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ALBERT HLEBEC: On the Slovenian National Question

Author: Albert Hlebec, under the pseudonym Lidin

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About the author

Albert Hlebec (1899, Trbovlje–1939, Pittsburgh) was a trade union organizer and communist revolutionary from the miner's town of Trbovlje. He was an active organizer of Slovenian economic and political émigrés across several countries, including France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States.¹

Nothing is known about Hlebec's life before the age of twenty-one, when, in March 1920, he led a left-wing split of the Yugoslav Social Democratic Party

¹ This text was prepared within the framework of the Higher School of Economics University Basic Research Program. The biography is based on the following sources: Aleš Bebler, *Kako sam hitao: sećanja* (Beograd: Četvrti jul, 1982). France Klopčič, *Desetletja preizkušenj: Spomini* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1980). Arhiv Republike Slovenije, SI AS 1546, Hlebec Albert.

(*Jugoslovanska socialdemokratska stranka*, JSDS) in Trbovlje. The splitters, headed by Hlebec, established a new organization called the Socialist Workers' Party for Slovenia, which would almost immediately merge with the communists. In April that same year, Hlebec was one of the leaders of the takeover of the town, being at the helm of the so-called "Trbovlje Republic" that lasted for two days, during which the workers took over the mine, the municipal building, the post office, and the railway station. When the army bloodily suppressed the uprising, he was arrested as one of the instigators of revolt. As the Communist Party went underground in 1921, he rose to become one of its leading members in Slovenia. Most likely, Hlebec was a member of the Communist Party's Provincial Committee already in April 1920. In 1922, he moved to Ljubljana and began working as a union organizer and a journalist. He was the secretary of the League of Independent Trade Unions of Slovenia (*Zveza neodvisnih strokovnih organizacij za Slovenijo*, ZNSOS) and was the editor of their newspaper, *Strokovna borba* (Trade Union Struggle, 1922–1924). In 1923, he was elected a member of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) for Slovenia. After another stint in jail in 1924, he became the editor and a permanent contributor to *Delavsko-kmetijski list* (The Worker-Peasant Newspaper, 1924–1926) and *Enotnost* (Unity, 1926–1929).

Writing in party newspapers throughout the 1920s, Hlebec argued that the main criticism of the communists should be aimed against the regime in Belgrade rather than the clerical conservative Slovenian People's Party (*Slovenska ljudska stranka*, SLS). His reasoning was that attacking the latter enabled the largest Slovenian party to frame the communists successfully as collaborationists of the central government in Belgrade. In the period between 1926 and 1928, he was among the Slovenian communists calling for a slogan of an independent worker-peasant republic of Slovenia within a Balkan Communist Federation. Consequently, he was broadly identified with the "left faction" of the party, which generally pushed for a more revolutionary policy and for understanding ethnic tension as an expression of the class dissatisfaction of the peasantry. This contrasted with the "right faction," which believed capitalism had stabilized and the party should focus on long-term trade union organizing instead of collaboration with the peasantry and its adjacent national organizations. At the Slovenian party conference in March 1928, Hlebec was elected the secretary of the Provincial Committee, thus becoming the leader of the Slovenian party organization.

In the summer of 1928, Hlebec was the party's delegate at the Sixth Comintern Congress and the Eighth Balkan Communist Conference in Moscow (see Context below). After the end of the Congress, he moved to Vienna in order to avoid another arrest in Yugoslavia. He was briefly expelled from the party for factionalism

in 1929, and after his reinstatement he would spend several years organizing party émigrés in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Arriving in Paris in 1929, Hlebec began collaborating with Aleš Bebler (1907–1981) on the newspaper *Borbeni radnik/Borbeni delavec* (Fighting Worker, 1929–1930). The two would develop a close political relationship over the coming years, insisting on the need for an autonomous Slovenian party within the KPJ, which would bring them into conflict with the central party leadership several times. In 1931, Hlebec and Bebler were editors of the newspaper *Slovenska delavsko-kmečka republika* (Slovenian Worker-Peasant Republic, 1931–1933), based in Heerlen, in the Netherlands (although Hlebec actually resided in Aachen, just across the border). In a newspaper aimed at the numerous Slovenian miners' community in the Netherlands, they openly called for the creation of an autonomous Slovenian communist party independent of the KPJ, for which they were promptly expelled. The Hlebec-Bebler group actively opposed all Yugoslavism and pushed for broader internationalism based on Balkan federalism. They came into conflict with the KPJ not because of their federalist stance, but because they questioned the authority of the Central Committee and Bolshevik organizational norms on party centralism in the process.

During the Popular Front era, Hlebec was reinstated into the party again and even attended Politburo meetings in Paris under the leadership of Milan Gorkič (1904–1937), apparently as a member of the Émigré Committee, in charge of overseeing the work of all Yugoslav economic émigrés abroad. In April 1937, he was sent from France to the United States of America, and he became the editor of the Slovenian pro-communist and anti-fascist newspaper *Naprej* (Forward, 1935–1941). In October 1939, he was found hanged in the newspaper's offices in Pittsburgh, having committed suicide in response to the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Hlebec was largely forgotten in socialist Yugoslavia and was not part of the country's official memory politics, despite attempts by historian and comrade France Klopčič (1903–1986), who tried to spark interest in him in the 1960s and 1970s.²

Context

Albert Hlebec is a paradigmatic representative of a Slovenian independentist current within the Yugoslav communist movement. Given that the Yugoslav socialist state had eventually been formed on a federal basis, the independentist

2 See France Klopčič, *Velika razmejitev: Študija o nastanku komunistične stranke v Sloveniji aprila 1920 in o njeni dejavnosti od maja do septembra 1920* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1969). France Klopčič, *Desetletja preizkušenj: Spomini* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1980).

currents within various local sections of the party withered away after the introduction of the Popular Front policy in 1935. The Popular Front aimed to preserve the territorial unity of the Yugoslav state, fearing that any other outcome would benefit fascist expansionism. However, until that moment, for most of its history, the KPJ had been decidedly anti-Yugoslav: it sought to break up Yugoslavia to create a Balkan Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, with Slovenia (among others) as an administrative unit. While it may seem counter-intuitive at first, given their internationalism, the communist support for secessionism made sense within the overall theoretical framework that was dominant in the movement during the 1920s and 1930s.

This theoretical framework was based on the classical Marxist philosophy of history, broadly divided into successive epochs, known in Marxist jargon as “stages.” These would be, respectively, the feudal stage, the bourgeois-democratic or capitalist stage, and the socialist stage, on the path to the end of history which would be communism—a stateless, moneyless, global planned economy. The division, however, was not always clear-cut, as periods tended to intermingle and overlap with one another. The phenomenon was already observed by Marx and Engels themselves, since, at the beginning of their political lives, the messianic class of the future, the proletariat, only made up about three percent of the population of the German Confederation, from which they both hailed. The problem became more acute by the late nineteenth century, when Germany had already become an industrial powerhouse, but Marxism began to gain currency in the agrarian European periphery, east of Vienna, Berlin, or Stockholm—including among Slovenian-speakers.

The Marxists in the Balkans, Central Europe, and Russia noted that their countries, which were supposed to undergo a “bourgeois-democratic” transformation, had not fully gotten there: often, their capitalist systems were far from purely capitalist, interspersed with feudal remnants and underdeveloped, often oligarchic or even *de facto* aristocratic, systems of government. Therefore, the idea that progress through stages was not linear quickly became evident. Likewise, this meant that underdeveloped countries could go on the path of socialist revolution even without becoming full, “proper” capitalist democracies first. Some thinkers and revolutionaries, most notably Alexander Parvus and Leon Trotsky, picked up the idea of “permanent revolution,” as introduced by Marx and Engels when discussing the role of the proletarian minority in a German bourgeois revolution in the 1840s and 1850s. In other words, the liberation of peasants from feudalism and national emancipation of oppressed minorities, seen as hallmarks of bourgeois revolutions, could happen alongside a socialist revolution ushering in a moneyless urban economy and rule of workplace councils. It was along these

lines of thinking that the Bolsheviks (although, with the exception of Lenin, initially skeptical) embarked on a seizure of power in 1917, calling for a seemingly paradoxical universalization of a workers' state across the Eurasian landmass combined with self-determination for national minorities everywhere.

By the early 1920s, as the revolutions in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Italy suffered defeats, and the Red Army had been stopped at Warsaw, the "bourgeois-democratic" tasks of the revolution in Central Europe regained their importance. In some ways, the Communist International began to use the national and peasant questions as a surrogate for declining class struggle in urban centers following the stabilization of postwar regimes. National and peasant emancipation were not quite proletarian revolutionary tasks, but they did correspond to the demands of the peasant absolute majority of underdeveloped peripheral countries.

The Balkan Communist Federation (BCF) therefore made these two poles their central point of agitation, giving them precedence over workplace organizing in the urban areas (while maintaining the need for working-class political domination over the peasant and national movements in order to ensure the revolution did not remain merely democratic). Land redistribution and national self-determination thus became the fighting slogans of the communists in the Balkans, in stark contrast to the "traditional" Marxist program of collective land ownership and centralized internationalist state-building. The rhetoric of ethnic secessionism in particular was toned down between 1925 and 1928, in parallel with the triumph of Bukharin's and Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country." The Soviet Union was gradually attempting to carve out a place for itself within the global capitalist system and normalize relations with countries previously unequivocally described as "imperialist." By 1928, however, this approach had clearly failed. A series of offensive acts against the USSR, such as the attack of the Kuomintang on the Chinese communists in 1927, the breakdown in Anglo-Soviet relations, and the intelligence information on a possible Polish invasion of the Soviet Union, marked the bankruptcy and abandonment of the policy of co-existence with the capitalist powers. Moreover, the looming new economic crisis, culminating in the 1929 Wall Street Crash, had convinced the communists that a new revolutionary wave was coming, one that may also involve a preemptive attack by a coalition of capitalist countries against the workers' state.

The Eighth Balkan Communist Conference in 1928 followed the Sixth Comintern Congress in proclaiming the "class against class" line. While in the early 1920s the communists were open to collaboration with reformist socialist and agrarian parties, they now chose to work only with those who, like themselves, wanted to radically abolish the European order established at Versailles. Those were usually radical nationalist organizations in Central Europe and the

Balkans, in which communists sought out those with left-wing sympathies to create a joint revolutionary platform. These “national-revolutionary organizations,” as they were known to the communists, often framed their national oppression in colonial terms. Communists such as Albert Hlebec argued (and national revolutionaries agreed) that policies of countries such as Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia resembled colonialism applied to Europe. Specifically, Hlebec illustrated this by pointing out the uneven tax burden on Slovenia, the relocation of industry from the administrative periphery (Slovenia) to the center (central Serbia), and even policies of population resettlement, which the Yugoslav state had practiced in Kosovo. Consequently, the communists tried to draw national revolutionary organizations into their anti-colonial front organization, the League Against Imperialism, where Balkan independence fighters found themselves together with the African and Asian anti-colonial revolutionaries.³

The “national-revolutionary” collaboration was not without precedent either, not just in post-imperial Russia, but also in the Balkans. As early as the 1890s, Balkan Marxists had actively collaborated with the nationalists from the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO); Young Bosnia, whose Gavrilo Princip assassinated Franz Ferdinand in 1914, had extensive ties to anarchists and socialists, both in the Balkans, but also in the Russian-language émigré community in France and Switzerland; and most leading young Yugoslav nationalist revolutionary radicals from Slovenia and Croatia of 1910 became the country’s leading communist cadres by 1920. This tradition was picked up in the era of the Communist International, starting in 1919. In 1924–25, the communists managed to move a considerable number of Macedonian revolutionaries to the left with the creation of IMRO (United), and the young Albanian revolutionary exiles from the circle of Fan Noli became that country’s first-ever organized communists. The Croatian Republican Peasant Party briefly entered the communist-controlled Peasant International, and Hlebec saw the Slovenian People’s Party, with its support base in the countryside, as the Slovenian equivalent. The Eighth Balkan Communist Conference of 1928 thus tried to once again fan this revolutionary flame among the “oppressed nations” of the Balkans.

Starting from these premises, Albert Hlebec (under the pseudonym Lidin) proposed to the BCF that Slovenia had become the “Macedonia of Europe” and that its division between Austria, Italy, and Yugoslavia made it the perfect springboard for a new national-revolutionary movement. His somewhat eclectic proposal often mixed up the Marxist revolutionary stages, considering national

3 Fredrik Petersson, “‘We Are Neither Visionaries nor Utopian Dreamers.’ Willi Münzenberg, the League Against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933,” doctoral dissertation (Åbo Akademi University, 2013), 348, 354, 381–86.

emancipation as part of the “proletarian” rather than the “bourgeois-democratic” stage. He does, however, employ the language of colonialism to explain the Slovenian position within Yugoslavia, and explicitly sees national unification as part of the socialist revolution. Themes of the coming danger of counterrevolutionary war are also present, as well as his own (unique but superficial) definition of what constitutes colonial oppression.

Hlebec’s intervention at the Conference went largely unacknowledged, as the event was used to bring up a wide variety of issues rather than spark debates on the spot. However, the points he made were most certainly taken to other forums and further elaborated there, as the communists did, among other things, attempt to establish collaboration with Slovenian national revolutionaries between 1928 and 1934, as well as establish their own pro-communist nationalist organization. The Slovenian organization in question was *TIGR* (*Trst, Istra, Gorica, Reka*) which was, like the Macedonian IMRO in the 1920s, torn between a pro-government wing (in this case, pro-Belgrade rather than pro-Sofia), and a pro-communist wing. After 1935, and the switch to the Popular Front policy of the Comintern, the communist cooperation with TIGR would continue on an antifascist basis. Slovenian secessionism within a framework of Balkan federalism, laid out by Hlebec, eventually resulted in the articulation of Slovenian antifascism. Thus, ironically, an anti-Yugoslav Slovenian communist political language became part of the process of laying the ideological grounds for the future political integration of Slovenia into a Yugoslav socialist federation.

ALBERT HLEBEC

“Address to the Eighth Balkan Communist Conference in 1928”

Session Three of the Balkan Conference, August 31, 1928

Lidin (in Croatian):

The comrade first states that Slovenia, which the Balkan Conference has not yet discussed, is in fact a kind of European Macedonia. It was divided by the Versailles Treaty between Italy, Yugoslavia, and Austria. One-third of Slovenes lives under Italian rule. Slovenia is significant not only for Yugoslavia, but for the Balkans as a whole, which is why this conference ought to deal with it. In Yugoslavia, Slovenia is its most industrialized province, and

it is also located on the Italian-Yugoslav border, meaning it would have immense significance in the case of a war between the two countries.

The Serbian bourgeoisie has given up on the task of liberating the Slavs living under Italian control, and effectively abandoned the project of uniting all the South Slav nationalities. This should instead become the task of our party and the Balkan Federation. The Serbian bourgeoisie has no interest in liberating Slovenia, because it has other priorities, namely Thessaloniki. Moreover, any expansion of Yugoslavia means an increase in the amount of non-Serb populations, and, therefore, the decrease of the share of the Serbian population within Yugoslavia.

Slovenia, despite being the most industrialized province of Yugoslavia, currently finds itself in a colonized position. The comrade points out that one person in Slovenia has to pay an average of 1200 dinars of tax per year, while that same person in Serbia would have to pay an average of 450 dinars. However, the issue of colonialism does not concern only the economic development of Slovenia, but also the political exploitation of the Slovenian population. On the other hand, not only does the Serbian bourgeoisie ignore the possibilities of Slovenia's industrial development, even though the province has excellent objective conditions for its development, but moreover, they actively obstruct Slovenia's industrial development and attempt to diminish its industrial capacity by moving its heavy industry to Serbia.

This clearly shows the colonial position that Slovenia has found itself in. The comrade points out the position of the working class in Slovenia, saying that it has become markedly worse than under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. They have dropped to the level of the Serbian workers. Social welfare legislation is also much worse than it was under Austria-Hungary. All of this data points to the colonial position of Slovenia.

Due to deindustrialization, there is a land shortage and, as a result, large emigration to America, Germany, France, Belgium, to the mines, where masses of Slovenian workers go. The question of emigration is extremely significant, and the Balkan Conference and the Federation must take greater interest in it.

The comrade notes that the Slovenian people do not recognize today's state and those who rule over them. The Slovenian people has had no opportunity to exercise its self-determination. The party of Korošec,⁴ the largest in Slovenia, has used the slogan of autonomy to gain the majority of votes. Yet, now, when they entered the government, they betrayed their people and forgot the slogans under which they contested the elections.

4 *Slovenska ljudska stranka* (Slovenian People's Party).

By its social composition, the Slovenian People's Party is akin to the party of Radić:⁵ it influences, and enjoys the support of, the broad layers of the peasantry. However, there is one major difference between the two: the Korošec party is run by the clergy. The impact they have on the peasantry can be explained by their network of cooperatives, which they use to maintain their influence over the countryside. In Slovenia, both the Serbian and the Slovenian bourgeoisie agitate for a war against Italy, even under the slogan of liberating the Slavs under Italian yoke.⁶ The communists fight against an imperialist war between Yugoslavia and Italy under the slogan of a free and independent Slovenia.⁷

The comrade further points out that a left wing is being formed within the party of Korošec due to its treacherous policy. According to the comrade, this left wing of the Slovenian party has had greater success and influence than the left wing within the party of Radić. In the case of a war between Italy and Yugoslavia, Slovenia would become the central battlefield. Therefore, its significance for the Balkan Peninsula and all of its communist parties is crucial. The comrade concludes by saying that this and all the other questions that have been raised today clearly prove the necessity of the organization of a Balkan Federation, and that all our parties should be bound to work towards strengthening its activity.

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5 *Hrvatska seljačka stranka* (Croatian Peasant Party).

6 This sentence is clearly in contradiction to the statement Hlebec made at the beginning of his speech, and is most likely a mistake by the person who was transcribing or translating his speech. Alternatively, Hlebec may be implying that while the ruling classes of Yugoslavia have begun agitating for a war against Italy as a national liberation war, this would not be the case, in the same way that 1918 did not result in national liberation.

7 Likewise, this sentence begins with "They" without specifying the subject, but the author clearly means that the communists are fighting against "imperialist war," and not that "the Serbian and the Slovenian bourgeoisie" are doing so.

