

Letter from BELGRADE

The Gentle Tyrant

Two hours after crossing the Yugoslav frontier, I was sunk in gloom worthy of Koestler or Dostoevsky. I wanted to die; I wanted to abolish the human race; and I wanted to turn back and never again set foot in Yugoslavia. Between the Italian frontier and the outskirts of Rijeka (formerly Fiume) I had seen 256 portraits of President Tito. Not one single motor car or lorry. Every second village was celebrating something. I passed under a large number of hastily (and poorly) constructed triumphal arches, bearing the legend: ZIVIO TITO. I could not fail to see how drab and grey universal poverty had made the country. In the main street of Rijeka loudspeakers were howling. Someone was delivering what sounded like a political harangue. After each sentence an unseen audience of 20,000 burst out shouting and applauding, though the people in the street did not seem to be particularly stirred or, indeed, to pay any attention whatever to the hullabaloo. Having made some enquiries, I was directed to a restaurant where I was served a poisonous meal by a murderous looking waiter. Nobody seemed to be leaving tips so neither did I, and consequently, on top of my increasing irritation, I felt mean and niggardly, too. After lunch I drove to one of the town's two petrol pumps (Rijeka has about 75,000 inhabitants) where I had to wait three-quarters of an hour for the return of a man who served me Yugopetrol. Compared with the fuel I was compelled to give my car, my own lunch seemed to be the acme of a *tour gastronomique*.

When, a week later, I passed through Rijeka once again, this time heading towards Trieste, I was genuinely sorry to leave. I am extremely fond of facile and superficial generalisations because, as a rule, I find them true. So I do not hesitate to say that the Serbs

are one of the finest people in Europe; the Dalmatian coast enchants you with all the most beautiful scenery you can dream of; and, after all, amazing as it is, cars seem able to run even on Yugopetrol.

There were three basic questions I had asked myself before arriving in Yugoslavia and I have been asked the same questions many times since my return. (1) How Communist is Yugoslavia? (2) How far is the country a police state? (3) Is Tito popular?

I shall try to answer the third question first. Tito's popularity had faded to some extent before my arrival. "He's getting old, pompous, and unapproachable," was the usual comment, even among his old supporters. Then suddenly Tito produced a singularly impressive rabbit from his top-hat: the news of the coming Russian pilgrimage to Canossa, the Yugoslav capital.

Yugoslavia—and this is a characteristic and very human touch—was in no boastful, arrogant, or self-important mood. She was simply amused. I talked to quite a few people in responsible positions. They were all keen on displaying the "correct" attitude in public speeches, newspaper articles, at diplomatic receptions, etc. The Russians were to be treated as honoured and welcome guests but, at the same time, no offence must be given to the West. Behind closed doors, however, the Yugoslavs were smiling, indeed laughing aloud. Pravda's famous leading article on the past Russo-Yugoslav quarrels—the continuation of which, according to Pravda, would only serve the interests of the "enemies of peace"—was regarded as one of the best political jokes of post-war Europe. Yugoslavia made a determined, almost heroic, effort to keep a straight face.

Tito's ubiquitous portraits—in every room,

public and private, restaurants, hotels, corridors, lifts, on posters, triumphal arches, and other specially-erected structures—remained irritating and ridiculous. But one had to remember that there had been a time of ideological and political struggle between Titoism and Cominformism when Stalin's equally ubiquitous portrait had to disappear and be replaced by Tito's; or else, where both leaders once figured, only Tito could remain now. That was part of the ideological fight. By now, much of the ideology has faded away—but the pictures are still there. And new ones are hung up—automatically, simply as an indispensable part of the furniture. Roman Emperors—Augustus and his successors—all became deified as a matter of course. Some of these Emperors insisted on their deification and rather liked the idea; others just could not avoid it. The modern dictator is also deified in a slightly streamlined manner and it is possible that he both approves and feels a little uncomfortable at one and the same time.

Is then Tito popular or not? Yes, on the whole he is. Naturally, there are many irreconcilable elements in the country, among whom the monarchists and the dispossessed classes are perhaps predominant. Many people have justified complaints, others cannot resign themselves to the disappearance of their own importance and influence—a feeling certainly human enough. But in the eyes of the masses, Tito is the old warrior, the hero of the war, the glorious and successful defender of the country's independence against both Germany and the Soviet Union, and also—most important—the head of the state. The Yugoslavs are used to kings. The monarch was a distant figure, beyond reproach and above criticism. He might be surrounded by bad advisers but he, himself, was good, noble, and a fond father of his people. Monarchical traditions are still strong enough to make a Communist president popular.

YUGOSLAVIA has a Communist government. The Yugoslav brand of Communism is not imperialistic and threatens no one with an aggressive peace-movement; it is further tempered by a great deal of humaneness. All this follows from the nature of the Serbs who are a curious, indeed, unique people. They used to be good demo-

crats under a succession of dictatorships. Without being arrogant and self-assertive, they felt themselves to be anybody's equal. (Being under Turkish domination so long, they escaped, fortunately for them, the degrading influence of feudalism.) The Serbs are disinclined to persecute minorities, and even anti-Semitism has always been practically unknown among them (although not among the Croats). The Serbs are always ready to go out of their way to help anyone who needs help. Nevertheless, they can be cruel, they can kill and they can die without much fuss; and they can be outrageously unjust whenever their sense of justice is outraged.

Today, they regard themselves as good and faithful Communists but, apart from a tiny minority, they are no great ideologists. In the red-hot atmosphere after the break in 1948, ideological arguments and screams of "monolithic chauvinism" and "chauvinistic monolithism" filled the air. Eventually, however, the battle-cries over the right interpretation of the Creed died away and the Yugoslavs settled down to work. They were not worried about orthodoxy although they still like to regard themselves as the true disciples of Lenin. Before the schism, Yugoslavia used to be the most ruthless and least flexible among all the satellites. Today, while there is of course no sign of the withering away of the Yugoslav state, there is plenty of indication that Communist ideology is slowly withering away instead.

The most essential features of Soviet Communism do not exist in Yugoslavia. There is no "socialist rivalry" in production. That means that there are no workers' brigades, no norms, and consequently no overfulfilment of norms and plans. The trick of persuading workers to fulfil their norms and then to fix the new record achievements as the new norms is no longer practised. There used to be a Five Year Plan; this has never been officially abandoned but it has withered away along with the ideology. There are no production quotas for peasants: they produce what they want to and as much as they can or fancy. They are encouraged to sell their products to the state but quite a lot goes to private buyers at higher prices. All former régimes either waged war on, or tried to woo the peasants who now feel, quite rightly, that they have won a long drawn-out battle.

They are better off than they have been for many decades and today they can afford to eat sugar and milk—an unheard of luxury in the past for most of them. They have more money to spend than before, but—being peasants—of course they do not spend it. The country is squeezing the town, unlike the situation in Russia where the peasant is victimised for the sake of the industrial worker. In Yugoslavia the standard of living of the peasants has risen, that of the town dwellers has sunk. Peasants were even allowed to leave the cooperatives, and leave them they did. Out of just under 7,000 people only 1,000 have remained members of the cooperatives; the rest have returned to individual farming. The extent of their holdings is, however, strictly limited to ten hectares (24.71 acres). In Yugoslavia the hated and despised *kulak*—the perpetual Russian scapegoat for every sort of trouble—has become a “builder of socialism.” He is a little surprised at that and shrugs his shoulders but, in fact, he *is* building socialism (of a sort) because agricultural production has rocketed and is still going up—again unlike the Soviet Union and the satellite states where one agricultural crisis follows the other and where a kulak is still a kulak.

ALL forms of industrial enterprise were nationalised in Yugoslavia; but lately, while ideology has been slowly withering away, private enterprise has reappeared. More and more private shops are being opened or reopened and there is no discrimination against them.

A great deal of litigation goes on in Yugoslavia. Since “decentralisation” is one of the great slogans of the day, various nationalised enterprises have obtained a fair amount of autonomy. These nationalised enterprises are often engaged in pitched legal battles against one another in and out of the law-courts. When these disputes or law-suits are decided, the state puts money from one pocket into another and pays a private lawyer for the process. There are many law-suits also between private enterprises and nationalised firms and these are decided on their merits: the private firm has a good chance of winning its case against the state provided it has a good case. Lawyers, in fact, are numerous and rather prosperous.

Who else is well off in Yugoslavia?

Artisans—carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, etc.—and those doctors and dentists who, after having done their duty towards the state, are allowed to have a private practice.

The ordinary town-dweller is very poor, indeed terrifyingly poor by Western standards. An unskilled or semi-skilled worker earns one pound fifteen shillings or two pounds per week, a medium-grade civil servant £2 10s. a week, and a man with £15 per month is considered quite well off. This is exceedingly little even by Yugoslav standards, although money goes considerably farther there than here. Housing conditions are very bad in towns and “one room for one family,” I was repeatedly told, is, in fact, the general rule. Clothing is bad and expensive, but food is good and cheap; and the more mouths there are to be fed the more wages one gets. Schooling, too, is free. The state helps the sick and looks after the aged; pregnancy is no problem for a wife: she gets sufficient leave from her work to rest during her pregnancy and there are very good maternity hospitals—free of charge—and pre- and post-natal care is also satisfactory as are, on the whole, all the social services. All things considered, the one pound fifteen or two pounds per week is not the insult and disaster it would be in Britain; it only means a very poor existence and a hard struggle.

Yugoslavia, it ought to be remembered, has always been one of the poorest countries in Europe. But Yugoslav poverty is dignified and serene, not abject and miserable like Italian poverty. In Italy many people drive about in huge and expensive cars while many others go around begging a little cash for their mother’s funeral (their mother is alive and kicking, of course, only this is regarded as an excellent trick which usually opens the purse of any American tourist). There are no beggars in Yugoslavia and in spite of their very low standards one feels that while there are many people in the country who are prepared to give, very few are ready to accept charity.

I much preferred Yugoslavia’s dignified and defiant poverty to her few attempts at international luxury. The best hotel in Belgrade—although spotlessly clean, comfortable, and staffed by helpful and polite people—might just pass as a two-star hotel at Godalming; the capital’s most alluring nightclub would not be able to survive competition

as a dance-hall in Reading. In Yugoslavia you cannot help thinking of the partisans. Partisan poverty is an inspiration and a challenge to all; partisan luxury is something hopelessly provincial.

W HATEVER else I may be, I do not think I can be called a physical coward. To qualify for this I should need a more vivid imagination. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that, crossing the Yugoslav frontier, I had an uncomfortable feeling, and there entered my mind at least the faint possibility of languishing in one of the less comfortable dungeons of Herzegovina. Such thoughts now seem rather ridiculous.

Political persecution of the familiar Communist kind has, for the time being at any rate, completely stopped in Yugoslavia. Police and Party terror reigned until 1950 or so; then it eased up considerably, and about three years ago it practically disappeared. The UDB—the Yugoslav equivalent of the NKVD—still exists and it probably still has long ears; but it no longer shows long arms.

Recantation, the public admission of one's heinous crimes and abject apology *à la Russe*, is out of fashion. There are no political trials at all, spectacular or otherwise. Speech is surprisingly free. I heard many remarks which would have been regarded as treasonable behind the Iron Curtain. The person who made them did not even look around furtively or openly to see if anyone had heard him. He did not care nor had he any reason to. One can listen to foreign radio stations and buy certain foreign newspapers at the stands in Belgrade, but English and American papers are not on sale. "We can't afford the foreign currency," I was told. "Good excuse for keeping up a censorship," I replied. But I was wrong. A few days later I saw a little notice in a Zagreb hotel advertising a newsagent who did sell English newspapers.

Speech may be free but the press is gagged. Not entirely though. Intellectuals are free to quarrel in the press about books, plays, films, paintings, and all modern tendencies of art and philosophy. The régime cannot possibly be so naïve as to imagine that the granting of this freedom is harmless and that quarrels about existentialism and surrealism (Zagreb is a bit behind Paris in time) are the innocent pastimes of a few cranks, devoid of political

significance. The granting of intellectual freedom is not without certain possible, if not actual, dangers and it seems certain that the Yugoslavs do things with their eyes open—or at least one eye open, looking Westwards.

There are also a large number of people in Yugoslavia who are true followers of The Line in the Russian sense of the word. They try to maintain that no one criticises the government in the press because everybody agrees with its policy. This kind of stupid obstinacy is, however, rare. People in a more responsible position would say: "There is freedom of speech within limits. There is no freedom of the press yet. It may come. Anyway, freedom of speech is quite a considerable achievement."

Today there is no tension, no fear in the air. And people are allowed to travel abroad—which is another basic difference between a free country and a prison. Almost all these travellers return by their own free will. It is also true that a small number of people cross the frontiers illegally and ask for political asylum in Austria. These are a great embarrassment to the Austrians as well as to the Yugoslavs and the Americans—who run or finance the Austrian camps—and all concerned try to act as though these refugees did not exist.

B EFORE the war Yugoslavia was a beehive of nationalist factions, quarrels, and intrigues. Many who tried to understand the Macedonian question have gone mad. Today there is no longer any sign of unrest. The Serbs are extremely tolerant by disposition and the constitution, too, is very outspoken and strict on this point: to foster national, racial, or religious hatred is a very serious crime. All the six Republics constituting the Federation (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro) are allowed to use their own national language and are granted a fair amount of autonomy, or too much autonomy as some people say (they are permitted to regulate their own foreign trade relations, thus creating a complete muddle for the Federal Republic). The order to use these minority languages as the official languages of the component republics created some difficulties. The unhappy Macedonians had no proper national language—no literary language, at

least. So the Serbs and Croats by dint of great effort created the President's Macedonian, as it ought to be called. They gave them a bit of grammar with the necessary amount of irregular verbs thrown in, and now the Macedonians are as happy as the rest.

Religion is not persecuted in Yugoslavia. The Orthodox and Mohammedan churches receive generous state grants from the Federal Government. The Roman Catholic Church receives no Federal grant but it is supported by the governments of Croatia and Montenegro and is helped to maintain its schools. The Catholic Church created a political problem and so did Cardinal Stepinac. Stepinac is no Mindszenty. There can be no doubt that the Cardinal was a supporter and admirer of Ante Pavelic, the despicable Croatian quisling. The Cardinal was largely responsible for the forcible conversion of Orthodox Serbs to the Catholic faith and the persecution of those who refused to abandon their religion. He was convicted by Tito's courts, but as the years went by Tito grew extremely tired of the fact that all his English and American visitors, when he tried to impress them with the achievements of the new Yugoslavia, said: "That's all very well, but what about Stepinac?" So the UDB released the Cardinal and he now lives at his home village of Urasic. If anyone tries to visit the village, he is stopped by gendarmes and gently persuaded to turn back. The UDB has hit on a very simple truth: it makes very little difference to them whether a prisoner is not let out of a place or whether no one else is let in to see him. At the same time, this makes a great difference to the prisoner.

The case of Milovan Djilas and Vladimir Dedijer has understandably received considerable attention in the West. It will be remembered that Djilas, one of the former leading personalities of the Yugoslav Communist Party, demanded in a newspaper interview given to *The Times* that the one-party system should be liquidated and the formation of other political parties—obviously opposition parties—should be permitted. All his former friends left him in the lurch, with the single exception of Dedijer, Tito's intimate friend and biographer.

Djilas and Dedijer were tried and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The sentences were immediately suspended on

condition that neither of them spoke to the foreign press. Today both men move about freely in Belgrade, although they are not exactly popular members of Belgrade society. But Djilas still receives his state pension and the shop windows of the whole country are still full of Dedijer's book, *Tito Speaks*. All this would rightly be regarded as scandalous in the West; nevertheless, one must remember that people who have been purged in Russia receive no pension from the state. Not even their widows and orphans.

YUGOSLAVIA is a small country, only slightly bigger than Britain. It has seventeen million inhabitants. Belgrade has a population of about 400,000; Zagreb, the second city, 300,000. Zagreb is still very much "K. and K."—"Kaiserlich und Königlich"—that is to say, it is a strange and provincial but charming relic of the late Austro-Hungarian Empire. Belgrade is not a beautiful city. It belongs to neither Central Europe nor the Balkans; neither East, nor West. It has an atmosphere though, which is endearing and captivating rather than exciting or stimulating.

The most memorable visual experience of the visitor is the almost unparalleled beauty of the countryside—and, first of all, the Dalmatian coast. Then one remembers the almost complete absence of traffic throughout the country. I was told that there are less than a hundred cars belonging to private individuals and I quite believe it. Few vehicles are used even by officials. In Belgrade, whole minutes may pass at certain times of the day before one single motor vehicle passes through Terazije, the main thoroughfare. A high percentage of the cars you do see in Belgrade belong to foreigners. In this land a traffic-jam is not a dreaded nuisance but a sweet, almost unattainable dream. It is a little pathetic to see all the proper international traffic signs in Belgrade, permitting or prohibiting parking, or forbidding even a momentary stop in a street where you are unlikely to see a motor vehicle for hours. There can be no more frustrating job in the whole world than being a traffic policeman in Belgrade or Zagreb. But traffic policemen are numerous—almost more numerous than cars—and they do their work with dignity and devotion. I always felt that I was doing a deserving man a good deed whenever I

passed one. I noticed—or did I only imagine it?—that the traffic policemen always eyed me gratefully for passing through *their* street instead of their colleague's and competitor's. Occasionally the policemen have so little to do that they sink deep into thought or fall asleep on their little pedestals. In such cases you hoot at them. They wake up with a start, go through all the necessary elaborate gymnastics, and let you pass with an angry look which has mellowed into the usual gratitude by the time you leave the crossing.

Motoring between Belgrade and Nish, or Belgrade and Sarajevo, is not recommended even by the Yugoslav tourist agencies. ("If you plan to come to Yugoslavia, leave your car behind," said the encouraging advertisement in an official propaganda leaflet.) Avoid the Nish and Sarajevo routes unless you literally enjoy sticking in the mud or swallowing dust by the pound. But—in spite of all the rumours—the road between Trieste and Zagreb (via Rijeka) is excellent and the *autoput*—the motor road—between Zagreb and Belgrade is, without exaggeration, the best in the world. The land is as flat there as a table and there are no bends at all. On the American and German highways there is no traffic meeting you from the opposite direction. The Yugoslavs have improved on that. There is nothing going even in your own direction.

The distance between the two cities is 240 miles. Every sixty miles there is a roadhouse and a filling station. I covered the distance in three and a half hours, cruising at about seventy miles an hour. And I have a sluggish car and am a rather slow and careful driver. If you like going very fast, drive to Belgrade; if you like going very slowly, go on to Nish.

YUGOSLAVIA is a very cheap country by our standards. The best hotel room costs about fifteen shillings a day, a large plateful of black caviar ten shillings, and an enormous goose-liver £1—just to mention the most urgent necessities of life. Leather goods are admirable and ridiculously cheap but

otherwise shopping is no easy task. On the last day of my stay I found myself left with 4,000 dinars (about £4) and, as one is not allowed to take much money out of the country, I tried to spend it in Rijeka. I had already bought my full supply of leather-goods, food-stuffs, and *slivovica*, the justly famous Yugoslav plum brandy. So I tried articles of clothing first for my wife and then for myself. I was offered a pair of ladies' slippers which looked like the late Stalin's dream of socialist realism. Some men's handkerchiefs looked as if they had been designed by a man expelled from the American Middle West because of his bad and loud taste. In the end, I bought a sufficient supply of socks to last me for the next eighty-four years, provided I can wear them at all. I also bought a shirt. I put it on once and then changed my mind about it and gave it to the gentleman who comes to wash my car every Sunday afternoon. One Sunday he took it; the next Sunday he brought it back. He looked hurt and pained.

In conclusion I should like to say a few words about the Slav muddle which is unlike any other muddle I have ever come across. It is not chaotic like German muddle; it doesn't have an underlying secret method and system as English muddle has; it is not a natural state of things like over-organised American muddle. Slav muddle is gentle, lovable, and utterly pointless. On my journey to Belgrade I stopped at one of the roadhouses mentioned. When I went in I was greeted to my great pleasure by my wife's favourite Hungarian folk-song, which a pleasant voice on the radio was singing in Hungarian. Thus inspired, I thought I would send my wife greetings. I walked up to the counter and asked the man for a picture postcard. He informed me that he had none and was saddened, as it was clearly his wish to please and oblige me. Any ordinary postcards? No—he shook his head—no ordinary postcards either. Suddenly a broad smile lit up his face. He had something to offer. His eyes shone and he declared proudly:

"But we have stamps."

George Mikes

Letter from AMERICA

The American Dilemma Over China

WHEN the tide of Communism engulfed China in 1949 and the American-backed Nationalist Government lost its last foothold on the mainland, Americans began bludgeoning their minds with the nightmare that it was they who had lost China, they who had suffered the greatest defeat in their history. What had been the famous "open door" for fifty years had suddenly been slammed in their face. Cultural, religious, educational, and commercial ties were ruptured, the work of hundreds of missionaries of all kinds seemed to have been in vain. Millions of dollars invested in the spreading of Western culture, in creating goodwill for the United States, in building up the military power of the Kuomintang régime were lost. America, which had felt like a guardian towards China—her refusal to allow Japan to dominate China was one of the main reasons that led her into the last war—felt utterly rejected. China had been to Americans what India had been to the British—an Asian nation willing to absorb some of her cultural and political influences. India at least stayed within the British Commonwealth—to Britain that was more than a consolation. But China which, it was hoped, could be turned into a strong, democratic, and friendly partner of the West, abruptly cut herself off from the United States, and from the West in general.

Though it had been a slowly gathering storm of revolution, American public opinion was caught almost unawares. The sentimental novels of Pearl Buck, the smiling charms of Mme Chiang Kai-shek on the covers of large-circulation magazines, the rosy and misleading picture painted by American wartime propaganda, had made Americans expect a different finale to the

liberation of China. It was a shattering blow to American self-confidence, American pride. After fifty years of benevolent guardianship the Chinese rebuffed America's political philosophy and instead adopted Russia's. It hurt, and every American felt it. And, as a consequence, it was for a long time impossible for the United States Government to introduce rational thought into the heated, often violent, discussion about the "loss of China."

The State Department, under Mr. Dean Acheson, issued a White Book in the hope that it would calm the troubled waters and inject reason and perspective into a debate which paralysed American policy in Asia. In his introduction the Secretary of State sought to explain the catastrophe as follows: "The unfortunate but inescapable fact is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the Government of the United States. Nothing that this country did, or could have done within the reasonable limits of its capabilities, could have changed that result, nothing that was left undone by this country has contributed to it. It was the product of internal Chinese forces, forces which this country tried to influence but could not."

But Americans continued to blame themselves, their government's incompetence. All this fed the flames of a bitter debate within the American body politic, a debate based essentially on misconceptions. Soon the China controversy became mixed up in the election fever and the Republican party was quick to exploit it. But history and emotionalism and some pleasant fancies were not the only reasons for the psychological setback. Europeans easily forget, because the United States has committed herself so elaborately to the