<sup>361</sup> The letter also stressed that "more would need to be done to popularize the Party's stance on the

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358 *DLRS, I/111*, p. 255.

359 *DLRS, I/94*, p. 212, Poročilo CK KPS z dne 5. decembra 1941 CK KPJ.

360 *DLRS, I/78*, p. 178.

361 *DLRS, I/109*, p. 251.

right of the Slovenian nation to self-determination, including secession”, and that a “more combative stance would have to be adopted against the Greater Serbian elements that are again turning into the most reactionary and most dangerous of all such cliques, as well as against the London clergy, who are again acting as their agents and are preparing a reprise of 1918. (...) Your criticism of the London (Yugoslav) government should be more vigorous as well, as the London government has as of yet not given even a single statement that would guarantee that the Slovenian nation would have the right to self-determination.”<sup>362</sup>

Upon hearing the news of the disagreement between Tito's Partisans and Mihailović's Chetniks in Serbia, Kidrič wrote to CK KPJ saying that the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front would publish a “Magna Carta of Slovenian rights”, in which they would openly attack Miha Krek, a representative of the Slovenian People's Party (SLS) in London and the Vice-President of the Yugoslav government in emigration, and stressed the following: “a) the Slovenian nation alone shall decide its fate, its foreign relations and internal arrangements; b) the Slovenian nation generally insists on the brotherly co-existence of all Yugoslav nations, etc., while also stressing the inalienable right of self-determination, including the right of secession.”<sup>363</sup>

In line with such policy, the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front updated its programme with two additional items at its session on 21 December 1941, stating that “in light of the Slovenian national needs and the fact that the time of our national liberation is approaching, the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front adds the following to its fundamental points: “8. In accordance with the solemn proclamations made by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, the internal organization of Slovenia and its foreign relations after the national liberation will be decided by the Slovenian nation itself. The Liberation Front will enforce and protect this elementary right of the Slovenian nation by every means available.”<sup>364</sup> And in May 1942, Kidrič wrote that the Slovenian resistance movement was fighting for the liberation and self-determination of the Slovenian nation. This struggle was focused directly at the occupying forces; however, its goal – i.e. the liberation, unification and self-determination of the Slovenian nation – would not be achievable if the pre-occupation situation was re-established in any form – e.g. the Yugoslavia as recognized in the Treaty of Versailles – or if any other imperialist system of government was set up that would confine the Slovenian nation within its borders.”<sup>365</sup>

In the increasingly polarized Slovenian society, the unclear attitude of the KPS to the national framework of the United Slovenia led the Party's adversaries to publish propaganda alleging, for example, that the Slovenian Communists

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362 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

363 *DLRS, I/104*, p. 235.

364 *DLRS, I/111*, p. 256.

365 *DLRS, II/19*, p. 51.

were in favour of the Danubian Federation, that they were hostile towards Croats and Serbs, that they had surrendered Trieste (Trst), Klagenfurt (Celovec) and Maribor to Italy and Germany, which were, as the occupying forces, considered national enemies at the time. CK KPS issued a special communiqué in February 1942, renouncing these allegations as “palpable lies that can only be the product of an addled mind”.<sup>366</sup>

A speech by Alojzij Kuhar, a representative of SLS in emigration, that was broadcast by the BBC on 12 April 1942 and in which Kuhar supposedly stated “that the Liberation Front is misleading Slovenians with its unclear political concepts, while the goal of every respectable Slovenian is Yugoslavia and nothing but Yugoslavia”, received a harsh reply with the article “The Liberation Front and Yugoslavia” (“OF in Jugoslavija”) by Edvard Kocbek, the Catholic representative in the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front. Kocbek responded that “the only reason why Slovenian Londoners are charging the Liberation Front with anti-Yugoslav tendencies is because they want to reduce Yugoslavia to its past political and national form and because they only see Yugoslavia as themselves. Their selfish reasons thus lead them to opt for the past form of Yugoslavia and call it legitimate instead of joining their people and deciding on a new, revolutionary course that alone holds the promise of liberation for both Slovenians and Yugoslavia. However, while their opinion is legitimate, they conveniently forget that the reason for Yugoslavia's dissolution was precisely the Greater Serbian face of legitimacy. They conveniently forget that the hearts of patriotic Yugoslavs have by now been filled with the idea of a new Yugoslavia, cleansed of political and social parasites and included in the great Slavic bloc that will protect individual Yugoslav nations and their common political existence.”<sup>367</sup> Kocbek concluded his thoughts with the following words: “If we remain faithful to ourselves, we can achieve a great national resurrection, but if we follow Kuhar's instructions, we can only achieve a diminished Yugoslavia that will remain the sad colony it has been for the past 20 years, and within it a Slovenian sub-colony, just as the Slovenian situation has been during the period of the nation's formal freedom within Yugoslavia.”<sup>368</sup>

Following the announcement of the Twenty-Year Mutual Assistance Agreement between the United Kingdom and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in June 1942 that had a significant impact on the new views of the liberation movement regarding future international and domestic situation, the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front issued a special pronouncement

<sup>366</sup> DLRS, I/137, p. 294–296, Komunikacije CK KPS z dne 21. februarja 1942.

<sup>367</sup> Edvard Kocbek: *Osvobodilni spisi* [Liberation Texts], I. Ljubljana, 1991, pp. 94–95.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., p. 98.



stressing that the signature marked “the first agreement between two superpowers that elevates the principle of self-determination of nations to the position of the leading principle for future international relations”. The “Anglo-Soviet agreement thus represented the ultimate international affirmation of the policies of the Liberation Front”. The text continued: “They are telling you that the Liberation Front is against Yugoslavia, against Serbs and Croats. But in truth, the Liberation Front has always emphasized the need for fellowship and unity of Yugoslav nations as the unconditional principle of the common liberation struggle. The Front has stressed countless times that the Southern Slavic nations are bound by the same fate and that the organization thus believes that future national co-existence of Southern Slavic nation will certainly be realized in the form of a united country made up of these nations. Self-determination of the Slovenian nation is not contrary to a united country of Southern Slavs; however, such situation would require that the Slovenians join such country as an independent nation, taking on the responsibilities as an equal partner, consensually and voluntarily, while also asserting and preserving its rights.”<sup>369</sup> A major clarification of the Front's attitude towards Yugoslavia was brought by the July (1942) issue of *Delo*, the newsletter of CK KPS. In his article “KPS and Yugoslavia” (“KPS in Jugoslavija”), Maks Stermecki explained: “A rejection of the Yugoslavia as it recognized in the Treaty of Versailles with all its anti-popular and oppressive characteristics does not mean a renouncement of Yugoslavia in general. On the contrary, the struggle for self-determination and its realization is the only way of bringing our nation together with the Croats and the Serbs that could join them into a union of nations that the Greater Serbian bourgeoisie and other counter-popular elements were never able to achieve. That is, the acknowledgement of our nation's right to self-determination would eliminate the sense of national insignificance that has previously alienated us from other Yugoslav nations.”<sup>370</sup> Stermecki concluded his article with the following words: “Instead of the old Yugoslavia, which the people and all truly democratic elements regarded as a prison of nations, a free and democratic homeland of Southern Slavic nations will rise and satisfy all their national tendencies.”<sup>371</sup> In mid-August 1942, Slovenski poročevalec also published a reply to the allegations made by the opponents of the Partisan movement regarding the right of nations to self-determination – which was the basis for the national policy of the Communist Party and the main point of contention for these adversaries – claiming that the principle of self-determination, including the right of secession, does not immediately equal an

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369 *DLRS, II/94*. Ljubljana, 1964, p. 189.

370 *DLRS, II/156*, p. 438.

371 *Ibid.*, p. 441.

obligation to secede and that these concepts are not interchangeable.<sup>372</sup> However, in spite of this shift, Boris Zihlerl, then head of Agitprop at CK KPS, who was responsible for re-establishing connections with the “centrists” in Autumn 1942, wrote a letter to Kardelj dated 25 September 1942 wherein he remained extremely critical of the “mistakes of the ultra-leftist nature”, as he called them: “The issue of self-determination with the right to secession. In the time when the strongest unity of Yugoslav nations is being forged in our national liberation struggle, we have been far too focused on “secession”. This principle of the right of nations to secede was never explained, we never stated that the right does not mean an obligation and that we as Communists have a duty to advocate and push against the possibility that a nation would use this right when such use would be to the nation's clear detriment. In the past few months, I have initiated a new course in the SP<sup>373</sup> (...) The people immediately noticed this new course of the SP and were happy to acknowledge it.”<sup>374</sup> Zihlerl then warned Kardelj: “We have avoided giving clear and straightforward answers to a whole series of questions in which the petite bourgeoisie of Ljubljana is particularly intolerant, despite being able and obliged to do so. Our adversaries exploited our evasion and tried to cast everything in such light as to imply that we have tricks up our sleeves regarding these issues and do not want to show our true colours. We should not delude ourselves that they won over some of the undecided people exactly by doing this. One of such issues that we have danced around is the question of Yugoslavia. We had often wrote about Yugoslavia as a dead dog. We did issue a brochure – I do not know who wrote it – titled “The Liberation Front and Yugoslavia” a little over half a year ago, but I must say that the brochure did nothing to provide answers to the issue and was a classic case of beating around the bush. All this drove away numerous honest people for whom Yugoslavia remained a *conditio sine qua non*. I do not think it would be a hyperbole to claim that SP has only recently, in the past few months, began properly contrasting the old Yugoslavia and the new Yugoslavia that we are fighting for.”<sup>375</sup>

Zihlerl's text mentioned above was probably what prompted Slovenski poročevalec to publish a special issue, dated October 1942, with increasingly confident and explicit arguments against the defamations and allegations made against the Liberation Front in association with its attitude towards Yugoslavia. Among other things, the newspaper published the following: “People are quick

372 France Škerl: Jugoslovanska ideja pri Slovencih v dobi NOB do drugega zasedanja AVNOJ [The Yugoslav Idea among Slovenians in the Period of the National Liberation Struggle until the Second Meeting of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia]. *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja*, 1974, No. 1-2, p. 221.

373 *Slovenski poročevalec*, newsletter of Liberation front of the Slovenian Nation.

374 DLRS, III/111. Ljubljana, 1966, pp. 234–235.

375 Ibid.

to allege that the Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation is 'against Yugoslavia'. They base their claims on the fact that the LF has mercilessly exposed the faults of the old Yugoslavia of Versailles. (...) However, is criticism of the old Yugoslavia in fact 'anti-Yugoslav'? Is the Slovenian national programme in itself aimed against Yugoslavia? And finally: is the recognition that every nation must attain complete national freedom if it wants to enter an equal community of brotherly nations – anti-Yugoslav? Today, the LF can proudly announce that its Slovenian national programme was never opposed to the idea of a Yugoslav community built on the basis of national equality and the right of every nation to self-determination. And not only that! The LF may claim to be the only Slovenian organization that provided a programme and showed a practical way of how the Slovenian nation might achieve its sovereign national rights and, at the same time, create favourable conditions for the future symbiosis of Yugoslav nations, conditions for a new Yugoslavia based on national equality and mutual satisfaction of all its nations.”<sup>376</sup>

## II

The cited statements on the stance of the liberation movement towards Yugoslavia were typically very general and principled, generally merely responding to the allegations made by the adversaries of the Partisan movement. However, the attitude of the LF towards Yugoslavia appeared in a whole new dimension after the first AVNOJ session on 26 and 27 November 1942 in Bihać, which was organized as the supreme political expression of the unity of Yugoslav nations, which, however, Slovenian and Macedonian representatives failed to reach in time. For Kardelj, the establishment of AVNOJ, of which Slovenians learnt through Radio Svobodna Jugoslavija, was proof that “it is even now clear that Yugoslavia will be the best way for us to strengthen our international standing”, as he wrote in a letter to J. B. Tito in mid-December 1942. As Janko Pleterski wrote in the mid-1970s, Kardelj had determined that “the relationship between KPJ and Yugoslavia was the relationship between the revolution and the most promising national framework”<sup>377</sup>.

Kardelj thus immediately reacted to the Bihać session of AVNOJ, drafting a communiqué in the name of the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front by

<sup>376</sup> Škerl, *Jugoslovanska ideja pri Slovencih*, p. 221.

<sup>377</sup> Janko Pleterski: *Temelji jugoslovanske federacije* [Foundations of the Yugoslav Federation]. In: *Osvoboditev Slovenije 1945 (referati z znanstvenega posvetovanja v Ljubljani 22. in 23. decembra 1975)* [Liberation of Slovenia 1945 (papers from the scientific consultation in Ljubljana on 22 and 23 December 1975)]. Ljubljana, 1977, p. 44.

himself in which he stated that “a whole series of extremely important decisions will have to be made”. In his letter to Leskošek dated 2 December 1942, Kardelj wrote the following regarding the Bihać event: “It is clear that this is the most significant political event in Yugoslavia and a severe blow against Mihailović and the White Guard. It is extremely regrettable that we had no representatives at the session. My proposal, to be immediately announced by the Executive Committee, is as follows: we must immediately express solidarity with the assembly, otherwise Mihailović’ supporters and others will claim we have intentionally distanced ourselves and that we are ‘at the mercy of some kind of Central European Soviet Union’.”<sup>378</sup> Kardelj’s letter to J. B. Tito in mid-December 1942 had a similar emphasis: “Meanwhile, this issue (author’s note: the AVNOJ session in Bihać) is important for us from a different perspective as well: The main trump card of the reactionary elements has always been that we were supposedly against Yugoslavia and in favour of some ‘Central European Soviet republic that would enslave our nation’. As stupid as the fabrication was, it still held sway among the masses who hate Italy and Germany so much that they no longer believe things would be better in a soviet state. We have continually emphasized our position in favour of Yugoslavia. However, as we never recognized the London government – at least not in practice – we could offer no tangible proof of this. In fact, there was a widespread desire that a unified political command would be established for the whole country, which would, to a certain extent, already include elements of a new government. Bihać had thus happened at exactly the right moment for us.”<sup>379</sup>

In this regard, Kardelj’s article “Outlines of a New Yugoslavia” (“Obrisi nove Jugoslavije”) mostly stressed that the new Yugoslavia would be a state of independent nations, allowing Slovenians to achieve all national rights within its framework.<sup>380</sup> Kardelj thus focused primarily on the fundamental differences between the new and the pre-war Yugoslavia, making it clear that the new country would be established upon a different foundation than the pre-war kingdom. However, formal and legal aspects of this issue remained open.

Although comments regarding Yugoslavia and related to the establishment of AVNOJ in Bihać mainly remained at the general level, it became clear that the restoration of a united country was the clear aim of all Yugoslav nations. The Bihać session was thus the key turning point in the attitude of the Slovenian liberation movement towards Yugoslavia – since the establishment of AVNOJ we can note the continuing focus on Yugoslav tendencies that only intensified with time. At the same time, Slovenia saw the start of the process of popularization of J. B. Tito,

378 *Jesen 1942. Korespondenca Edvarda Kardelja in Borisa Kidriča* [Autumn of 1942. Correspondence between Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič]. Ljubljana, 1963, doc. 196, p. 498.

379 *Ibid.*, doc. 207, pp. 554–555.

380 Škerl, *Jugoslovanska ideja pri Slovencih*, p. 226.

who was being presented as the leader of the Yugoslav nations. From that time onward, the slogan Tito=Yugoslavia appeared with increasing frequency in the Slovenian liberation press and was more and more emphasized, soon becoming the *conditio sine qua non* of their propaganda.

With regard to this turning point, Kocbek wrote the following in his diary at the time of the Kočevje Assembly in October 1943: “We have expressed our wish to re-enter the Yugoslav community for the first time this past December when we were invited to attend the AVNOJ session in Bihać, or specifically when the Slovenian communist party decided upon the establishment of Yugoslavia as well. However, this pro-Yugoslav policy was expressed rather casually and as part of the propaganda, while the actual Yugoslav interconnections were only expressed among the communist parties of the Yugoslav nations.”<sup>381</sup>

At the time of the Bihać session, the internal organisational principles of the new Yugoslavia were, however, not yet completely clear or evident from the principles of the resistance movement. At the same time, Kardelj thus arrived at the conclusion that changes will be necessary even regarding the stance on future issues. On 4 December 1942, he therefore wrote to the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front as follows: “With regard to internal and external events, we will have to draft concrete proposals on what our future Slovenia should look like. At the moment, we really have to write about the future as much as possible. We will have to discuss the future in concrete terms and prepare some organizational measures that would allow us to realize these plans. The time has come when we will have to make plans and communicate them to the masses! In my opinion, the central task in this regard is for us to specify in detail our opinion of Yugoslavia, the London government and the constitutional assembly in Bihać. (...) This is especially important now, as the English were forced to use a radio broadcast to ask all Yugoslavs to somehow let them know how they would want Yugoslavia to be organized. As Mihailović’s supporters will undoubtedly write their statement, it is important that we also express our wishes. Please do not underestimate this issue and hurry as much as you can.”<sup>382</sup>

This was followed by a discussion among the leaders of the Yugoslav resistance movement, concerning which I would only like to point out the essence, i.e. that the proposal adopted regarding this issue was Kardelj’s and that it formed the basis of the second AVNOJ session in Jajce that culminated in the decision on the federal system in the future state.<sup>383</sup> I would also like to add that Italy’s

381 Edvard Kocbek: *Listina. Dnevniški zapiski od 3. maja do 2. decembra 1943* [Document: Journal Entries from 3 May to 2 December 1943]. Ljubljana, 1982, pp. 351–352.

382 *Jesen 1942*, doc. 201, p. 514.

383 Bojan Godeša: *Slovensko nacionalno vprašanje med drugo svetovno vojno* [Slovenian National Question during World War II]. Ljubljana, 2006, pp. 126–137.

capitulation in September (1943) along with its related events represented an important turning point of this interim period when a number of important aspects of the national question were resolved.

On 16 September 1943, the Supreme Plenum of the Liberation Front declared the annexation of the Primorska (Littoral), stating in the announcement that it declares the “annexation of Slovenian Primorje to the free and united Slovenia within the free and democratic Yugoslavia”. The assembly of representatives of the Slovenian nation, held from 1 to 3 October 1943 in the large liberated territory around Kočevje, was the culmination of the Slovenian efforts for national emancipation during the war. In his memoirs titled “Wartime”, Milovan Đilas, who attended the Kočevje Assembly as a representative of the central Yugoslav command, described the assembly as follows:

“The Slovenes, and their struggle against the invader, were something special. Yes there would have been no struggle if the leaders hadn't been convinced that they were bringing about a turning point in the national destiny such as leaders before them had only dreamed of. In no other Yugoslav land, among no other Yugoslav people, was there such keen awareness, such enthusiasm over creation of one's own state. I myself first became aware of this during the meeting of Slovenian representatives which began on October 1 in Kočevje. This gathering was more impressive than all the previous ones. The setting, the food, the decorations of the hall were all as if one conqueror hadn't ruled there till yesterday, and another still more formidable one weren't on the way. Among the 562 representatives from all parts of Slovenia, the number who were prominent in their field or occupation lent the session an extraordinarily historical significance. Kardelj and Kidrič had the principal role, which they acquired by virtue of their sacrifice and political talent. Yet no one adulated them; there was no personality cult. The cult was Slovenia itself, a unanimous surge toward statehood as the crowning fulfillment of nationalism and the beginning of socialism. When Kardelj, as chief speaker, remarked that foreign rulers referred to the Slovenes as a nation of servants, the hall murmured in the anger, only to explode with rapture when he praised the Partisans or spoke of a free Slovenia. Perhaps even more moving was the delirious unanimity of the cities, and the soldiers with wounds still fresh—all with their own little affairs, their own fears, yet fearless, surging inevitably toward a national and social ideal. The speakers and all present were caught up in a moment of immortality. Above the podium was emblazoned a quotation from Cankar, the Slovenian man of letters: “The people shall write their own destiny.” Cankar was written that before the October Revolution, when socialism was regarded as the self-assertion of a benign people following the downfall of bourgeois rule. There were very few, if any, at that gathering who didn't know from their own experience that people had to be led by an avant-garde to be a popular one, since

the people themselves were not conscious of their destiny, the ideal society. The slogan: “The people shall write their own destiny” dazzled and enthralled minds because it joined, indeed identified, the destiny of the people with the role of the party; all that we Communists were doing was in fact the destiny which the people were writing for themselves. And the slogan was all the more enthralling and prophetic in that it sprang from their own Slovenian socialist writer. The session was held at the night, because of the danger of an attack from the air. The night, and the isolation from the world outside, contributed to the self-containment of the gathering and its surge toward a single aim and unquestioned unity. No one before us Communists was ever so scientifically convinced that they were not only transforming a given state of affairs, but giving men and nations an ultimate and unalterable direction. All development and movement were seen as the self-fulfillment of the ideology and the party. To be sure, the course of life was not denied, but inasmuch as it was teleologically understood, it had to be directed, constructed. What was left for spontaneous, blind existence, but to submit to an omniscient and vital conscious? Our assemblies were even then unanimous, zealously obedient to the leaders, with a sense of historic self-awareness. Yet the assembly at Kočevje was the first to attain a total, conscious, and wanton fascination with itself, with the ideas, battles, and leaders from which it sprang.”<sup>384</sup>

On the other hand, Vladimir Dedijer, who later wrote a controversial biography of Tito, wrote a diary entry describing the assembly as follows: “Vidmar was the first to speak,<sup>385</sup> but he did not speak as well as he can. You could feel the Slovenian petit bourgeois within him – he did not even mention the struggle of other Yugoslav nations and he did not mention the army! Bevc<sup>386</sup> and Maček<sup>387</sup> were very unhappy. Democracy in the Liberation Front! Kidrič did not even go through the President’s speech. He never read his speeches before, but Vidmar, as intelligent as he might be, has really failed this time!”<sup>388</sup>

Kardelj’s speech in Kočevje was crucial for the final clarification of opinions regarding the internal organization of the united country.<sup>389</sup> Among other things,

384 Milovan Đilas: *Wartime*. New York, London, 1977, pp. 340–341.

385 Josip Vidmar, a prominent pre-war literary critic, President of the Liberation Front and the artists’ representative in the Executive Committee of the LF.

386 Edvard Kardelj’s nom de guerre.

387 Ivan Maček – Matija, member of the Politburo of the CK KPS and later the lieutenant of the Department for Protection of the People (OZN) for Slovenia.

388 Vladimir Dedijer: *Dnevnik 1941–1944: (II. knjiga): (od 28. novembra 1942 do 10. novembra 1943)*. Rijeka, 1981, p. 423.

389 Previously, the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front decided at its session of 12<sup>th</sup> September 1943 that “an opinion should be formed regarding Yugoslavia as a federal unit and AVNOJ should be declared as the government, which would resolve the issue of the London government” (*Dokumenti organov in organizacij narodnoosvobodilnega gibanja v Sloveniji* [Documents of the National Liberation Movement Authorities and Organisations in Slovenia], XI/72. Ljubljana, 2012, p. 337).

Kardelj said the following: “And there is another principle that we have to discuss loudly and clearly today. People in London keep saying: after the occupiers collapse, the Slovenian nation will be free, but it is too early to put the federal issue on the agenda. The workings of this federation, say the hypocrites in London, will be discussed and decided after the war. What this post-war discussion would look like is indicated by the fact that these reactionary gentlemen in London were never to agree even among themselves. In this regard, we are not going to tolerate any more doubts or beating around the bush. The Slovenian nation joins the future Yugoslavia on its own accord, bolstered by its right of self-determination. The federal system of the future Yugoslavia cannot be in doubt any longer, nor can the fact that the Slovenian nation will be a separate, self-governing federal unit in the future country. And if the gentlemen in London remain doubtful about this, they should be told that we have already settled this matter in a brotherly agreement with our brotherly Yugoslav nations. Our activities are based on the principles of the right to self-determination and equality in this joint Southern Slavic homeland.”<sup>390</sup>

While the Liberation Front was constantly forced to defend itself against allegations by its domestic adversaries regarding their attitude towards a Yugoslav state prior to the Bihać session of AVNOJ in November 1942, the adoption of the federal principle meant that the liberation movement went on the offensive a few months later, as evident from the quoted speech by Kardelj.

### III

The AVNOJ ordinances adopted in Jajce clarified all fundamental formal and legal issues concerning the stance of the Slovenian liberation movement towards Yugoslavia. At the meeting of the Slovenian delegation with J. B. Tito in Jajce on 1 December 1943, the leader of the Yugoslav resistance movement, who had just been pronounced Marshall upon the proposal of the Slovenian delegation, explained future policies in the following words: “Measures that might seem centralist at the moment are just a current requirement for the success of our struggle and are necessary if we want to prove the common desire for freedom of all Yugoslav nations to the world in general and the Allies in particular, and in order for us to act as a single entity for various political reasons. The English feared that we would exploit the right to self-determination given by the Atlantic Charter and that the Yugoslav nations would misinterpret this right and dissolve the country.”<sup>391</sup>

<sup>390</sup> *Zbor odposlancev slovenskega naroda v Kočevju* [Assembly of the Deputies of the Slovenian Nation in Kočevje]. Ljubljana, 1953, p. 77.

<sup>391</sup> *DOONGS, XI/93*, p. 370.



In line with Tito's statements, after the second session of AVNOJ in Jajce the emphasis on a united country intensified even further on all levels (e.g. the so-called AVNOJ Campaign<sup>392</sup>). Some new highlights could be observed in Kidrič's article "Let Us Learn from Our Southern Brothers!" ("Učimo se pri južnih bratih!") published after the return of the Slovenian delegation from Jajce: "At last let me speak about the genuine Yugoslav spirit that is so strong in the South of the country. There is no doubt that the dissolution in April and the incitement by national traitors had created terrible chaos in the South, which threatened a slaughter between Serbs and Croats that could have ended with their extinction. Today, the whole world is in awe of the national liberation movement that managed to stop the chaos and forged an unbreakable kinship and unity between Southern Slavic nations. At this point, I want to emphasize the fact that has been the most pleasant surprise of all, i.e. that the genuine Yugoslav spirit *has penetrated the consciousness of the masses in all its detail*. You can hardly find a Serb who would blame Croats for the atrocities committed by the Ustashe. You can hardly hear a chauvinist expression or profanity aimed at a person of a different Southern Slavic nationality. However, there is a strong will to learn everything and to personally apply everything good that was created by other Southern Slavic nations. Despite doing our share for the establishment of a new Yugoslavia and the fact that no one can reproach us for not being dedicated to Yugoslavia, us Slovenians have a lot to learn in this regard. We are all too focused solely on our own wartime experience, all too confined in our own little circle. It would serve us well to learn from the positive experiences of other Southern Slavic nations and apply them to ourselves. It is understandable that learning from the brotherly South during the time of old Yugoslavia was difficult and frustrating because we were used to the proponents of Greater Serbian hegemony from the South to bring us nothing but oppression. The situation today is completely different. An egalitarian Yugoslavia is being formed, and for the benefit of ourselves and this egalitarian country, we have to learn from our southern brothers as they have to learn from us."<sup>393</sup>

At the celebratory session of the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front on 27 April 1944 on the third anniversary of the LF of the Slovenian nation, Kidrič said the following: "The second thing is the experience of a destined connection of the Yugoslav nations. The Slovenian nation, vulnerable on all sides to the greed of foreign imperialism, would become its victim if it weren't for the simultaneous resistance of other Yugoslav nations. (...) today, we can enter the Yugoslav concept without worries regarding our national rights. Nowadays, we still fear the old Yugoslavia and think that a Yugoslav community represents a

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392 DOONGS, XI/94, p. 372.

393 Boris Kidrič: *Zbrana dela* [Collected Works], II. Ljubljana, 1987, pp. 341–344.

threat to the independent development of the Slovenian nation. It often happens that when we express our thoughts of liberation we do not stress enough the connection to Yugoslavia. However, we have to realize that without Yugoslavia there can be no continuation of the policies and struggles for the liberation of the Slovenian nation. Even our press does not take advantage of the successes of Yugoslav liberation movements in other parts of the country. Let the fourth year of the Liberation Front bring a greater emphasis on the Yugoslav conception based on the democratic and federal Yugoslavia.”<sup>394</sup>

It was in this period (18 April 1944) that Kardelj wrote a letter to Leskošek, in which he commented on the texts published by newspapers of the time (*Slovenski poročevalec*, *Slovenski partizan*), stating that “the press does not even make it clear that Yugoslavia exists. The newspapers are focused so exclusively on Slovenian issues that they have acquired a character of national exclusion. Do not let this continue. Please intervene at the level of editorial boards.”<sup>395</sup> A typical reflection of the post-AVNOJ mood and the efforts made for the promotion of Yugoslavia is Kidrič’s article “More Yugoslavism” (“Več jugoslovanstva”) published in Summer 1944, after the author had found himself in “isolation” for his supposedly arbitrary decisions regarding the acceptance of British loans. In the article, Kidrič criticized the “Slovenian narrow-mindedness and lack of interest in anything beyond the borders of our immediate homeland.” Kidrič warned that “our press was slow to renounce its noticeable Slovenian exclusivity, that our meetings and conferences were all too concerned with the irrelevant issues regarding the liberated and non-liberated Slovenian territory, that our masses were poorly informed and know little of the casualties and superhuman efforts, of the glorious victories and magnificent events taking place all over Yugoslavia, and that our activists are not interested in the events or developments across other countries of our Yugoslav homeland as well as elsewhere in the world, that the legal connections between the Yugoslav issues and global events remained hidden, and that they continue, to their sole detriment, to look at everything from a narrow Slovenian viewpoint.”<sup>396</sup>

This was followed by Kardelj’s intervention at the session of the CK KPS on 1 September 1944, where he determined that the issue regarding the attitude towards Yugoslavia has not been remedied and specifically stressed that this was no longer a matter of policy, as it was for a long time, but rather a matter of actually teaching the people to see things from a Yugoslav perspective.<sup>397</sup>

394 DOONGS, XI/102, p. 390.

395 *Izvori za istoriju SKJ. Dokumenti centralnih organa KPJ. NOR i revolucija 1941–1945*, XVII/25. Belgrade, 1986, p. 118.

396 Boris Kidrič: *Zbrano delo. Govori, članki in razprave 1944–1946* [Collected Works. Speeches, Articles and Discussions 1944–1946]. Ljubljana, 1959, p. 105.

397 DOONGS, XI/26, p. 162.

Let me conclude with Kidrič's comments from the session of the CK KPS on 29 March 1945, after he returned from the liberated Belgrade, when he notified the Slovenian Party leadership that they can mainly expect centralist measures in the near future, while decentralization would be carried out at a later point in time, and informed them that the main threat associated with the national question was separatism because it is most harmful to the progress.<sup>398</sup>

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398 *DOONGS*, XI/45, pp. 257–258.