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Literature, revolution, and national aesthetics on the interwar Yugoslav left

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The interwar years are relatively understudied by intellectual historians of Eastern Europe. This is especially true of the study of the region's radical left-wing cultures, where attention has tended to focus on the Marxist revisionists of the post-war decades. As a period typically identified with political repression and economic crisis, the years following the end of World War I and the outbreak of World War II are assumed to hold little interest to the intellectual historian. However, throughout Eastern Europe, the 1920s and 1930s saw the growth of rich left-wing cultures that engaged with a diverse set of ideas from Western Europe and the Soviet Union, and adapted them to their local conditions. This article explores the development of leftist ideas during the interwar period by examining three prominent figures from Yugoslavia's literary left: the Croatian modernist Miroslav Krleža, the Montenegrin critical realist Milovan Đilas, and the Slovene Christian socialist Edvard Kocbek.

Keywords: Yugoslavia; intellectual history; literary left; Communism; modernism; national culture

Introduction

Between the end of World War I and the outbreak of World War II, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was home to a vibrant left-wing intellectual culture. Despite state repression of the Communist movement and its affiliates, the cities of Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana were home to cafes and journals that promoted the radical political and aesthetic ideas that permeated Europe at the time. Although the interwar left of Yugoslavia was a product of the intellectual networks that reached from Paris to Prague to Petrograd, the adaptation of these ideas was conditioned by the local political priorities of South East Europe. Of central concern for Yugoslav leftists was the problem of the new country's national question, which, despite official pronouncements, was far from resolved. For much of the far left (and the non-Serbian far right), Yugoslavia merely masked a "Greater Serbian hegemony," which restricted the cultural and political development of the smaller nationalities. The revolutionary struggle of Communists and their fellow travelers against the "Greater Serbian bourgeoisie" was conceived as both a social and a national liberation. In this liberation, literary aesthetics came to dominate, and leftist intellectuals from the 1920s and 1930s set out to develop a radical alternative to the cultural models offered by official Yugoslavism.

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In this article, I explore the interwar work of three key leftist intellectuals: the Croatian modernist Miroslav Krleža, the Montenegrin critical realist Milovan Đilas, and the Slovene Christian socialist Edvard Kocbek. Through an examination of their work, the article considers the diverse intellectual strands that informed left-wing culture in interwar Yugoslavia and the various ways the revolutionary left explored the problem of national culture within a multi-national state.

Intellectual historians of the Eastern European left have tended to look to the post-war period as the most fertile terrain for study, with attention primarily focusing on the revisionist Marxist humanists of the 1950s and 1960s (Kusin 1971; Sher 1977; Satterwhite 1992; Gubser 2014). This priority ceded to the post-war period has drawn attention away from the earlier interwar years and has consequently skewed our wider understanding of the intellectual history of the Eastern European left in three key ways. First, it has led us to overlook the variety of left-wing intellectual currents that emerged across Eastern Europe following World War I. Second, such a neglect of the region's interwar intellectual heritage has compounded the tendency to see post-war state socialism as a historical rupture and a foreign imposition, overlooking the more subtle continuities that are visible from a holistic historical perspective. Finally, the teleological privileging of the post-war tends to limit scholar's attention to those intellectuals that were willing to accommodate themselves to the demands of the Stalinist system. As a consequence, with a few notable exceptions, the heterogeneous leftist cultures of interwar Eastern Europe are reduced to poor imitations of the Soviet Union, lacking any indigenous roots.[1]

Such a conclusion stands in sharp contrast to the vibrant leftist intellectual milieus that developed across the region in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the political, economic, and cultural conditions of Europe's eastern periphery produced questions that forced leftist thinkers to develop new ideas that challenged traditional assumptions. Historically placed on the crossroads of Western and Central Europe and the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the societies of Eastern Europe were rich sites of intellectual transmission. Marxism, surrealism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and personalism all found fertile soil in this region and contributed to diverse intellectual cultures within which the radical left participated. Better understanding of these cultures gives us a more complete picture of the twentieth century left and sheds light on the often unexpected survival of interwar ideas and intellectual movements in the era of post-war state socialism. This article takes a first step toward recovering this intellectual history of the interwar Eastern European left by exploring the role of revolutionary politics, literary aesthetics, and national culture in the work of Krleža, Đilas, and Kocbek.

That these three figures should be writers is no coincidence. In interwar Yugoslavia literature was the privileged ground of leftist intellectual expression. Its importance was a consequence of the Yugoslav state's repression of the Communist Party and its affiliate organizations, which began in December 1920 with the *obznana* decree and was deepened following the establishment of King Karađorđević's dictatorship on 6 January 1929 (Avakumović 1964). This repression eroded much of the space for open political discussion for the Yugoslav left, although it also, ironically, transformed the country's prisons into schools of Marxism (Đilas 1973). Outside of prison, culture became the sole field of discussion on which leftist intellectuals could publish and, as a result, many of the political and economic debates that animated the period found expression through questions of literature or art. This politicization of culture fueled the "conflicts" on the literary left that dominated the intellectual history of interwar Yugoslavia (Lasić 1970; Kalezić 1975).

Writers also came to the fore among the interwar left owing to their traditional role as creators and purveyors of national culture. While the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and

Russian empires in Eastern Europe seemed to have resolved the key national questions of the nineteenth century, many in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes believed that national liberation remained unfinished business. This was especially true of the far left who, despite their tentative commitments to some variation of the Yugoslav idea, were critical of a Kingdom that seemed to be little more than the "hegemony of the Greater Serbian bourgeoisie" (Đilas 1991). The question of national liberation for the constituent nations of Yugoslavia, therefore, remained a powerful ideological question for the far left during these years. Literature, historically tied to questions of national identity, became the medium for intellectual exchange on themes of national liberation and cultural development. Each of the writers examined here used literature to explore questions of national or regional distinctness and sought to integrate the liberation of their respective nations into a socialist worldview. While the specific tensions of Yugoslav national culture during the interwar period have already been expertly analyzed by Andrew Wachtel (1998), his treatment of the particularities of the literary left is wanting. This article will complement his work by isolating some of the concerns that specifically drove the revolutionary left to grapple with the problem of the nation within the framework of revolutionary literature.

Miroslav Krleža: Croatia through Balkan horizons

Miroslav Krleža was the central intellectual force in Yugoslav leftist literature and one of the most celebrated Croatian writers of the twentieth century. Born in 1893 to a lower middle-class family, he was an unhappy child of the late Austro-Hungarian Empire and grew up amidst the national struggles that characterized its final decades. In his early teens he and his schoolmates became active in the progressive wing of the Yugoslav youth movement and developed an interest in socialist ideas. He also cultivated a love for modern literature, devouring Baudelaire, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Strindberg, as well as Hungarian poets like Petöfi and Ady and the Serbian poets Aleksa Šantić and Vojislav Ilić. In his later teens, while a student in the Military Academy in Budapest, Krleža read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the latter having a profound effect on his intellectual development and paving the way to his appreciation of Marx and Lenin. A romantic Yugoslav nationalist, when the Second Balkan War broke out, Krleža immediately left to offer his services to the Serbian military. But it was on the battlefields of Macedonia in 1913 that the aspiring writer's nationalism was irreparably shaken (Lasić 1982). Face to face with the militarism, violence, and chauvinist expansionism of the Serbian Kingdom – the same "politics of conquest" that the famous Serbian social democrat, Dimitrije Tucović, would soon condemn in his book *Serbia and Albania* – Krleža's nationalist enthusiasm was extinguished (Tucović 1945).

If the Balkan Wars shook Krleža's faith in Yugoslav nationalism, his experience of World War I destroyed whatever convictions he had in the superiority of European civilization. The Great War had a profound impact on his aesthetic and political outlook, further radicalizing his politics and forcing him to rethink the horizons within which he imagined his homeland. In March 1916, two months before he was called up and sent to fight on the Eastern Front, Krleža reflected on his small nation's position in the midst of the conflagration:

> And I lost myself: Moscow, Istanbul, Belgrade, Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, Balkan, Slavdom, Illyria and right at the end, our poor Croatia, and it is only just today that it becomes clear to me what is wrong with her, with this hungry Croatia of ours. In Budapest I thought that I was a European, that things were clear to me; but I was actually a totally ordinary and confused fool. (Krleža 1956, 156)

The geographic imagery here – the swirling, disorienting citations of various imperial capitals and regional designations – served to highlight Croatia's peripheral position within these broader spatial formations. The war, which had mobilized thousands of Croats to pursue the interests of an empire in which they were, as Krleža once remarked to the writer Dezsö Kosztolányi, "second class citizens," highlighted Croatia's marginalization (Lasić 1982, 126–127). At the same time, his realization of this marginality provoked in Krleža a spiritual crisis that disabused him of his earlier, "naive" faith in Europe; to be a periphery of Europe, was not to be European, but something else and the search for this "something else" or "somewhere else" would profoundly shape the writer's poetic geography in the interwar years.

By the end of the war, Krleža had begun to make a name for himself as both a promising writer and a prominent member of the newly formed Communist Party. In January 1919, he joined August Cesarec in publishing *Plamen* (*The Flame*), the first Marxist journal of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and over the following decades the two would continue to be leading voices of the revolutionary left. But Krleža was to have a particularly turbulent relationship with the interwar Communist movement. As a powerful and original intellectual force, he lent to Yugoslav Communism a creative élan and a great deal of symbolic capital; but at the same time, his eclectic philosophical influences (in particular his idiosyncratic blend of Nietzsche and Lenin) and his unwillingness to submit to politically derived aesthetic programs guaranteed he would run afoul of the Stalinism that would come to dominate international Communism by the end of the 1920s (Lasić 1982; Očak 1982; Bogert 1990). Rejecting the realist forms and social themes privileged by Communist-aligned writers, Krleža's interwar writings would instead adapt modernist literary practices to develop what can best be understood as an abject, Balkan aesthetics through which he sought to reimagine Croatia as part of the wider space of South East Europe.

Krleža's "Balkan" vision was informed by an indigenous intellectual tradition of socialist federalism that pursued regional unification as a step toward political-economic modernization. The vision of a Balkan Federation, as a distinctly socialist resolution of the region's complex national question, originated in the 1870s in the works of the Serbian socialist Svetozar Marković and the Bulgarian populist Hristo Botev and had been further developed by the social democrats of the fin-de-siècle, such as Dimitrije Tucović, and the early Comintern (Stavrianos 1944). This strategy was informed by a critique of the political economy of the Balkans that located the underdevelopment of the region in its political fragmentation and dependence on the larger European capitalist markets. The only means of liberating the region from the geopolitical control of Europe's Great Powers was the political and economic unification of the Balkans into a federation of free republics. For a young socialist like Krleža, the signifier "Balkan," far from a pejorative, pseudo-colonial term, stood for the political, economic and even cultural independence of South East Europe.[2] In a speech to a Zagreb crowd in 1920, for instance, while campaigning for the Communist Party in the national elections, Krleža called openly for the creation of "a free federation of Balkan states" as a central slogan in the party's platform (Očak 1982, 80–81). Elsewhere, he spoke of the need for the party to win to its ranks those younger and more radical intellectuals who had rallied to the slogan of a "socialist Balkans" and understood by this the emancipation of the region from European imperialism (Očak 1982). Disabused of his earlier Yugoslav nationalism by the bloody wars of 1912–1913 and of his European fantasies by the destruction of World War I, Krleža sought to break out of this existential impasse by casting himself and his nation within Balkan horizons. His work transposed the idea of a common Balkan space from a political-economic to an aesthetic register, one in tune with the modernist experimentation and revolutionary politics of the era.

The abject people

The cultural struggle to reimagine Croatia within the Balkans and against Europe was announced in the very first issue of *Plamen*, in Krleža's manifesto-like "The Croatian literary lie," a text that would become, in the words of one biographer, "a founding document in [his] spiritual biography" (Lasić 1982, 148). The article was an iconoclastic piece directed against the leading lights of contemporary Croatian literature, which Krleža rejected as merely "aping" European trends and perpetuating Croatia's cultural stagnation in the "most swamp-like of swamps" (Krleža 1919, 39; see also Šicel 1975). For him, the representatives of the so-called Croatian "renaissance" of the fin de siècle were little more than "Austrian generals in white dolamas and Hungarian aristocrats in Illyrian tunics" (Krleža 1919, 32). The image of Croatia's historical oppressors dressed in the mawkish costumes of a rural folk dance captured Krleža's anti-colonial critique of Croatian literature, which, he felt, even as it attempted to lay claim to some kind of authentic Croatian tradition, did so using the literary forms and cultural models of its masters.

Whether decorative, rural idylls, the decadence of the poets of the *moderna*, or the militant folk songs of the national romantics, Krleža rejected attempts to construct an idealized picture of the nation; rather, he sought to show how the very history of Austrian and Hungarian rule had become engrained in the consciousness of the Croatian masses: "To feel oneself disappear beneath the foot of the Black-Yellow Emperor, that is what it means to be a Croat" (Krleža 1919, 34). It was not that the Habsburgs had wiped out an earlier, more "authentic," more dignified Croatian culture, but that Croatian culture itself had been forged under the boots of imperial rule and from this history it could not be parsed. Indeed, the various efforts of the Croatian literati testified to the continued domination of European cultural norms, which were inappropriate and inapplicable to the contemporary Croatian reality. Against the idyllic village landscapes of his contemporaries, Krleža insisted on a literature that would remain true to the abject reality of life on Europe's south-east periphery. The task of the writer was not to escape from the barbaric and backward Balkan existence, but to immerse oneself in it, to confront it in all its horror and decay and to faithfully reproduce it through new literary forms.

What is remarkable about Krleža's aesthetics is his representation of the people as abject beings. In this sense, he was as opposed to the patriotic idylls of the national romantics as he was to the leftist ideal of the heroic worker. His work also presaged many of the themes that would later be taken up by the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, another Balkan intellectual attracted to the problem of the abject. However, if for Kristeva the abject marked a *psychological* border zone between the self and the other, a traumatic point of the ego's erosion, for Krleža it grew from a *geographic* and *temporal* border, from the roots of a culture stranded on the lagging, south-east periphery of modern Western Europe (Kristeva 1982). In Krleža's work, "the people" are hideous, barbaric and abject, unresponsive to the ideals of national romantics:

> What does all this matter to that gigantic, blind animal, which is called The People, and which lies unchanged in a primordial dream in these waters and mountains of ours, just as it has for centuries. […] What does this luxurious literature matter to this behemoth? Will not this colonial, barbaric and rabid monster, with a thirst for life, squeeze all of its diseased ulcers to expel the pus? It will certainly squeeze them, and those who believe that sermons on national revolutionary health and heroism will be a salve to this decadent wound are fooling themselves. (Krleža 1919, 36)

This revolting image of the monstrous people would come to dominate Krleža's writings throughout the interwar period, and owed far more to his reading of Nietzsche than to his commitment to Marx or Lenin. But even within this Nietzschean schema, the writer's

Communist convictions continued to shape the aesthetics; it is telling, for example, that Krleža's abject people bear far greater resemblance to Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian than they do to the contemptible "herd." Indeed, for Krleža "the herd" is most clearly identified with the bourgeois and "European" Croatian intellectuals whose efforts to co-opt and marshal the energies of the oppressed Balkan masses into "civilized" cultural traditions will come to naught. The people, on the other hand, represent the unpredictable and destructive force that will bring about what Nietzsche termed the "transvaluation of values:"

> The People are not given to the reviving of phrases. The People does not mean an empty editorial, nor a militant song, nor a literary career. Today The People can mean only one thing: the shipwreck of all the old values. Today The People means the experience and knowledge that the boat, which will discover the New, needs to be much more solidly built than all those that have previously sunk. The will to build new boats, that is what The People means today! (Krleža 1919, 37–38)

The people as the "shipwreck of all the old values" linked Krleža's left-Nietzschean goal of an "activist negation" of the existing world, to a populist conception of the general will; the people were at once a violent nihilistic energy – barbaric, unpredictable and monstrous – but also the conditions of possibility for something new, the ground upon which a new civilization had to be built (Wierzbicki 1980). In this sense, Krleža's aesthetic philosophy bore similarities with the Balkanist project of his contemporaries, the Zagreb-based *Zenit* movement. The caveat, however, was that while the Zenitists deployed the vision of a violent Balkan revolution as a provocative aesthetic device, for Krleža, a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, the revolutionary unification of the Balkans was a concrete political goal (Đurić 2003; Božović 2013).

The violent, popular force of the Balkan peasantry could not be controlled by the old Austro-Hungarian or European cultural models, but required something more sturdy, a boat that would not sink in the Dionysian storm, and to that end in the final sections of the essay Krleža identified what he believed might be a single "Yugoslav cultural line," which began with the bogumils, continued through the fifteenth-century pan-Slavic missionary Juraj Križanić and the nineteenth-century nationalist poet Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević (Krleža 1919). His choice to locate the origins of this cultural lineage in the bogumils highlights Krleža's anti-colonial, pan-Balkan vision. In the bogumils, the dualist Christian sect that spread throughout South East Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, he identified not only a radical political movement that practiced social egalitarianism and destroyed religious hierarchy, but also an early expression of a regional political impulse that rejected foreign domination. This cultural line, Krleža argued, led up to the revolutionary present. The advent of Communism offered an escape from the division and subordination of the Balkans; it was a force that could "build an arch of salvation over [...] Byzantium and Rome [...] Europe and Asia [...] rich and poor" (Krleža 1919, 40). The Communist idea, for Krleža, was a project for the cultural independence of Croatia within a wider Balkan space.

A Balkan grotesque

The ideas set out in "The Croatian literary lie" received a more thorough articulation just over a decade later when Krleža published an introduction to a series of drawings by his fellow Communist, Krsto Hegedušić. Published in 1933, *The Drava Valley motifs* was a collection of grotesque sketches of everyday life of the Croatian countryside in a naive, almost primitivist style. Hegedušić was an original voice on the Croatian cultural left and had helped found both the Marxist *Zemlja* art collective and the Hlebine School, an

art movement that brought together leftist intellectuals and peasant painters. Both of these institutions served as an anchor for Hegedušić's project of a socially critical art that drew on local themes and forms of expression at a time when leftist culture was coming to be dominated by Comintern-approved critical realist trends (Bihalji-Merin 1959).

While scholars of Krleža's work tend to see his introduction to *The Drava Valley motifs* as a step away from his earlier Communist politics, in fact the piece echoes and builds on his concerns from 1919 (Bogert 1990). As in his earlier work, Krleža criticized the tendency of Croatian artists and writers to ape German, French, or Soviet trends. His concern was not merely that this aping reproduced a subservient relationship between Europe's metropole and its south-east periphery, but also that the introduction of these foreign models did not result from an organic experience of local reality. For Krleža, art was not the product of a conscious, creative subject but the uncontrolled result of "emotional agitations, which are born out of elementary, human, sensory traumas, bodily unrests, and emotional potential amidst dark and colossal creation" (Krleža 2003, 169). The creative subject was a tangle of unconscious psychological and physiological drives that were cultivated by the totality of the material environment. This theory of art as the product of a chaotic bodily unconscious radicalized the ideas of surrealism and necessarily placed Krleža in conflict with the younger leftist writers that had begun to insist on a strict realist program.

Although Krleža rejected the aping of European trends, this did not mean he promoted a kind of cultural isolationism; on the contrary, his own literary philosophy had an eclectic array of influences from Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx to Ibsen and Gottfried Benn. The point was not to cut oneself off from others' culture, but to adapt foreign practices to reveal local conditions. He celebrated Hegedušić's ability to draw from diverse European models, including both George Grosz and Pieter Breughel, and forge a grotesque aesthetics that could capture the violence, poverty, and backwardness of life in the Croatian countryside. Echoing Krleža's earlier insistence on an honest representation of the economic and cultural backwardness of Croatia, Hegedušić's village landscapes were muddy, strewn with decay and garbage, and populated with monstrous human forms that recalled the inhabitants of Brueghel's Flanders. For Krleža this was a form of radical agrarian primitivism that corresponded to the politico-economic reality of South East Europe:

> [Hegedušić's] apparent exaggeration of the sickly elements, his unconcealed inclination for the grotesque, the pronounced crudeness of his strokes, his ridicule of shameful elements – this entanglement of doltish, lumpy pumpkin-heads, swollen, sensual lips, engorged arms and deformed movements – all this represents a negation of our contemporary feudal absurdity, where Singer's sewing machines coexist with the twelfth century, and where this world of goiterous necks, swollen noses, chubby cheeks and low foreheads still believes in the Evil One, in werewolves, in the church, and in witches. The neurotic reaction to the twitching of these physiognomies, as sorrowful growths of life amidst universal wretchedness, across which the economic imperatives of contemporary Europe stomp like Atillas through our vineyards and ploughed fields. (Krleža 2003, 189)

That Brueghel's sixteenth century should produce forms appropriate to Croatia's twentieth century spoke of the backwardness, the "contemporary feudal absurdity" of the small Balkan nation. Hegedušić, that is, had captured the sense of uneven development, the chaotic combination of modern and pre-modern that plagued the societies of South East Europe. Before Mikhail Bakhtin would turn to the work of Rabelais as a model for a contemporary representation of the people, Krleža had drawn attention to the early modern grotesque and its aesthetic relevance for Europe's south-east periphery.

Krleža's grotesque aesthetics were a continuation of his earlier Balkan approach to the problem of national liberation. His theory that art lay in the unconscious psychological and

physiological mediation of the totality of material existence meant that a new national culture was to be drawn primarily from an experience of the predominant forms of political-economic life, not from an imaginary ethnos or historical mythologies. This approach allowed Krleža to emphasize the common forms of life that Croatia shared with the rest of the South East European region: agricultural backwardness, rural poverty, industrial underdevelopment, and dependency on Europe. Indeed, these were precisely the problems that fin-de-siècle social democrats and the Comintern had sought to resolve through the creation of a Balkan Federation. Krleža's grotesque was an attempt to transpose this vision of the region's shared material reality from the political-economic to the political-aesthetic register.

Krleža's biography demonstrates both the intellectual effervescence of the interwar Yugoslav left, but also the connections between the inter- and post-war eras. While he remained a committed intellectual of the revolutionary left throughout his life, his relationship with official Communist politics during the interwar period was quite strained. Throughout the 1930s the rift grew between him and the younger generation of critical realists in the Communist Party from which he was effectively expelled in 1940. While he was partially rehabilitated during the first post-World War II years, Yugoslavia's break with the Soviet Union in 1948 propelled Krleža and his dissident comrades of the 1930s to the echelons of cultural policy. From the early 1950s to his death in 1981 he was one of the leading cultural authorities of the Titoist state, writing and speaking at senior government events, sitting on the editorial board of several key journals and founding the Yugoslav Institute for Lexicography, where he oversaw the publication of the ambitious *Encyclopaedia of Yugoslavia* (Lasić 1982; Bogert 1990).

Milovan Đilas: modernizing literary Montenegro

One of the most vocal of the younger generation of writers to challenge Krleža was the Montenegrin Communist, Milovan Đilas. Đilas was born in 1911 in the small mountain village of Podbišće. His father was an officer in the Montenegrin military, and therefore able to offer his children a chance of social advancement and in 1929 the young Milovan moved to Belgrade to begin a degree in Yugoslav literature. His arrival in the capital coincided with the establishment of the 6 January dictatorship and in this politically charged situation, Đilas quickly found his way into the ranks of the radicalizing student movement. Two years later, he and a handful of friends established an unofficial cell of the Communist Party at Belgrade University (Đilas 1973). In 1933, in connection with this activity, Đilas was sentenced to three years imprisonment, and in the walls of the regime's Sremska Mitrovica prison he received his rigorous political education, formally joining the party, taking part in study groups on Marxist theory and participating in prisoner protests. By the time of his release in 1936 he was a leading party cadre, writing on both political and literary matters and when Josip Broz began to reorganize the party in 1938 Đilas was hand-picked for membership on the Central Committee (Đilas 1973). He remained a leading Communist figure, commanding partisan units during World War II, becoming vice president of the post-war socialist state and contributing to the ideological scaffolding of self-management socialism following the break with the Soviet Union. His career as an international Communist statesman, however, was cut short in 1954 when he was expelled from the party after publishing several articles publically criticizing the failures of the socialist state (Đilas 1959).

While his political career as both Communist Party cadre and Cold War dissident has meant that Đilas has been the subject of numerous studies in western scholarship, little

attention has been given to his early literary career and its place in the wider cultural politics of interwar Yugoslavia (Reinhartz 1981; Lustig 1982; Clissold 1983). Close attention to this period of his life not only points to the intellectual continuities that bridged the inter- and post-war periods of Yugoslav socialism, but also deepens our understanding of the depth of critical realist literary trends in Eastern Europe.

Eclipsing tradition: historical time and actuality

Literature and politics were the chief concerns of student counterculture in Belgrade when Đilas moved to the city. Already, as a young man, he had published poetry in Serbian and Montenegrin journals, and he devoured the publications of the so-called social literature movement. Social literature was an indigenous Yugoslav literary movement that drew aesthetic inspiration from German Neue Sachlichkeit, Soviet Proletkult, and French naturalism. Disseminated through a network of legal and semi-legal journals, it celebrated a gritty realistic aesthetic and promoted work that engaged with themes of political and economic oppression. Despite its frequent repression by the state, social literature was by far the most influential ideological force for young, leftist writers during the years of the Karađorđević dictatorship and, as a result, played a key role in shaping the aesthetic sensibilities of a generation of leftist intellectuals (Kalezić 1975).

The influence of social literature can be seen in Đilas' critical writings from the early 1930s, in which he attacked the modernist principle of "larpurlartizam" (*l'art pour l'art*). For Đilas, the very lifeblood of art was drawn from its roots in society, what he calls its *aktuelnost*, its relevance or *actualité*: "Modern life requires *aktuelnost* from an artist-thinker; real touch with the life of the masses, their needs, their desires. [...] This view of art requires that everything must submit to contemporary, essential human needs" (Đilas 2009a, 55). Modernist authors who denied their roots in the social world and disappeared into introspective formalist experimentation were cut off from contemporary life and restricted to scavenging on the "dead spirituality" of past ages. Rejecting the principle of "larpurlartizam," Đilas (2009a, 67) argued that it was the writer's duty "to reveal the truth, naked and unmade up, to work for social progress." In sharp contrast to Krleža, then, Đilas understood the writer to bear a moral, political, and historical burden and responsibility to the people, and this burden presupposed a commitment to a realist aesthetics.

However, alongside this individual moralism, his aesthetic writings from this period recognize the supra-individual role of history, and, in keeping with the ideas of the social literature movement, advocated a historical materialist criticism that sought to situate literature in the development of a society's class struggles (Đilas 2009b). For the young Đilas, history was composed of gradual and sudden social changes (war, revolution, changes in the modes of production) and these changes produced new social classes, movements, and subjectivities with new aspirations, desires, and anxieties. *Aktuelnost* was achieved through a literary anticipation and articulation of these novel historical forms. To fetishize past forms (as did the nationalist romantics) or to cling to the idea of an ahistorical beauty (as did modernist trends such as symbolism) was to cut oneself off from this historical dynamic and the reservoir of new poetic themes.

Đilas' fiction from the early 1930s was preoccupied with what he understood to be a crisis in the traditional, romantic cultural model of his native Montenegro and during this period his work was motivated by a need to capture a new literary *aktuelnost* based on the present historical conditions. As Wachtel has shown, in the first decades of the twentieth century, romantic depictions of Montenegro, especially those drawn from the epic poetry of

Petar Petrović Njegoš, stood as a powerful model for a synthetic Yugoslav culture. For interwar Yugoslav intellectuals, such as the sculptor Ivan Meštrović and the writer Ivo Andrić, traditional Montenegro represented the primitive vitality of tribal society, and the heroism of the anti-Ottoman struggle (Wachtel 1998). The difficulty with this representation was, of course, that it relegated Montenegro to a heroic past, frozen in time. For Đilas and his generation, this romantic image of Montenegro had become a cliché and had long ago lost its *aktuelnost*.

Đilas' first short stories from these years explored the crisis of the Montenegrin cultural model and registered the contemporary conflict between the old world of rural tradition and the new world of urban, capitalist modernity. The 1931 short story, "The Death of Hajduk Jovan," for instance, restaged the world of the heroic and brave hajduks as a dream-like fantasy, as the protagonist's final showdown with Turkish soldiers on a narrow, isolated mountain road transpires to be nothing but a dying man's feverish delusion. "Where are you off to you poor thing?" a caring mother asks her son, as he tries to rise from his deathbed. "Me? A 'poor thing'? But I am strong, mother! Strong like the mountains! I am your minion, you have given me the most powerful milk … my horse! Ready my horse!" (Đilas 2000a, 92). Fleeing from the house in a feverish stupor, Jovan wanders through the mountains of Montenegro in a Quixote-like fantasy before succumbing to his illness. The autobiographical short story "Mile the student milkman" adopted a more contemporary theme and centered on a young Montenegrin emigrant to Belgrade who had taken up working as a morning milkman. Deploying a trope typical of critical realists such as Gorky, Đilas used the banal, everyday milk run to stage the interior psychology of the worker, who, we learn, is consumed by an anxiety to succeed in the capital so as not to dishonor his family's name in his far off mountain village. The character embodied the struggle to reconcile the demands of a disappearing world of tradition and honor with those of a modern capitalist society and had a devastating symbolic dimension; in Montenegrin culture, milk was considered to be the substance of national as well as physical nourishment; during infancy, young children were said to "suckle" the nation at their mother's breast. Here, in the cold and muddy streets of Đilas' Belgrade, the national substance had been reduced to just another commodity hastily poured out on muddy door-steps by impoverished rural migrants (Đilas 2000b). Deploying traditional national symbolism within a capitalist urban landscape made a mockery of the ancient and ultimately outdated world of traditional Montenegro. The message of these early works was clear: to the old world of honor, heroism, tribalism, and brutal justice, there was no going back. History had already begun to push forward, and its movement had begun to shatter the old values, both aesthetic and political.

Recasting tradition: Popular Front and historical preservation

In his early stories Đilas was unable to go beyond a literary critique of the old Montenegrin cultural models to articulate a positive alternative. By the latter half of the 1930s, however, he began to form something of a distinct, national cultural model still informed by his socially engaged realist aesthetics. This shift was connected to his participation in the cultural politics of the Popular Front and the new intellectual connections that opened during this period as leftist writers across Europe turned away from the more radical, iconoclastic, proletarian realism of the late 1920s and toward a more nuanced, new realism. New realism was the cultural parallel of Popular Frontism, and where the latter called for alliances between the revolutionary left and liberal anti-fascists, new realist theories promoted a newfound respect for the classical realist literary tradition of Europe. Communist writers in

Yugoslavia were encouraged to turn to the masters of the European canon – Cervantes, Balzac, Tolstoy – to hone their formal techniques. Silhouetted against Nazi bonfires, the progressive, democratic, and humanist dimension of the "bourgeois" literary tradition stood out more clearly for Popular Front intellectuals.

New realism was informed by literary theories then promoted from the Soviet Union, in particular the ideas of the exiled-Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács and the Bulgarian activist Georgi Dimitrov, both of whom sought to combat fascism by challenging its appropriation of national cultural traditions (Dimitrov 1935; Lukacs 1963). To their mind, the anti-fascist struggle needed to lay claim to its own national, progressive traditions. In Yugoslavia, where Dimitrov and Lukacs' articles were translated in Popular Front cultural journals such as *Književni savremenik* (Literary Contemporary), this "historical" turn inspired leftist writers to explore their respective national literatures: Radovan Zogović (1937) identified the democratic spirit of the Serbian epic, the playwright Bratko Kreft (1967) staged the Slovene-Croat peasant rebellion of 1573, Hasan Kikić (1969) turned to Bosnian Muslim folklore, and August Cesarec (2004) explored the legacy of Eugen Kvaternik and the Croatian national movement.

Đilas too found in new realism a solution to his earlier concern with the cultural representation of Montenegro. In a programmatic article from 1936 entitled "Problems of our literature" (2009c), he echoed Dimitrov and Lukacs' warnings about the fascist appropriation of national culture and called for a leftist counter-offensive that would lay claim to the historically progressive works of the different Yugoslav nations. For Đilas, the left was to closely study each nations' rich cultural legacies and to draw out their progressive elements by identifying in them the manifestation of a popular, democratic, or humanist spirit. The paradox of this new theoretical proposition was that it led Đilas back to the same Montenegrin literary canon enshrined by the synthetic Yugoslav cultural model against which he had rebelled in his earlier criticism. Indeed, it was the poetry of Petar Petrović Njegoš that most appealed to him and in a short article from 1937, Đilas argued for the literary significance of Njegoš for progressive writers (Đilas 2009d). However, where intellectuals like Meštrović or even Andrić had relegated Njegoš's work to a mystical realm of national mythology, Đilas insisted that only a historical materialist method would fully reveal the poet's literary greatness. In his reading, the Bishop-Prince's poetry documented a stage in the historical evolution of the Montenegrin people, their move from a primitive, tribal federation to an absolutist monarchy with a modernizing political-economic system in the early nineteenth century. It was these historical dynamics, Đilas argued, that lent Njegoš's writing its existential depth:

> The Bishop-Prince must walk a fine line – between progress and the liberty of his land, tribal backwardness and foreign assaults – and he must remain alone in the uncertainty of victory or defeat. From this comes the deep sadness that shudders through his works. But they are for this reason … full of power and the optimistic idealization of his heroes, of a primitive heroism, of humanity and enthusiasm. (Đilas 2009d, 137–138)

The model of historical time that underpinned this literary theory was no longer static, with works losing their *aktuelnost* as earlier stages were eclipsed; rather, history was dynamic and great literary works preserved the dynamism of the era within which they were composed. Far from relegating his work to a by-gone era, Đilas' new realist approach sought to grasp the *aktuelnost* of Njegoš's work and to redeploy these elements within the new conditions of the Popular Front. If his earlier criticism negated the existing cultural models through which Montenegro was represented, his later criticism looked to re-integrate the official canon into a new, more malleable national culture.

Edvard Kocbek: Christian socialism and Slovene poetics

If the thrust of Đilas' early literary criticism was the collapse of the village and the need to transcend the old symbolic universe of traditional Montenegro, other young writers on the Yugoslav left looked to the village as a source of re-vitalization against the incursion of capitalist modernity. Perhaps the most interesting example of this trend was the Slovene Christian socialist poet, Edvard Kocbek. Kocbek was born in 1904 in a small village in the Slovene-speaking region of Lower Styria and came of age during the final decade of Austro-Hungarian rule. Raised in a religious family, as a teenager he became active in the Catholic youth movement and, in 1925, enrolled in the seminary in the town of Maribor. However, after only a year, Kocbek had become disillusioned with his chosen vocation and dropped out. In the spring he moved to Ljubljana to study Romance philology and it was here that his intellectual career flourished (Inkret 2011).

Kocbek quickly established himself in Ljubljana as a leading figure among a circle of revolutionary Catholic leftists that came to be known as the *Križari* (Crusaders). From the late 1920s through to the outbreak of World War II, the *Križari* established an intellectual and cultural resistance to both the Catholic right, which they felt had undermined the Church's popular message and had lost touch with the people, and the Communist left, which, they argued, promoted a spiritless materialism. Unsurprisingly the group was frequently attacked by the Catholic establishment. This political split within Slovene Catholicism came to a head in 1937 when Kocbek published his essay, "Reflections on Spain," which castigated the Church for its pro-fascist inclinations and called for young Catholic activists to support the Republican cause in Spain (Dolenc 2003). This break dovetailed with the period of the Communist Party's Popular Front strategy, which, in Slovenia, opened a space for greater collaboration between the Communists, leftist liberals, and Catholic socialists and created the basis for the partisan coalition of World War II. Kocbek himself played a key role in both the partisan leadership and, after the liberation of the country, took a ministerial position in the new socialist state. Although this unorthodox socialist safely rode out the wave of anti-Stalinist purges following the Tito-Stalin split, in 1951 he fell afoul of the party leadership after his collection of short stories, *Strah in pogum* (*Fear and courage*), was condemned for its critical, existentialist portrayal of the partisan struggle. Removed from his positions of influence, Kocbek spent the rest of his career maintaining a low profile, although his influence would be felt in the anti-Titoist opposition movements that emerged following the student protests of the 1960s (Inkret 2011).

Christianity, biocentrism, and the political theology of revolution

Kocbek's politico-theological and aesthetic ideas built on an indigenous history of Christian socialism in Slovenia, but were also inspired by non-conformist religious philosophers elsewhere in Europe, including Henri Bergson, Vladimir Soloviev, and the intellectuals around the French journal *Esprit* (Prunk 1977; Dragoš 1998). His unorthodox religious philosophy turned on three related concepts: biocentrism, or a belief in the epistemological and ontological priority of the bios; revolutionary socialism, which appropriated Marxism's commitment to an anti-capitalist, proletarian-led revolution, but grounded this idea in the Christian principle of love; and ecclesiastical union, which interpreted Slovenia as a bridge between the two poles of Catholic rationalism and Orthodox mysticism. This idiosyncratic worldview drew from an eclectic array of influences, from the life-philosophy of Bergson, the personalism of Emmanuel Mournier, the radical iconoclasm of Nietzsche and

the Orthodox Christian philosophies of Berdiaev and Soloviev, as well as an indigenous Slovene literary and theological corpus (Hribar 1990).

Kocbek's biocentrism was outlined in his 1928 article "Biocentric metaphysics." In this piece he warned against what he understood to be the deepening "one-sidedness" of the modern human personality, a "one-sidedness" that was demonstrated in the hegemony of mechanist, rationalist, and materialist models of perception and knowledge. Since the Middle Ages, he argued, European man had become trapped in these "mechanist" ideologies and, in the process, his perception of "total life," the subject's self-recognition as part of a holistic universal spirit, had been lost (Kocbek 1928a). Through the concept of a biocentric metaphysics, Kocbek tried to re-align human spiritual values with a holistic vision of the universe: "Biocentric metaphysics is the worldview, which from the perspective of the bios, that is, of organic life, is the center and starting point for a single and rounded conception of the world" (Kocbek 1928a, 107). This re-alignment had more than an epistemological significance; it concerned a deeper understanding of God. In a way that echoed the Bergsonian Catholics of France, Kocbek understood the vital forces of the bios to be a part of the divine: "Today we stand before the wisdom of organic life. Security, reality, and the divine premonition are revealed to us in the processes of nature" (Kocbek 1928a, 107; Grogin 1988). The totality of biological life, its diversity, and movement was the divine being in which all humanity and all nature participated.

The ideas that ran through Kocbek's biocentric metaphysics underpinned both his reading of Marxism and his argument for ecclesiastic union. His political theology was most clearly presented in his 1928 manifesto "Marxism and Christianity," which argued against the Catholic Church's anti-socialism and for a selective appropriation of Marxist ideas (Kocbek 1928b). For Kocbek, Marxism was a competitor for the soul of modern man, one whose agitational and practical nature gave it an advantage over a Church steeped in scholasticism and political conservatism. However, Marxism was not in itself sufficient to lead a spiritual revolution; bogged down in a materialist worldview, it reproduced the "metaphysical nihilism, empty relativism, political absolutism and exclusive rationalism" that characterized the mechanist "one-sidedness" against which Kocbek had warned (Kocbek 1928b, 149). Although Marxism correctly identified the proletariat as the social force capable of constructing a new socialist world, it had failed to appreciate the spiritual dimension of this struggle. The proletariat's struggle for social equality, he insisted, led it to recognize the importance of solidarity and thereby come to embody the Gospels' command of love. Like many of the non-conformist Catholics around the French journal *Esprit*, with whom he would later have close relations, Kocbek sought a "spiritual revolution" that would use the intellectual tools of Marxism to revive Christian thought and practice (del Bayle 1969; Hribar 1990).

His efforts to revive a western Christianity in thrall to the rationalism of modernity also led Kocbek to seek inspiration in Russian Orthodox theology. In part, this interest in eastern Christianity had deeper roots in Slovene Catholic thought. Influenced by the cultural politics of pan-Slavism, Slovene theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as France Grivec (1909), had explored the possibility of Slavic culture facilitating a reunification of the Eastern and Western Churches. Kocbek drew on this tradition as he sought a more intuitive, experience-driven spirituality. He developed his thoughts on the Eastern Church in his 1929 article "Familiarity of the East," which inscribed his Christian biocentrism into a cultural geography (Kocbek 1929). The Eastern Church, for Kocbek, embodied the vitalist spirituality that he had outlined in his article on biocentrism and Slovenes, sharing as they did a common state with Orthodox believers, possessed a unique insight into the soul of "Eastern man." For him, Orthodoxy

had not succumbed to the petrification of rationality that had dominated the Catholic Church since the Middle Ages. Indeed, in many ways Orthodox spirituality practiced precisely the biocentrism that he had advocated in his earlier writings and he celebrated Solovev and Dostoevsky as "the greatest messengers" of "the marvelous feeling of solidarity between man and nature," in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi (Kocbek 1929, 165–166). Here Orthodoxy stood for a more intuitive, personalist spirituality; a mystical union of man and divine nature. And Slovenia, with its Slavic roots and borders with Orthodox communities, offered a unique opportunity to "familiarize" other Western Christians with this Eastern spirituality. For Kocbek, then, the Slovene nation was to play a central role in the revolutionary, biocentric revitalization of Christian Europe.

Toward a spiritual realism

The conceptual constellation of biocentrism, revolutionary socialism and an "Eastern" mystical communion with nature inspired Kocbek's poetics in the early 1930s and underpinned his vision for modern Slovene culture. Indeed, the years 1927–1932 mark a break in his literary work, seeing him move away from an earlier interest in Catholic symbolism and adopt a sharper realism and clarity of verse more in tune with his biocentric ideas. The culmination of this aesthetic shift was registered in Kocbek's first book of poetry, *Zemlje* (*Earth*) published in 1934 (Kocbek 1977). As his biographer has argued, the poems in this collection were infused with a directness and an insistence of the objectivity of the material world and this realist aesthetic was a logical conclusion from the author's Christian biocentrism: if the divine logos could be revealed intuitively in the very processes of nature, then poetry had to capture that spiritual dimension not as a preternatural background lurking beyond the worldly objects, but within and between them (Inkret 2011). Kocbek's poetry came to focus on the mystical harmony that manifested itself in the intersubjective relations between man, object, animal, and land. It was an aesthetics that his comrade, France Vodnik, dubbed "spiritual realism" (Vodnik 1935).

Like many of the secular critical realists, Kocbek's work approached the problem of literary reality through a dialectical play of the exterior and interior world, coupling a realist concern with empirical description with an excavation of the subject's rich psychological experience. But unlike critical realists, Kocbek's realism was not intended to explore the social problems of exploitation or poverty, but rather to offer a poetics of community and, in particular, to explore the experience of communion with nature, with others, and with God. As such, the poems of *Zemlje* emphasized a profound, at times tumultuous, but never-the-less harmonious reality, which Kocbek located in the Slovene countryside. In contrast to Đilas, for whom the traditional village had given way to the dark modern cityscape, Kocbek sought in the village salvation from a chaotic, mechanistic modernity, and he infused the rural countryside with an almost mystical, utopian power. In "Earth, I get everything from you," for instance, the author imagined his dying body as "a sweet dark grain among grains" soon to be "pecked up" by the chirruping birds, effectively recasting death and resurrection as counter-moments in nature's harmonious cycle.

In keeping with his socialist politics, Kocbek also explored the communion that took place between men in the process of work and poems such as "The heavy bole presses the last basket of grapes" and "A pair of young oxen go slowly" took as their inspiration the agricultural labor of his native Styria. Although these scenes of rural labor echoed the thematic concerns of writers affiliated with the social literature movement, their representations of work were distinct (Hladnik 1991). Whereas the former emphasized the exhaustion, monotony, and exploitation of modern labor, Kocbek's spiritual realism had

a utopian impulse that oriented to the moments of harmony and intersubjective intimacy. The difficulty with such a utopian depiction of labor, of course, was that its efforts to reveal a divine harmony that infused man and nature undid the social antagonism that attracted many young writers on the left to this theme in the first place. Even though few writers in the social literature movement depicted militant labor struggle, their focus on themes of exploitation and work were intended to raise political consciousness among readers. While Kocbek eschewed the problem of social antagonism in his poetic representations of labor, some of his poems captured an element of his revolutionary political theology. "Loud greetings to you, my living comrades," for instance, depicted the socialist revolution as a joyous gathering of the eclectic revolutionary forces: "laborers, scribblers, adventurers and deep-sea divers/fishers of all the seas and farmers of all the lands/warriors, lepers, bandits and all your wives" (Kocbek 1990, 27). The diverse gathering was simultaneously rendered a boisterous carnival, a revolutionary war and the day of judgment as the assembled forces lie "waiting in the night for the trumpet to sound." For Kocbek, the poetic significance of revolution was not conflict, but community; the coming together of a diverse union of laborers, intellectuals, and social outcasts.

These themes of communion run through Kocbek's interwar writings and come to the fore in his wartime diaries, which serve, in many ways, as a literary exploration of the concept of *tovarišija* (camaraderie) in the context of the partisan struggle (Kocbek 1967). Although it was precisely his critical literary portrayal of this struggle that would precipitate his downfall in the 1950s, his writings continued to receive muted praise from leading socialist intellectuals even after he was removed from the public eye. Kocbek's work was a fascinating attempt to rethink modern Slovene culture through a unique interpretation of French, Russian, and Slovene ideas that fused his biocentric philosophy and revolutionary political theology with a realist aesthetic sensibility.

Conclusion

As these three cases demonstrate, the interwar period of South Eastern Europe was one of productive and unexpected intellectual encounters. This was especially true for the revolutionary literary left, for whom the problems of economic development and radical political change were bound up with questions of spiritual rejuvenation and national culture. The transmission of contemporary philosophical and aesthetic ideas and their adaptation to the specific political and economic priorities of Europe's south-east periphery created a rich and vibrant left-wing intellectual milieu that was able to thrive even under conditions of state repression and economic crisis. This article has been able to evidence only partially this interwar milieu, and gesture toward the continued life of these intellectual encounters in the period of socialism. The creation of the socialist state in post-World War II Yugoslavia did not mark a sudden rupture with these interwar intellectual threads, but opened or closed different possibilities for the three writers depending on the twists and turns of government policy, foreign alliances, and internal party dynamics. Đilas, who would go on to be a leading figure in the Titoist state, helped shape the foundations for the realist literary principles that influenced much partisan and post-war leftist literature; Kocbek's spiritually inflected wartime diaries were cautiously praised by officials of the socialist state even after their author's fall from grace; and Krleža's rehabilitation in the aftermath of the 1948 break with the USSR propelled him to the heights of cultural administration. The interwar intellectual milieu remained an important resource for the Titoist state as its struggle to construct a new, distinctly "Yugoslav" socialism prompted intellectuals to turn to the rich intellectual possibilities revealed during the 1920s and 1930s. Approaching

the post-war era from its prehistory in the intellectual effervescence of the interwar years, therefore, gives us a more full understanding of the intellectual history of state socialism, one that does not presuppose a radical rupture at the end of World War II, but that can trace the continuities and developments of ideas through the dramatic events of the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Three important exceptions to this trend are recent works by Marci Shore (2006), Derek Sayer (2013), and Thomas Ort (2013).
2. The history of the term "Balkan" as it was developed and deployed in the history of the revolutionary left of South East Europe has been an overlooked aspect of "balkanism" as the term was examined by Maria Todorova (2009).

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