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AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES FIELD STAFF
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"BELGRADE REVISITED"

In the attached letter Fred Warner Neal reports on his immediate impressions of the surface changes which have taken place in Yugoslavia since he left it in 1951. During the next several months he will continue his study of the Yugoslav scene preparatory to a tour of the AUFS member universities and colleges in the 1954-55 academic year. His later reports will go into recent political, economic and sociological developments in this Eastern European country which has aligned itself with the West.

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BELGRADE REVISITED

A Letter from Fred Warner Neal

Belgrade,
July 10, 1954

It was Winston Churchill who said, Make your impressions of a country after a week; these will be better than any you can formulate short of six months. It is on this basis that I am writing this letter, which might be entitled "First Surface Impressions of Yugoslavia." Even more accurately -- of Belgrade, since we have not been far or often out of Belgrade in the ten days since our arrival.

The first general overall impression is that things are enormously improved since 1950-51, when I was here last. People on the streets are better dressed and look healthier. There is an increase in Western-style dresses, and women's shoes -- once the bane of Balkan beauties -- have improved noticeably in appearance. There are more usable goods in the store windows (although the American eye is impressed by the inordinate amount of store space given over to things like typewriters, costing hundreds of dollars, and tourist-attraction antiques, clearly not for sale to the general public). There are also more and better places of amusement. All this is still the Balkans -- still on a pretty low level, judged by American or Western European standards -- but it is a big improvement. This, of course, is only on the surface. How deep it goes, I do not yet know. Prices have risen in the past four years, but to an American coming fresh from Paris they seem quite moderate. Although lots of people are constantly in the department stores, there is no question that all prices are high compared to Yugoslav wage standards. There are still lots of terribly poor people around, although -- except at the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral -- I have seen no beggars, save for two or three of the urchins who pester foreigners from time to time.

Living accommodations for foreigners are better, too, but they are still pretty far below claims of the government tourist office. There is another hotel since my time, the Excelsior; it is said that there is often no water there but that it is comparatively clean and quiet. The best hotel is the Majestic, whose tiny rooms are constantly all occupied. One whole floor is currently taken by an Albanian delegation here to reopen diplomatic negotiations. Except for one or two cravated individuals, the Albanians are wild, unkempt-looking men who stick close together and speak to no one. The Moskva, definitely below the Majestic, is older and Balkan-er. The cockroaches are not as important as

the horrible smells from the drains, yet even the Moskva has improved considerably. Four years ago, the Majestic dining room was the only place in Belgrade where nonresident foreigners ate. Today both the Moskva and the Excelsior have fairly good restaurants, and there are a number of others about town that did not even exist in 1951. The worst meal we have had here so far was at an official dinner given by an American government representative.

It is said that some of the roads are better than they were. Certainly the road down the Danube to the ancient Smdrova fortress -- once one of the worst in Eastern Europe -- is now paved and quite drivable. One sees at least a fivefold increase in the number of automobiles in the streets. They mix dangerously with horse-drawn vehicles, occasional donkeys, and countless and colorfully dressed peasants on foot. A whole new autobahn has been completed linking Belgrade and Zagreb, and the capital itself has on the main streets a new fluorescent lighting system.

A part of the apparent physical well-being must be attributed to American aid, which, joined by British and French economic assistance, plays an important part in the Yugoslav economy. Yet the country is still extremely poor. It is, in fact, in the throes of a crisis as far as national finance goes, having been unable last week to meet payments on a British loan. Illustrative of the dire material difficulties that beset the Yugoslavs is a current article in New Yugoslav by Moshe Pijade, president of the Skuptshina (or parliament), on the courts. One of the biggest barriers in the way of smooth functioning of the courts, Mr. Pijade wrote, is a lack of furniture, to say nothing of typewriters.

Of course, the problems of socialism and politics in general are the most interesting of all in Yugoslavia. Politically-- and in a socialist state this means economically as well -- Yugoslavia is definitely in a state of flux. The strongest impression I have here is one of ideological confusion and uncertainty. It is interesting to trace this: in 1946, the Yugoslav Communists impressed one as being just like their Russian counterparts -- dogmatically certain about everything. Even in 1948, immediately after the Soviet-Yugoslav break, their attitude continued. They went through a period of groping in 1949; but in 1950-51 they again were certain -- certain that, freed from the Soviet yoke physically and dialectically, they were following the path of true Marxism. Now the Yugoslav Communists don't seem so certain. This ideological confusion is difficult to put your finger on. I shall write more about it. It may prove to be the key point of investigation in this academic mission. Right now, I can say only that I have the impression that the leaders of Yugoslavia are a lot less sure of what Marxist line they are hewing to -- or how definitely Marxist (or Leninist, even) it is -- than they were four years ago.

The direction of the confusion, however, seems to be all away from the Moscow line. If anything, the anti-Russianism of the Yugoslav Communists is more firm and convinced than previously. Old Pijade and I held a long, spirited conversation in Russian in

1950 as a matter of course, and he seemed intrigued by my Russian. This time he began by pointedly announcing: "I will speak Russian, but if you were a Russian I wouldn't."

None of the foreigners in Belgrade has any doubts about the reality of the economic decentralization that has taken place. In fact, some American officials in our FOA mission here complain that their task is harder because no longer can they always get firm decisions in Belgrade. How successfully the decentralization is working out is another question and comprises one of my major projects here, perhaps the first one to be investigated.

Political decentralization is another thing. Actually, it appears that the political decentralization -- as far as the Communist Party is concerned, anyway -- never really got under way before the Djilas affair last spring. In the first place, the concept was never clear. In the second place, a large percentage of the party was never sold on it. Djilas, possibly with the approval of Tito and some of the other top leaders, tried to hasten it along with his series of articles last winter. But something happened along the way. Either Djilas, in the murky depths of his personal intellectual processes, went astray; or he became enamored of the very idea he had previously warned against -- Western-type democracy; or he had political ambitions of his own; or some combination of these. All (foreigners especially) talk about the Djilas episode, but after hearing Yugoslav, American, French, and Russian explanations it is still an enigma to me. I hope to probe it in some detail.

In any event, after Djilas was removed from his official posts (he has since resigned from the party and is ostracized by Yugoslav officialdom, although of course he is quite free legally) there seems to have been a tightening-up of party control of politics. The party organs (Borba in particular) talked -- and still talk -- a lot about discipline and the need for observing democratic centralism. Yet the role of the party continues to be debated.

An old State Department colleague of mine, who knows his way about these parts, has this theory: Tito and his top colleagues desired the "democratization" of government and party to accelerate. But what might be called the iron core of the party -- les militantes, born and bred as they were on Moscow-type communism, and also instinctively guarding their own positions -- held back. Tito felt he could not proceed without the support of the men in this strong center group of the party; at least he was not sure he could proceed without them. The Djilas articles were an attempt to propagandize not the country but the party. But the Djilas articles backfired; hence the retrogression.

Another old friend of mine, a Britisher, whom I regard as the best of the correspondents here, sees Tito as using communist terminology and ideas to carry the rest of the country along toward political democracy.

Others, however, believe Tito and his top colleagues never will give up their hold on the country. These people believe that the Djilas affair started as make-believe, in response to the popular demand for more political freedom, and that when his articles caught on so strongly (and there is no disputing that they did catch on) they had to call a halt, and poor Djilas (I knew him well!) was dispensable.

We shall try to see in the course of the next few months' investigations how these various theories stand up.

All this raises the question of how Marxist (and/or Leninist) Tito really is. Clearly a deviationist from Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, is he also a deviationist from the Marxism-Leninism of which he claims to be the only true exponent? One hears at least three points of view in Belgrade. One -- from foreigners and some anticommunist Yugoslavs -- is that Tito is simply an opportunist, with no basic ideological beliefs, always playing the horse that seems likely to win. Another -- also mostly from foreigners -- is that Tito is no longer a Marxist-Leninist of any sort, and that he is no longer -- in his heart of hearts and mind of minds -- operating within the dialectic, but is trying to bring Yugoslavia toward some sort of Western-type democracy. A third -- from official Yugoslavs and some foreigners-- is that Tito is basically a Marxist-Leninist (but not Stalinist) communist, operating within the Marxist-Leninist dialectic, and is trying to establish socialism in Yugoslavia in a non-Soviet form and is in the process of feeling his way.

None of these explanations is entirely satisfactory. For myself, I tend to discard the first: that Tito is an opportunist solely; this ignores the stuff of which communist leaders (usually) are made. The second might make sense -- although I distrust it -- but the time factor here may be the important thing. Regardless of what democratic hopes Tito has for his country, it will be a long, long time before any Western-type democracy can be a reality in this backward land of backward peasants; and Tito himself has said as much. As far as the third explanation goes, it does not add up either. If Tito is operating within the dialectic, then he either must have a set program with set, certain goals (from the dialectical point of view), or he must operate a sort of NEP, an openly and consciously temporary affair to stave off the economic wolf until such time as he can resume his dialectical pursuits. The impression one has of the Yugoslav government today is that it does not fit either of these categories.

In foreign policy, Yugoslavia continues day by day to move farther and farther toward collaboration with the American-led Western camp. True, this is done with certain dialectical overtones. Tito told the recent Serbian Party Congress, for example, that he had the best interests of the country at heart and that even if some foreign policy moves seemed inexplicable they should be supported by the party on the theory that Big Brother knows best. A few days later came the announcement of Yugoslavia's willingness

to join EDC. All the current hullabaloo about Balkan defense agreements is explainable chiefly as a mechanism for binding Yugoslavia to the Western defense system -- or, a better way to say it might be, binding the Western defense system to Yugoslavia. A couple of years ago the official Yugoslav statements, vowing never to join a capitalist-led military arrangement, referred even to American military aid in more or less apologetic tones. Today the tendency is to boast about Yugoslavia's part in these arrangements.

The Yugoslavs are, indeed, very much preoccupied with defense. Despite their economic difficulties, some thirty per cent of their total budget goes for military expenditures. Why? A highly responsible official of the foreign office told me that Yugoslavia does not foresee a military attack from the East -- from the USSR. But he said that the Yugoslavs want to be as prepared as possible against it if it should come. He added that Yugoslav preparedness is not only against this eventuality but against any eventuality.

"After all," he said, "you must remember that war is very much a part of our life. Serbia, for instance, has never had twenty years of continuous peace in nearly 1,500 years of history, unless you except our 500-year occupation by Turkey, if that could be called peace. Can you expect that suddenly we should believe there will be no more fighting?"

All around Belgrade, in the city and in the countryside, there are reminders of war. Not only destroyed and damaged buildings, but people as well. The number of one-legged people here, for instance, is a constant source of amazement. I met an attractive one-legged woman who had only one arm as well. I asked her if this resulted from the war. She smiled a little bitterly, and looked down at where her leg should have been. "This is from the recent war," she said. "And this," she said touching her empty sleeve, "from the First World War."

Despite Yugoslavia's increasing integration in Western military plans, it certainly is too much to speak of the country as being westernized in any important degree. The newspapers continue to harp on the evils of Western culture, and except superficially there is little evidence of it. But last week, while Borba was making snide remarks about "Americhski Chaz," store windows along Terazie (Belgrade's main street, which runs into Boulevard Marshala Tita) displayed advertisements of a modern dancing school. The school guaranteed to teach its clients such things as "Sving, Fokstrot, Slofoks (whatever that is), Bluus, Tango, Rhumba, and Mambo," in addition to the famous peasant Kola. The radio features some really good jazz daily, along with lots of folk music, and Belgrade now has several jive joints -- "snake pits" in the local jargon -- the fanciest of which is the "Kristol Bar." The director of the workers' council in charge of bars tells us that all these enterprises are "nicely profitable."

Yet the Yugoslavs continue to seek their own way. Their workers' councils and Producers (parliamentary) Council are unique contributions to political forms. Within the last few weeks they have added another: the Commune. There is a lot of discussion in the press and elsewhere about just what this is. Nobody has yet given me an adequate explanation. The Commune seems to be a sort of local government body connecting the country with the city -- the peasants with the workers. With their new autonomy, both peasants and workers have shown some of what is called here "economic particularism," forgetting the "socialist reality" of their interdependence. The Commune, governed by a body representing both peasants and workers, is aimed at bridging this divergence of interest. So far Communes have been established only in Macedonia, where the peasant-worker conflict has been most acute. Plans are being readied, however, to introduce the Commune into Serbia, and I hope to observe the installation efforts at some early date.

All in all, the political and economic uncertainties, the intense ideological discussion, the strategic position, and the constant blending of the old and the new make Yugoslavia one of the most fascinating countries in the world to study at firsthand.

Fred Warner Neal

P.S.: Should I add a note about the weather? It is terrible. Cold and cloudy in France. Cold and cloudy here most of the time. Occasionally a terribly hot day, followed by rain, then cold and dark again. The Yugoslavs are calling it an "atomic summer," apparently from the widespread conviction that the erratic weather is due to atomic explosions in various parts of the world.