

Mateja Režek\*

# Milovan Djilas and the British Labour Party, 1950–1960<sup>1</sup>

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## IZVLEČEK

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### MILOVAN ĐILAS IN BRITANSKA LABURISTIČNA STRANKA, 1950–1960

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Članek obravnava politično preobrazbo Milovana Đilasa skozi analizo njegovih stikov z britanskimi laburisti in odziv Laburistične stranke na afero Đilas. Po sporu z Informburojem so jugoslovanski voditelji skušali vzpostaviti alternativne mednarodne povezave tudi prek zahodnih socialdemokratskih in socialističnih strank, kot najprimernejši partner pa se je pokazala britanska Laburistična stranka. Uradni stiki z njo so bili vzpostavljeni leta 1950, ključno vlogo v dialogu z britanskimi laburisti pa je odigral predsednik Komisije za mednarodne odnose CK ZKJ Milovan Đilas. Po njegovi odstranitvi iz političnega življenja in obsodbi na zaporno kazen so se nekoč topli odnosi med britanskimi laburisti in jugoslovanskimi komunisti sicer ohladili, vendar vodstvo Laburistične stranke ni želelo tvegati poslabšanja odnosov z Jugoslavijo, zato se je na afero Đilas odzivalo zelo previdno. Čeprav je Jugoslavija ostajala avtoritarna država pod vodstvom komunistične partije, je v očeh Zahoda še vedno predstavljala pomemben dejavnik destabilizacije vzhodnega bloka, prijateljski odnosi med Laburistično stranko in jugoslovanskimi komunisti pa so temeljili predvsem na zunanjepolitičnih interesih obeh strani. V drugi polovici petdesetih let je pragmatični geopolitični premislek povsem prevladal nad ideološko afiniteto: zanimanje britanskih laburistov za jugoslovanski samoupravni eksperiment je občutno upadlo, zamrl pa je tudi jugoslovanski interes za demokratični socializem.

*Ključne besede:* Milovan Đilas, britanska Laburistična stranka, Aneurin Bevan, socializem, disidentstvo

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\* Senior Research Fellow, PhD, Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče Koper / Science and Research Centre Koper, Garibaldijska 1, SI-6000 Koper, mateja.rezek@zrs-kp.si

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## ABSTRACT

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*The article deals with Milovan Djilas' political transformation presented through an analysis of his connections with the British Labourites, and with the reaction of the Labour Party to the Djilas Affair. After the dispute with the Cominform, Yugoslav leaders tried to initiate alternative international contacts through Western socialist and social democratic parties, considering the most suitable partner the British Labour Party. Official contacts with the latter were established in 1950, the key role in the dialogue with the British Labourites played by the head of the Commission for International Relations, Milovan Djilas. In the aftermath of the Djilas Affair, the once warm relations between the British Labourites and Yugoslav Communists grew rather cool, but the leadership of the Labour Party did not wish to compromise their relations with Yugoslavia, and therefore reacted to it with considerable wariness. Although Yugoslavia remained an authoritarian state under the leadership of the Communist Party, in the eyes of the West it continued to represent a significant factor in the destabilisation of the Eastern Bloc, and the friendly relationship between the Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communists were primarily based on foreign policy interests of the two parties. In the second half of the 1950s, the relationship between the Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communists rested, even more than before, on pragmatic geopolitical consideration and not on ideological affinity; the interest of the British Labourites in the Yugoslav self-management experiment decreased significantly, as did the Yugoslav interest in democratic socialism.*

*Keywords: Milovan Djilas, British Labour Party, Aneurin Bevan, socialism, dissent*

Much has been written about Milovan Djilas,<sup>2</sup> much more than about the majority of Eastern European dissidents; but the question why the former Communist dogmatist and one of the closest Tito's co-workers<sup>3</sup> turned away from Communism, becoming an ardent advocate of individual liberty and political pluralism, remains in many

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- 2 Stephen Clissold, *Djilas: the Progress of a Revolutionary* (Hounslow, Middlesex: Maurice Temple Smith, 1983). Joshua Muravchik, "The Intellectual Odyssey of Milovan Djilas," *World Affairs* 145, No. 4 (1983): 323–46. Vasilije Kalezić, *Đilas, miljenik i otpadnik komunizma* (Beograd: Zodne, 1988). Momčilo Đorgović, *Đilas: vernik i jeretik* (Beograd: Akvarijus, 1989). Vladimir Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Đilas: prilozi za biografiju* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1991). Desimir Tošić, *Ko je Milovan Đilas?: disidentstvo 1953–1995* (Beograd: Otkrovenje, 2003). Mateja Režek, "Defeat of the First Party Liberalism and the Echo of 'Djiliasm' in Slovenia," *Slovene Studies* 28, No. 1–2 (2006): 67–78. Dejan Djokić, "Britain and Dissent in Tito's Yugoslavia: the Djilas Affair, ca. 1956," *European History Quarterly* 36, No. 3 (2006): 371–95. Dobrilo Armitović, *Milovan Đilas: bibliografija sa hronologijom života i rada* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2008). Slavko Goldstein, "Predgovor: Povratak Milovana Đilasa u Hrvatsku," in: *Milovan Đilas, Vlast i pobuna: memoari* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2009). Jože Pirjevec, *Tito in tovariši* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2011). Veljko Stanić, "Unutrašnji emigrant: političke ideje Milovana Đilasa 1954–1989," *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne* 6 (2014): 213–29. Aleksandar V. Miletić, "Unrealised Nordic Dream: Milovan Đilas and the Scandinavian Socialists," *Tokovi istorije* 3 (2015): 89–106. Tomaž Ivešić, "Padec Milovana Đilasa," in: *Milovan Đilas, Anatomija neke morale in 19 znamenitih člankov (oktober 1953 – januar 1954)*, ed. Tomaž Ivešić (Ljubljana: Inštitut Nove revije, 2015), 131–85. Etc.
- 3 In addition to the leader of the Party propaganda machine, Milovan Djilas, the closest circle of Tito's co-workers included the leading Party ideologist Edvard Kardelj and head of the Yugoslav repressive apparatus Aleksandar Ranković.

ways unanswered. Not infrequently has his rebellious stance been ascribed to personal grudges between Party comrades and to Djilas' fiery temper, which Vladimir Dedijer described as "a violent Dinaric type,"<sup>4</sup> yet this can only be part of the equation. The present article does not aspire to provide a comprehensive answer to this complex question; its goal is to shed light on Djilas' contacts with the British Labourites, which influenced his political transformation, and outline the reaction of the British Labour Party to the Djilas Affair.

The conflict with the Cominform was for Djilas, like for other Yugoslav leaders, a dramatic personal experience and a major political turning point. Under the weight of complete political isolation, Soviet economic blockade and threat of military intervention, Yugoslav leaders soon started turning their gaze towards the West. To ensure Western economic and military aid, they had to moderate their image and prove that Yugoslavia was different from the Soviet Union, while striving to preserve their national independence and radical ideological image. It was in this context that the idea of self-management emerged. It is impossible to claim with certainty who its original author was. In several of the editions of his memoirs, Djilas asserted that he had come to the idea himself and explained it one rainy day to Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič in a car parked in front of his villa,<sup>5</sup> whereas Tito's and Djilas' biographer Vladimir Dedijer insisted that the originator of the idea about workers' self-management was the leader of Yugoslav economic policy, Boris Kidrič.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the historical accuracy of Djilas' story about the birthplace of the idea of self-management, his memoirs clearly illustrate how decisions were made in Yugoslavia – within a closed inner circle of the Party leaders and from the top down, most often without any records. How the Yugoslav Party leadership operated in the field of ideology has been eloquently portrayed by the American historian Dennison Rusinow: "Ideology, like power, remained highly centralised, and the inner 'establishment' of Titoism in its formative years was still the small group of men, personally recruited by Tito after 1937 / ... / . They met at work and they met at play, they telephoned one another in the middle of the night, and they talked incessantly. Ideas were bounced from one to another until original authorship became undiscoverable as well as unrecorded."<sup>7</sup> Milovan Djilas, Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič were the most zealous ideological debaters, but the final decisions were made by Tito, although "he would stand aloof from these theoretical discussions: due to his overworking, hierarchical superiority, as well as non-theoretical mind-set..." as Djilas wrote.<sup>8</sup>

In 1949 and 1950, the Yugoslav leaders abandoned the rigid imitation of the Soviet system and began experimenting with new ideas. In contrast to the Eastern Bloc, where the state was growing stronger, they began to propagate Marx's thesis

4 Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Đilas*.

5 Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 296. Also Milovan Đilas, *Druženje s Titom* (Beograd: Zaslou, 1990), 57, 58. Milovan Đilas, *Pad nove klase: povest o samorazaranju komunizma* (Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, 1994), 110. Etc.

6 Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Đilas*, 384.

7 Dennison Rusinow, *The Yugoslav Experiment 1948–1974* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 49.

8 Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 296.

on the withering away of the state. They attempted to approach this ideal through the introduction of workers' self-management and social ownership, as well as decentralisation of state power. Bureaucracy was seen as the greatest enemy of socialism, which, if its wings were not clipped, would transform into a ruling social class and then inevitably lead to the establishment of state capitalism like that in the Soviet Union. The critical reflections on the Soviet system also gave rise to thoughts of separating the Communist Party from the state. At its Sixth Congress in November 1952, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) officially declared its renouncement of direct control and renamed itself the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY). Its fundamental task was defined as providing the masses with ideological guidance and education in the spirit of socialism. Surely, the early 1950s brought about some radical shifts, particularly in ideological terms, though the actual practice lagged far behind the declarative and normative standards.

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### **“The Beginning of Something Much More Lasting and Deeper”**

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Following the Tito-Stalin split, the Yugoslav leaders, eager to improve their image in the West, initiated contacts with the Western Left that could be a valuable support to their policy. Towards the end of December 1949, at the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPY, the foreign minister and leading party ideologist Edvard Kardelj announced a more “agile” foreign policy<sup>9</sup> and the intention to search for alternative international connections, including the Western socialist and social democratic parties. To this purpose, the Commission for International Relations of the Central Committee of CPY was founded. It was headed by Milovan Djilas, with Vladimir Dedijer as its Secretary.

In the Yugoslav desire to establish alternative connections, the most suitable partner both in the fields of foreign policy and ideology was Western Europe's largest social democratic party – the British Labour Party. Between 1945 and 1951, with the Labourites as the ruling party in Britain, numerous socialist reforms were carried out, particularly the nationalisation of key industries, as well as reforms of the health care and social security systems. This made the Labour Party a palatable partner to the Yugoslav leaders from an ideological point of view, although, contrary to the Yugoslav Communist Party, it swore by political pluralism, rejected Marxism and class struggle, and advocated a gradual transition into socialism.

Due to the anti-communist climate in the West, the invitation to the British Labourites to visit Yugoslavia was not extended on behalf of the Communist Party,

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<sup>9</sup> Edvard Kardelj's paper *O spoljnopolitičkim pitanjima* on the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of CPY in: *Sednice Centralnog komiteta KPJ: 1948–1952*, eds. Branko Petranović et al., (Beograd: Komunist, 1985), 469–82. See also Darko Bekić, *Jugoslavija u hladnom ratu: odnosi sa velikim silama 1949–1955* (Zagreb: Globus, 1988), 92, 93. Čedomir Štrbac, “Britanski laburisti u Jugoslaviji 1950,” in: *Jugoslovensko-britanski odnosi*, ed. Petar Kačavenda (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1988), 332, 333.

rather on behalf of the Popular Front. Between 7<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> September 1950, Yugoslav Communists in the disguise of the Popular Front hosted the first official delegation of the Labour Party, consisting of Morgan Phillips, the General Secretary of the Labour Party, Sam Watson, the Chairman of the International Committee, and Harry Earnshaw, a member of the National Executive Committee.<sup>10</sup> This was the first official visit by any Western social democratic or socialist party to Yugoslavia and it contributed appreciably to the further expansion of Yugoslav relations with the Western Left.<sup>11</sup> During their stay in Yugoslavia, the Labourites visited Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and some smaller towns. They held several meetings with Yugoslav leaders and visited factories, a copper mine, a collective farm, and even a notorious political prison in Sremska Mitrovica, where, ironically, Djilas would later be imprisoned. The Yugoslav side was represented by Milovan Djilas, Moša Pijade, Boris Kidrič and a few others. Towards the end of their visit, the Labourite delegation was received by the Yugoslav president Tito, who was at the same time President of the Popular Front and Secretary-General of the Communist Party. The discussions revolved around the liberalisation of economy, life standards, the issue of individual liberty and repressive policies, the different paths into socialism, and current foreign policy topics. They unfolded in the spirit of searching for common points, not differences, with the British guests giving plenty of leeway to their hosts. The Yugoslav side stressed their achievements, but also admitted that limitations existed, the latter blamed on Soviet remainders in domestic policy and the Soviet threat from outside. However, Djilas surprised the British visitors by the frankness with which he spoke of the recently held elections to the National Assembly. He admitted that the officially declared results did not reflect the true state of feeling within the country, since the pro-regime majority exercised a certain psychological and political pressure on the others.<sup>12</sup> These discussions with the British Labourites were characterised by a noticeable departure from the crude dogmatism of the first post-war years, but that should not be regarded as a pure pragmatic attempt on the part of the Yugoslav leaders to win the sympathies of Western Left, particularly not in Djilas' case. He noted in his memoirs that the debates with the representatives of the Labour Party were "very frank and convergent" and that "the Labourites, as well as other European socialists, were not just a transitional stage in our cooperation with the West, but an active force, and the cooperation with them plucked us from isolation, freeing us at the same time of the ideological prejudices about Communists as the sole true representatives of the working class and socialism."<sup>13</sup>

In a conversation between the representatives of the Labour Party and Tito on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1950, in which Milovan Djilas, Boris Kidrič, and Vladimir Dedijer

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10 For more details about this visit, see Štrbac, "Britanski laburisti u Jugoslaviji 1950." Aleksandar V. Miletić, "Prijem delegacije britanskih laburista kod maršala Tita u okviru njihove prve posete Jugoslaviji, 1950. godine," *Tokovi istorije* 1 (2011): 137–64.

11 Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, "The Yugoslav Communists' Special Relationship with the British Labour Party 1950–1956," *Cold War History* 14, No. 1 (2014): 36.

12 Clissold, *Djilas*, 217.

13 Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 300.

as interpreter also took part, the question about the different paths to socialism was raised. While the two sides acknowledged their respective rights to reach socialism their own way, the Labourites wished to emphasise individual liberty in this context. Sam Watson stated that the fundamental conception of the Labourites was to create a social order in which a factory worker could do his best at work and then, when he got off, be a completely free individual. When Watson challenged his Yugoslav interlocutors with the question whether they, too, wanted to follow this path, Djilas assented, saying that was the way “according to Marx.” Watson replied that they were not familiar with Marx themselves, but they did want the individual to be free “to criticise or cheer for whomever they choose,”<sup>14</sup> thereby underlining the Labourites’ commitment to parliamentary democracy. Morgan Phillips added that although the Labourites might not proceed from Marxism, that did not mean they knew nothing about it, as there were several ministers in the British government who had studied Marx. Watson then reiterated: “The only way, and I say this as an old worker (he used to work as a blaster in a coal mine – note by M. R.), is to give people maximum freedom, because no initiative can develop without that.”<sup>15</sup> This time, the call to confrontation was answered by Tito, who stressed that Yugoslavia was still insufficiently developed for that: “Up until recently, we lived in the very harsh conditions of a backward Balkan country. Freedom cannot be measured the same way in a developed country and in a backward country, where all possible instincts are present. It is precisely this backwardness that often, even against our will, imposes on us a certain brutality, brutality from our standpoint. Which is nevertheless necessary! I regard the whole country as a sort of school, and school requires a minimum of discipline. We re-educate people in it.”<sup>16</sup> Later on, Phillips pointed out the specific revolutionary experience of Yugoslavia’s coming out of a liberation war, which was hardly reproducible in any European country, but could set an example for Asian countries liberating themselves from imperialist domination.<sup>17</sup> This way he exhorted the Yugoslav leaders quite directly to cooperate with the “Third World.” Despite ideological differences between the Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communist Party or Popular Front, the conversation proceeded in the spirit of mutual understanding and collaboration. In the end, Watson emphasised in his toast that the British side would do everything to help Yugoslavia and that they appreciated their hosts treating them as “intelligent human beings” and not hiding their difficulties from them.<sup>18</sup>

But the Labourites had no illusions about the Yugoslav regime. In his confidential report to the Executive Committee of the Labour Party about the visit to Yugoslavia, Morgan Phillips wrote that the Yugoslav leadership, with Tito at its head, were “100% communists” and that Yugoslavia was a communist country, but anyone who thought

14 The transcript of the conversation between Tito and the representatives of the Labour Party is published in its entirety as a supplement to the article: Miletić, “Prijem delegacije britanskih laburista,” 157.

15 *Ibid.*, 158.

16 *Ibid.*, 159.

17 *Ibid.*, 159, 160.

18 *Ibid.*, 162.

that this regime could be replaced by a parliamentary democracy modelled after the Western example, was sadly mistaken – at best, it could be replaced by a “Cominformist communist party.” He declared Yugoslavia “a police state” that was nevertheless quite distinct from the Soviet Union in terms of the freedom of expression and the privileges of the Party elite. He stressed that there were indeed fundamental differences in ideology and practice between the two parties, but that “Yugoslavia might prove to be an interesting experiment that could, if it succeeded along the lines which it seems to be developing, have an influence on other nations.”<sup>19</sup>

The British guests were rather impressed by the Yugoslav hosts and invited them to visit Britain. The President of the Commission for International Relations Milovan Djilas and its Secretary Vladimir Dedijer, also in the role of interpreter, travelled to London in January 1951. The real purpose behind this trip was a Yugoslav request for arms from the British government. Djilas was entrusted with the task of confidentially and personally communicating this request to the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee. He promised that it would be dealt with sympathetically,<sup>20</sup> and indeed, Yugoslavia received the requested support.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Djilas held a lecture at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) about Yugoslav-Soviet relations, which encountered a positive reception in the audience and in the media. On 4<sup>th</sup> February, *The Observer* wrote that Djilas views were more pre-Bolshevik Marxist than Leninist.<sup>22</sup>

Djilas' visit to Britain was not only important from a military-diplomatic perspective, but also in light of Djilas' later dissent. There he met the leaders of both the Labour and the Conservative Parties, including Winston Churchill. But crucial for him was the encounter with the then Minister for Health in the Labourite government, Aneurin Bevan, leader of the left-wing of the Labour Party, the so-called “Bevanites”. Djilas met him on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1951 at a dinner organised by Prime Minister Attlee at Downing Street.<sup>23</sup> Later he wrote that he found Bevan to be “a dynamic personality, with a lively, unconventional mind,” and was most impressed by his “perspicacious line of thought and the concurrent stubborn, original and popular faith in socialism.”<sup>24</sup> Djilas was also otherwise quite enthusiastic about what he saw in Britain. Returning from London, he and Dedijer stopped in Paris, where Dedijer told the American journalist C. L. Sulzberger that Djilas was impressed with Great Britain and that he had found the workers' unions there to be a lot less bureaucratized than the ones in Yugoslavia.<sup>25</sup>

In April 1951, Bevan resigned from the position of the Minister for Health following the introduction of prescription charges to help finance the Korean War. Three

19 Štrbac, “Britanski laburisti u Jugoslaviji 1950,” 339, 340.

20 Clissold, *Djilas*, 217, 218. Bekić, *Jugoslavija u hladnom ratu*, 250. Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 301. Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Đilas*, 360.

21 For more details about Western support in arms, see Ivan Laković, *Zapadna vojna pomoć Jugoslaviji 1951–1958* (Podgorica: Istorijski institut Crne Gore, 2006).

22 Tošić, *Ko je Milovan Đilas*, 28.

23 Clissold, *Djilas*, 219. Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Đilas*, 364.

24 Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 302, 348.

25 Bekić, *Jugoslavija u hladnom ratu*, 251.

months later he accepted an invitation to visit Yugoslavia, where he arrived together with his wife, Jennie Lee, also a prominent Labourite and a Member of Parliament. Their host Milovan Djilas welcomed them in Belgrade and joined them on their visit to Tito in the Brijuni Islands. The British guests spent their vacations immersed in political debates with their hosts in the relaxed atmosphere at the Adriatic coast. Bevan's biographer Michael Foot wrote that they had come away "with indelible memories of the special qualities of Yugoslav bravery, of their absolute resolve to resist Soviet encroachment, of the greatness of Tito, and with another possession more peculiar to Jennie and himself – an immediately established affinity with Milovan Djilas."<sup>26</sup> The socialising brought forth a friendship and a cross-fertilisation of ideas between the Bevan and Djilas, both corroborated by their correspondence. Soon after the Bevan returned to Britain, Djilas wrote to them: "It is understandable that – in different countries under different conditions – identical or similar viewpoints are being born. / ... / I think that the personal relationship established between both of you and ourselves is only *the beginning of something much more lasting and deeper* (emphasis by M. R.), the beginning of that unbreakable link between people who through different methods and even from different ideological positions truly fight for freedom."<sup>27</sup> Djilas and Bevan were not only similar in their political outlooks, but also in character. "They were both poets, romantics, unrestrainable individualists, strong unpredictable mountain types", noted Jennie Lee.<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Dedijer described them in much the same way, when he wrote that Bevan was known for his short temper, and that he, like Djilas, could be very charming, but would sometimes have sharp outbursts, so his wife labelled him "a violent Welsh type."<sup>29</sup>

Djilas only later became aware of the divide between Bevan's way of thinking and his own, which originated in the different social realities of Yugoslavia and Britain. In his book *The Unperfect Society* Djilas described his conversation with Bevan and Jennie Lee in the summer of 1953 in Montenegro, which was focused on the issue of how to merge socialism and traditional political liberties. When Djilas suggested the answer could be workers' self-management, Bevan exclaimed: mixed economy. He believed that Britain should only nationalise the industries that would become more efficient if nationalised, while leaving the others in private hands, and that this way the British parliamentarism would not be weakened. "There was something in this Bevan's thought that linked up with my later realisations," wrote Djilas three decades later, "namely, that the impasse and limitedness in Communism, the impracticability of reforms in it, actually derive from the type of ownership, which is social or state in form and interiorised and absolutized as such, though in reality it is managed and commanded by Party bureaucracy through state and economic organs."<sup>30</sup>

26 Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: A Biography, Vol. 2: 1945–1960* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1973), 347. Clissold, *Djilas*, 220, 221.

27 Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, 348. Clissold, *Djilas*, 220, 221.

28 Clissold, *Djilas*, 219.

29 Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Đilas*, 377.

30 Milovan Đilas, *Nesavršeno društvo: (i dalje od Nove klase)* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1990), 115.



In 1952, Bevan published his first actual book, *In Place of Fear*, which in Britain became almost synonymous with all that the welfare state stood for and what it sought to achieve. By 1952, a consensus had formed in Britain that it was possible to create a society where all could live without the fear of being hungry, poorly housed, or of living with or dying in great pain – hence its title. In the book, Bevan presented his political views, including those regarding National Health Service, which he had established as the Minister for Health in the first post-war years. The writing is also somewhat autobiographical, as through Bevan's reflections on politics we retrace his path from a Welsh miner to a minister in the Labourite government. Interestingly, though not surprisingly given the Yugoslav political atmosphere in 1952, the publication of his book in Britain was immediately followed by a Serbian-language edition published in Yugoslavia.<sup>31</sup>

In February 1953, the Labour Party sent their delegation to the Fourth Congress of the Popular Front, which on that occasion changed its name to the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia (SAWPY). The latter was supposed to take over from the Party the task of managing current policies, while the Party would mostly focus on ideological issues. Yugoslav leaders even went as far as trying to make the Socialist Alliance a member of the Socialist International, but nothing ever came of these endeavours. As Western socialists and social democrats saw in the Socialist Alliance merely a transmission of the Communist Party, much like they did in their predecessor, the Popular Front, they rejected its affiliation to the Socialist International.<sup>32</sup> The greatest obstacle for establishing even closer relations with the Western Left was the Yugoslav single-party system. Clement Attlee, who visited Yugoslavia in August 1953, announced that the Socialist Alliance would not become a member of the Socialist International as long as Yugoslavia preserved its one-party system. He said: "With no opposition parties, the political life is dull, futile. It's a one-horse race," adding: "In Britain, I am the leader of the opposition, while here I am trying in vain to find a counterpart."<sup>33</sup>

Aneurin Bevan, who had a serious inter-party dispute with Attlee, was visiting Yugoslavia at the same time, so his host Djilas made sure the two never crossed paths. Upon Bevan's wish to visit "authentic people" and backward areas, Djilas took him and his wife to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Montenegro. Later he wrote: "I bid my farewell from the Bevan's in Cetinje, from where Dedijer accompanied them to see Tito: never did I suspect that that would be my last encounter with Nye – the discontinuation of selfless joint searches in socialism from two far ends of Europe, two different cultures and different experience."<sup>34</sup>

During the first half of the 1950s, Djilas would slowly grow disillusioned with Communism. He believed that the class struggle was over and that the principal enemy of socialism in Yugoslavia was no longer the bourgeoisie, but bureaucracy, and that Yugoslavia should proceed towards democratic socialism. Contrary to Djilas, in

31 Aneurin Bevan, *Umesto straha* (Beograd: Biblioteka Trideset dana, 1952).

32 Mateja Režek, *Med resničnostjo in iluzijo: slovenska in jugoslovanska politika v desetletju po sporu z Informbirojem (1948–1958)* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2005), 56, 57.

33 Ibid., 57, 58.

34 Dilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 348.

the mid-1953, the Yugoslav Party leadership adopted the opinion of the advocates of strong-arm politics, who saw in political liberalisation the beginning of the end of the Party's rule. This political shift was triggered not only by Stalin's death in March 1953 and by the prospects of a warming in relations with the Soviet Union, but also by Tito's perception that the power of the Communist Party had weakened. The often inconsistent directives from above led to confusion and lack of discipline among Party members, which resulted in apathy and public discussions on current policy as well as in the emergence of opinions that were not always in accord with the views of the Party leadership, at least its majority. In mid-June 1953, Tito called a Central Committee Plenum in Brijuni Islands and made clear that the leading role of the Party was to be reasserted. Djilas was not prepared to accept this about face. In the autumn and winter of 1953/54, he wrote several articles for the newspaper *Borba* calling for greater democratization of Yugoslav political life, attacking the bureaucracy, and making quite clear that the Party as it was had to go. He concluded his last article *League or Party* with the thought that the Leninist Party and State were obsolete and that at the current stage of development only reforms and evolution could be constructive.<sup>35</sup> He crowned his series of articles in *Borba* with the piece *Anatomy of a Moral*, which he published in the magazine *Nova misao* and in which he rebuked the morality of the political elite and inflamed the already smouldering personal grudges among Party leaders.

At the Third Plenum of the Central Committee on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954, Djilas was accused of violation of party discipline, revisionism, "Bernsteinism," social democratic deviations, and bourgeois liberalism. All the members of the Central Committee, with the exception of Vladimir Dedijer and Djilas' former wife Mitra Mitrović, joined in the accusations, and the Serbian Party leader Petar Stambolić even reproached Djilas with having fallen under Bevan's influence. Djilas was excluded from the Central Committee and stripped of all political functions, and later he resigned from the Party. In January 1955, criminal proceedings were initiated against him because of an interview he had given to *The New York Times*, in which he openly criticised the Yugoslav system and advocated political pluralism. He was given an 18-month suspended sentence, but then in December 1956 he was sentenced to 3 years of imprisonment for his article in the American leftist periodical *The New Leader* and his statement to the French press agency criticising Yugoslav apparent neutrality during the Hungarian Uprising. In October 1957, seven years of imprisonment were added to his sentence because of the book *The New Class*, a powerful critique of communist elite that made Djilas the most significant Eastern European dissident. He earned an additional five years in prison in 1962 with the book *Conversations with Stalin* and by 1966, when he was released from prison, he had served a total of nine years.

35 Milovan Dilas, "Zveza ali partija," *Ljudska pravica-Borba*, 4. 1. 1954, 2, 3.

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## British Labourites and the Djilas Affair

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Djilas' political downfall somewhat complicated the relationships between the British Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communists. The Labour Party did not protest to the Yugoslav authorities about it, but the reproach made at the Third Plenum in January 1954, that Djilas was under Bevan's influence, did not pass unnoticed. A few days after the Plenum, on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1954, Bevan wrote to Tito that he was surprised by what had happened as "nothing that I saw or was told when I visited Yugoslavia in August prepared me for these calamitous events." He underlined that he had no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of another country, but "some remarks which have fallen from people of high position in your country have suggested that I have had a bad influence on Milovan's political outlook, and that our friendship has had something to do with his recent attitude. This does little credit to Milovan's robust character and mental poise and I dismiss it as merely the rancour of political controversy."<sup>36</sup> He concluded the letter saying that his only interest was the welfare of Djilas and Dedijer, who initially took Djilas' side.

Tito answered Bevan that during the discussion his name had only been mentioned once and that he was sorry it garnered such publicity, "because we do not believe that you exercised any influence upon Djilas as regards the road upon which he had embarked, i.e., the road of anarchist conceptions, because we know you as a realistic political worker." He added that Djilas had been relieved of all political functions, but was ensured the economic safety befitting a high official and his personal freedom was not curtailed. He was still a member of the Communist Party and could reflect and correct his "erroneous conceptions". "It is entirely and solely up to him," concluded Tito his letter to Bevan.<sup>37</sup>

Djilas himself denied that Bevan had influenced his political stance,<sup>38</sup> but his former colleagues thought otherwise. Edvard Kardelj, who found himself in the role of chief prosecutor against Djilas at the Third Plenum, later told Dedijer that in the summer of 1953 Djilas had tried to persuade him that it was necessary to establish a second political party in Yugoslavia: "At that time, Bevan was visiting in our country. He must have greatly influenced Djilas, although not directly, rather implanting in his mind certain ideas. Djilas reflected about what Bevan had told him and started putting forward suggestions that a labour party should be founded in Yugoslavia. I told him I would not relate a word about this to Tito – although I should – nor would I inform the Politburo, as I hoped he would renounce such ideas. But he continued to spread these suggestions despite our conversation, so in the end, we were forced to discuss the case in the Politburo."<sup>39</sup> Up to 1953, there had been little divergence between Kardelj's and Djilas' theoretical views of the development of Yugoslav socialism, as foreign observers could

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<sup>36</sup> Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, 420.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>38</sup> Dilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 348.

<sup>39</sup> Dedijer, *Veliki buntovnik Milovan Dilas*, 377.

also support. The British ambassador Frank Roberts wrote as late as January 1955 that with regard to theory, he found no major differences between Djilas and Kardelj – “the real distinction is in that Djilas wants this theory to finally come to life in practice, whereas Kardelj insists on the preservation, for a while at least, of a single-party system, in the circumstances of which self-management institutions are now little more than pretentiousness” – while also pointing out the danger of left-wing or right-wing despotism should the bourgeois ideas of democracy be freely allowed into the state.<sup>40</sup>

As a result of internal and foreign policy situation, the retaliation against Djilas and the so-called “Djilasites” in 1954 was relatively mild. Tito wanted to silence and isolate him, not turn him into a victim and martyr. Also, he did not want to lose the favour of the West, which had been watching with suspicion Yugoslavia flirt with the Soviet Union for a while now. After Stalin’s death, the relationship between the two countries had been gradually improving, although Yugoslavia insisted on paving its own way into socialism. During the talks on reconciliation, the Soviet side even proposed that the blame for the Soviet-Yugoslav dispute should be pinned on Milovan Djilas and Lavrentiy Beria,<sup>41</sup> the former head of the Soviet secret police, executed in December 1953, but Tito strongly rejected the Soviet suggestion since it would negate the significance of Yugoslavia’s resistance against Stalin. During 1955 and 1956 the Soviet-Yugoslav relations were completely restored, first at the state and then at the Party level. The relationship between the two countries was more or less stable from then on, although severely wavering on occasion: first as early as the end of 1956 due to Tito’s public criticism of the first Soviet intervention in Hungary.<sup>42</sup>

Since the West was not willing to risk deterioration in the relationship with Yugoslavia, Western leaders were initially very cautious in their reaction to Djilas’ political downfall. Any irrational decision or behaviour could, in fact, push Yugoslavia to an even closer cooperation with the Soviet Union or even back inside the Soviet sphere of influence. The greatest problem therefore, at least at the beginning, for both the Yugoslav and Western authorities, was the Western media, which displayed considerable interest in Djilas’ case. In this context, the new British ambassador in Belgrade, Frank Roberts, made the assessment towards the end of 1954 that the Djilas Affair would not affect the relations between Yugoslavia and the West “unless the Western media continue to take so much interest in it to make the already irritable Yugoslav sense of independence reach a touchy point.”<sup>43</sup> In its dealings with Yugoslavia, the British conservative government gave precedence to political realism and pragmatism and never protested to the Yugoslav authorities with regard to the Djilas Affair. Also telling was the fact that the leading pro-Labour newspaper, *The Daily Herald*,

40 Katarina Spehnjak, “Velika Britanija i ‘slučaj Đilas’ 1954,” in: *Spoljna politika Jugoslavije 1950–1961: zbornik radova*, ed. Slobodan Selinić (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2008), 360.

41 Bekić, *Jugoslavija u hladnom ratu*, 582. See also Andrej Edemskii, “The Role of Milovan Djilas in Soviet-Yugoslav Relations 1944–1954,” in: *The Balkans in the Cold War: Balkan Federations, Cominform, Yugoslav-Soviet Conflict*, ed. Vojislav G. Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2011).

42 For more, see Mateja Režek, “Vročica jesen 1956: sueška kriza, mađarska vstaja in vloga Jugoslavije,” *Annales, Series historia et sociologia* 24, No. 4 (2014): 609, 610.

43 Spehnjak, “Velika Britanija i ‘slučaj Đilas’ 1954,” 355.

never published any of Djilas' articles, despite the promise of Ernest Davies, a Labour Member of Parliament and former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who visited Djilas in Belgrade in 1954. In his memoirs, Djilas considered this as evidence of opportunism on the part of the Labour Party leadership in its relations with Tito.<sup>44</sup> Also, in 1954, the leadership of the Fabian Society, the oldest socialist organisation in Britain and a sort of think tank of the Labour Party, expressed through the Yugoslav embassy in London a wish to hold its summer school in Yugoslavia. The event was organised in cooperation with the SAWPY Commission for International Issues, headed by Marija Vilfan, and the summer school was successfully carried out from the end of August to mid-September 1955 on the Red Island (Crveni otok) near Rovinj.<sup>45</sup>

More resolution about the conduct of the Yugoslav authorities towards their friend was demonstrated by Aneurin Bevan and Jennie Lee. After Djilas' incarceration in December 1956 and the extension of the term of imprisonment the following year due to his publication of *The New Class* in the United States, the Bevans made consistent efforts to have him released. Djilas experienced Bevan's death in 1960 "as a loss of a closest friend," later dedicating his classic work *Conversations with Stalin* to him.<sup>46</sup>

In the spring of 1956, Morgan Phillips, General Secretary of the Labour Party and president of the Socialist International, interceded with Tito on behalf of Djilas in a private and confidential letter in which he protested against the way the Yugoslav authorities treated Djilas. He had been prompted to do this by Djilas himself, when on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1956 he sent Phillips a letter through secret channels, describing his situation, which had worsened appreciably after the suspended sentence in January 1955: he was kept in complete isolation, having his services pension withheld, while the members of his family and the friends who had not severed their contacts with him were pressured, as well. Djilas and his family lived on his wife's salary in a relatively comfortable apartment in Belgrade, but Djilas had been informed a short time before that they would have to move into a smaller apartment. Also, he suspected that his home was wired and that all his mail was screened. In the conclusion of the letter he stressed that he was writing "to acquaint you with the truth, hoping for your moral support" and not to seek intervention to his benefit or an offer of material assistance.<sup>47</sup>

Some days later, on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1956, Phillips wrote to Tito that the Labourites had felt relieved in learning about Djilas' suspended sentence, but that the subsequent conduct of the Yugoslav authorities towards Djilas brought them to realise that their relief had been misplaced. He proceeded to list the discriminatory measures used by the Yugoslav authorities against Djilas and ended the letter saying: "I must confess that I am appalled that the country which in 1950 I supported in articles and public speaking, and in private documents to the then Foreign Secretary of our own government

44 Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 388.

45 AJ 507, IX, 133/II-79, Komisija za međunarodne odnose i veze CK SKJ, Fabijanska škola na Crvenom otoku kod Rovinja, 29. 8.–12. 9. 1955.

46 Đilas, *Vlast i pobuna*, 349.

47 Djokić, "Britain and Dissent in Tito's Yugoslavia," 385–87.

– Ernest Bevin – should have slipped back into the evil ways of the Cominform countries. I do not know whether this is related to what appears to be a shift in the foreign policy of your country – that, however, is not my business. I am only concerned with the human aspect of administration, and I still hope that you can in your relation with individuals demonstrate to the world the fundamental superiority of a socialist system of society.<sup>48</sup>

Phillips did not hide his disappointment over the Yugoslav political shift towards the Soviet Union and his writing also revealed that he had a thorough knowledge of Djilas' situation. Despite the letter being private and secret, it must have quite angered Tito. Contrary to Tito's confidential and conciliatory reply to Bevan in February 1954, the Yugoslav authorities responded publicly this time – with an article officially authored by the new head of the Commission for International Relations, Veljko Vlahović, published in *Borba* on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1956. While Phillips' letter focussed on the mistreatment that Djilas was subjected to by the Yugoslav authorities, the Yugoslav reply contained hardly any mention of him. The object of the article was to discredit Phillips as an irresponsible, uninformed and malicious person with a rather poor understanding of Yugoslav socialism and international politics. Apparently, the Yugoslav leadership was most annoyed by Phillips linking the actions of their authorities against Djilas with their shift towards the Soviet Union. In the reply they also rebuked the British for their imperialism, recommending to the Labourites that they concentrate on the conduct of the British government in Cyprus and Kenya instead of interfering with Yugoslav internal affairs.<sup>49</sup>

The British Conservative government was anything but pleased with Phillips' protest letter to Tito. It had followed the Djilas' case primarily from the perspective of international relations and only started paying more attention to the Yugoslav dissident after his imprisonment at the end of 1956.<sup>50</sup> Speculations surfaced in the foreign press that Djilas' arrest might have been an attempt by the Yugoslav authorities to appease the Soviet Union. The truth is, their reckoning with Djilas had far more to do with internal than foreign affairs. Aware of the dissatisfaction of the population with living conditions, the Yugoslav leaders were afraid of the repetition of Hungarian events in Yugoslavia, so they decided to get Djilas out of their way before he turned into a Yugoslav Imre Nagy. By declaring in his article in *The New Leader* that the Yugoslav "national Communism" was incapable of carrying out reforms, and with his interview for the French press agency, in which he condemned the Yugoslav reserved policy towards the Hungarian Uprising, Djilas unintentionally made that easier for them.

After the sharp Yugoslav response to Phillips's intervention, Hugh Gaitskell, the new leader of the Labour Party and a prominent right-winger, postponed his visit to Yugoslavia in mid-1956,<sup>51</sup> though, due to complex international developments that year, he changed his mind and stressed the need to repair relations with Yugoslavia.

48 Ibid., 388.

49 Ibid., 376.

50 Ibid., 382.

51 Unkovski-Korica, "The Yugoslav Communists' Special Relationship with the British Labour Party," 41.

Although the latter remained an authoritarian, single-party state, it still represented a potentially important factor in the destabilisation of the Eastern Bloc, especially when the Yugoslav leaders faced renewed criticism from the Soviet Union after the Hungarian Uprising. The Yugoslavs, on the other hand, found convenient the Labourites' opposition to the Anglo-French-Israeli military action against Egypt after Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal.<sup>52</sup> Pragmatic common interests in foreign policy ensured the continuing friendship between the Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communists, and the reconciliation persisted despite some fundamental ideological disagreements between the two parties.

As an illustration of the depth of these divergences, let us examine more thoroughly the talks held during the visit of a delegation of the British Labour Party to Yugoslavia in 1960. Towards the end of August of that year, the highest representatives of the Labour Party, Hugh Gaitskell, Sam Watson, foreign policy adviser to the Labour Party Denis Healey, and secretary to its international department David Ennals, met in Ljubljana and Bled with Yugoslav leaders Edvard Kardelj, Vladimir Bakarić, Milentije Popović, Mika Špiljak, Miha Marinko, and Vida Tomšič, who again appeared on behalf of the Socialist Alliance. For the greater part the talks were focused on foreign policy, particularly on the issues of the arms race, Soviet policy, the Sino-Soviet conflict, the German question, and other current international policy issues of the time. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the Yugoslav internal situation, prompting the Labourites to raise some provocative questions with their hosts, aimed at understanding the actual nature of the relationship between the Socialist Alliance and the Communist Party, as well as that between the Federal Assembly and Government, the functioning of workers' self-management, the system of economic planning, the responsibilities of the local authorities, the limitations on the freedom of speech, etc. During the conversation, Gaitskell repeatedly expressed his disagreement with the absence of political opposition in Yugoslavia and disapproval of the Yugoslav voting system, and considered the announced expansion of the decentralisation of power as well as of the competence of workers' councils and self-management in communes nonviable, impractical and, in the event of their hypothetical translation into practice, as leading to localism and anarchy.<sup>53</sup>

At the end of the discussion, Gaitskell opened the Djilas' case. Kardelj argued that Djilas was an ambitious and power-hungry man whose actions practically forced the authorities to imprison him. Gaitskell kept pushing, stating that it was the Djilas' case that caused the deterioration of the relations between the Labour Party and Yugoslavia and saying he wanted to overcome that, but needed clear answers to do so. He also asked Kardelj what would have happened in Yugoslavia if Djilas had not been imprisoned. Kardelj's reply was that it would have aggravated the internal political situation and could have led to "an intervention from outside, / ... / because the

52 Ibid., 43.

53 AJ 507, IX, 133/II-247, Komisija za mednarodne odnose i veze CK SKJ, Stenografski zapisnik razgovora izmedju jugoslovenskih funkcionera SZDLJ i delegacije britanskih laburista u Ljubljani i na Bledu, 22.-23. 8. 1960, Zabeleška o razgovorima izmedju pretstavnika SSRNJ i Laburističke partije Velike Britanije, 22.-23. 8. 1960.

door to a discussion about the most various controversial political issues would have been opened”,<sup>54</sup> adding that time had proved them right, not Djilas. The Labourites insisted that the Djilas’ case was a matter of principle in relation to which the right and left wings of the Labour Party held the same position – that it was unacceptable to imprison a person because of his conviction or because he publicly expressed an opinion that was opposed to the views of the ruling party. Despite political and ideological divergences, the debate ended in friendly and conciliatory tones, and with a conclusion that although the perspectives of the two sides differed in many ways, there still existed a common interest that warranted further cooperation between the parties, particularly in the field of foreign policy.

The Djilas Affair somewhat cooled the once warm relationship between the British Labour Party and Yugoslav Communists, but the Labourites would not take the risk of having their relations with Yugoslavia deteriorate for Djilas’ sake. With regard to his case, there were no major differences in the positions of the left and right wings of the Labour Party: Aneurin Bevan and Jennie Lee, Djilas’ staunchest supporters, were in the left faction, and Morgan Phillips was not. Certain more prominent left-wing members even openly criticised Djilas and his work; for example, Barbara Castle and Richard Crossman, who had a very negative opinion of *The New Class*.<sup>55</sup> But regardless of the different personal views of Djilas, restricting the freedom of expression and incarcerating dissenters was unacceptable to all. Yet the leadership of the Labour Party never went further than standing by the private protests such as those of Bevan in 1954 and Phillips in 1956.

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<sup>54</sup> AJ 507, IX, 133/II-247, Komisija za međunarodne odnose i veze CK SKJ, Stenografski zapisnik razgovora između jugoslovenskih funkcionera SZDLJ i delegacije britanskih laburista u Ljubljani i na Bledu, 22.–23. 8. 1960, 119.

<sup>55</sup> Djokić, “Britain and Dissent in Tito’s Yugoslavia,” 383.



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Mateja Režek

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**MILOVAN DJILAS AND THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY,  
1950–1960**

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SUMMARY

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After the conflict with the Cominform in 1948, Yugoslav leaders began to search for alternative international connections in the West. In this context, they tried to restore their own credibility in the eyes of the Western socialist and social democratic parties, whereby the most powerful Western European social democratic party, the British Labour Party, proved to be the most suitable partner both in the fields of foreign policy and ideology. Official contacts between the Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communists in the disguise of the Popular Front, later the Socialist Alliance of the Working People, were established in 1950, which was followed by a brief, but vivacious period of exchange of ideas and views on the development of socialism in the early 1950s. Discussions between Yugoslav leaders and the British Labourites showed a considerable deviation of Yugoslav politics from the crude dogmatism of the early post-war years, but that should not be regarded only as a pragmatic attempt of the Yugoslav leaders to gain sympathies of the Western Left, certainly not in the case of Milovan Djilas. As President of the Commission for International Relations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Djilas played a key role in the dialogue with the British Labourites, and through personal meetings and correspondence, he and the leader of the left-wing of the Labour Party, Aneurin Bevan, formed a personal friendship.

In the first half of the 1950s, Djilas' illusions about the communist ideology and the Yugoslav socialism were gradually dispelled, and he became increasingly enthusiastic about democratic socialism. When, after Stalin's death in 1953, the top leadership of the Yugoslav Party experienced the prevailing influence of those who advocated hard-line policies and saw political liberalisation as the beginning of the end of the Communist Party rule, Djilas was not ready to accept the return to the old path. In a series of articles published in the autumn and winter of 1953/54, he denied the Communist Party no less than the right to a political monopoly, and what is more, he criticised the moral values of the political elite. Due to his views, he was excluded from the Central Committee in January 1954 and stripped of all political functions, and later he spent nine years in prison because of his dissident posture and the publication of books abroad.

After Djilas' political downfall, once warm relations between the British Labourites and the Yugoslav Communists grew considerably cold, but the leadership of the Labour Party did not want to risk the deterioration of relations with Yugoslavia, and therefore responded with great care when it came to the behaviour of the Yugoslav

authorities towards Djilas. Nevertheless, Aneurin Bevan, his wife Jennie Lee, and Secretary General of the Labour Party Morgan Phillips, who was at the same time President of the Socialist International, were more determined, although none of them went further than trying to act through personal correspondence with Tito. Although Yugoslavia remained an authoritarian state under the leadership of the Communist Party, in the eyes of the West it continued to represent a significant factor in the destabilisation of the Eastern Bloc, and the friendly relationship between the Labour Party and the Yugoslav Communists were primarily based on foreign policy interests of the two parties. In the second half of the 1950s, a pragmatic geopolitical consideration completely overshadowed ideological affinity; the interest of the British Labourites in the Yugoslav self-management experiment decreased significantly, as did the Yugoslav interest in democratic socialism, the idea that Djilas was so passionate about.

**Mateja Režek**

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## **MILOVAN ĐILAS IN BRITANSKA LABURISTIČNA STRANKA, 1950–1960**

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### **POVZETEK**

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Po sporu z Informbirojem leta 1948 so jugoslovanski voditelji začeli iskati alternativne mednarodnopolitične povezave na Zahodu. V tem kontekstu so si skušali povrniti tudi verodostojnost v očeh zahodnih socialističnih in socialdemokratskih strank, pri čemer se je tako s političnega kot ideološkega vidika kot najprimernejši partner pokazala najmočnejša zahodnoevropska socialdemokratska stranka – britanska Laburistična stranka, ki je bila takrat tudi vladna stranka v Veliki Britaniji. Uradni stiki med Laburistično stranko in jugoslovanskimi komunisti v preobleki Ljudske fronte, kasneje Socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva, so bili vzpostavljeni leta 1950, čemur je v začetku petdesetih let sledilo kratko, a živahno obdobje izmenjave idej in pogledov na razvoj socializma. Razprave jugoslovanskih voditeljev z britanskimi laburisti so kazale na precejšen odmik jugoslovanske politike od surovega dogmatizma prvih povojnih let, česar ne moremo pripisati zgolj pragmatičnim prizadevanjem jugoslovanskih voditeljev, da bi si pridobili simpatije zahodne levice, zagotovo ne v primeru Milovana Đilasa. Ta je kot predsednik Komisije za mednarodne odnose CK ZKJ odigral ključno vlogo v dialogu z britanskimi laburisti, skozi medsebojna srečanja in dopisovanja pa se je med njim in voditeljem levega krila Laburistične stranke Aneurinom Bevanom stkalo tudi osebno prijateljstvo.

Đilas je v prvi polovici petdesetih let postopoma izgubljal iluzije glede komunistične ideologije in jugoslovanske različice socializma ter se čedalje bolj spogledoval z demokratičnim socializmom. Ko so po Stalinovi smrti leta 1953 v jugoslovanskem

partijskem vrhu znova prevladala stališča zagovornikov politike trde roke, ki so v politični liberalizaciji videli začetek konca partijske oblasti, Đilas ni bil pripravljen sprejeti vrnitve na stare tirnice. V seriji člankov, ki jih je objavil jeseni in pozimi 1953/54, je komunistični partiji odrekel nič manj kot pravico do političnega monopola, za nameček pa se je obregnil še ob moralne vrednote partijske elite. Zaradi svojih stališč je bil januarja 1954 izključen iz CK ZKJ in razrešen vseh političnih funkcij, zaradi svoje disidentske drže in objave knjig v tujini pa je kasneje preživel devet let v zaporu.

Po Đilasovem političnem padcu so se nekoč topli odnosi med britanskimi laburisti in jugoslovanskimi komunisti občutno ohladili, toda vodstvo Laburistične stranke ni želelo tvegati poslabšanja odnosov z Jugoslavijo, zato se je na ravnanje jugoslovanskih oblasti z Đilasom odzivalo zelo previdno. Bolj odločni so bili Aneurin Bevan in njegova žena Jennie Lee ter generalni sekretar Laburistične stranke Morgan Phillips, hkrati predsednik Socialistične internacionale, vendar nihče od njih ni šel dlje od osebne korespondence s Titom. Čeprav je Jugoslavija ostajala avtoritarna država pod vodstvom komunistične partije, je v očeh Zahoda še vedno predstavljala pomemben dejavnik destabilizacije vzhodnega bloka, prijateljski odnosi med Laburistično stranko in jugoslovanskimi komunisti pa so temeljili predvsem na zunanjepolitičnih interesih obeh strani. V drugi polovici petdesetih let je pragmatični geopolitični premislek povsem prevladal nad ideološko afiniteto. Zanimanje britanskih laburistov za jugoslovanski samoupravni eksperiment je občutno upadlo, zamrl pa je tudi jugoslovanski interes za demokratični socializem, nad katerim se je tako navduševal Đilas.