

Yellow Star, Red Star

Capitalist counterrevolution and the rise of fascism in southeastern Europe since 1989

By Clara Weiss
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Jelena Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star. Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, Cornell University Press 2019.

All over the world, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the drive by the bourgeoisie toward authoritarian forms of rule and far-right policies. Under these conditions, the struggle against the resurgence of fascism that the ICFI has taken up in the past six years is assuming ever greater political significance.

A new book by political scientist Jelena Subotic (Georgia State University) examines the relation between the criminalization of communism in Croatia, Serbia and Lithuania and the legitimization of fascism after the fall of the Stalinist regimes in 1989. Though fatally flawed by its equation of Stalinism with communism, and the author's reluctance to discuss the social character of the restoration of capitalism, the book provides valuable material that demonstrates the close relationship between capitalist counterrevolution and the rise of fascist forces.

Subotic focuses her account on developments in the former Yugoslavia and Lithuania, which was formerly part of the Soviet Union. In both the former Yugoslavia and the Eastern Europe, the Nazis were able to mobilize and count on the support of local fascist forces above all in their war on the Soviet Union and the communist partisan movement, as well as their persecution of Jews, Roma and other minorities. In Croatia and Serbia, the establishment of nation states on the basis of the restoration of capitalism and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, was accompanied by a systematic promotion of the very fascist forces that had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

The Nazis invaded Yugoslavia on April 1, 1941, a few months before the beginning of the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, on June 21, 1941. In Serbia, the nationalist Chetnik army (Yugoslav Army), though formally aligned with the Allies until 1943, began collaborating with the Wehrmacht already in the fall of 1941. It played a critical role in the fight against the partisan movement against the fascist occupation, and helped run the Semlin camp, where thousands of Jews were murdered in gas vans. Serbia thus became the second country in Europe, after Estonia, to be declared “judenfrei” and free of “gypsies” by August 1942. Less than 5,000 Serbian Jews survived the war.

The collaborating Serbian government of Milan Nedić endorsed the genocide of the Jewish population. In 1942, Nedić stated: “Owing to the occupier, we have freed ourselves of Jews, and it is now up to us to rid ourselves of other immoral elements standing in the way of Serbia's spiritual and national unity.” (quoted pp. 52–3)

After 1989, the Serbian state criminalized the communist resistance movement against the Nazis and the Chetniks while rehabilitating Nedić. History textbooks now describe the Chetniks as “national patriots” and “an antifascist movement from the right.”

In Croatia, the promotion of the fascist Ustaša has assumed even more staggering dimensions. The Ustaša movement set up the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in 1941 and established an expansive camp system which included 26 concentration and death camps. Among these was the Sisak camp, the only camp for unaccompanied children in Europe during World War II, where an estimated 1,600 children died. The most notorious Ustaša-run camp was Jasenovac, also called the “Auschwitz of the Balkans.”

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Ustaša regime murdered between 77,000 and 99,000 people at Jasenovac, among them between 45,000 and 52,000 Serbs, up to 20,000 Jews, 20,000 Roma and up to 12,000 political and religious opponents of the NDH. The Ustaša and the Nazis were defeated by the partisan movement that was headed by Tito.

Almost immediately after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the newly created Croatian state moved toward criminalizing the partisan movement against the Ustaša. Streets, schools and public buildings were renamed almost overnight to carry the names of famous Croatian figures of the NDH, instead of those of famous partisans and communist leaders. Monuments for Jewish victims and the partisan movement were destroyed and vandalized. This included a bombing attack on the monument at Jadovno in 1991. History textbooks in schools are openly glorifying the Ustaša.

Subotic acknowledges that the accession of these states to the EU served above all to further these practices and provided the basis for their expansion. In particular, she draws attention to the equation of the crimes of “communism” and fascism in the 2008 EU Prague Declaration, which catered to and encouraged far-right tendencies.

In southeastern Europe, the Jasenovac death camp has been at the center of this revisionism. In a state-backed campaign, Jasenovac has been depicted as a camp which was entirely harmless under the Ustaša but then allegedly turned into a death factory under Tito. The former Croatian prime minister Zlatko Hasanbegović, himself a former member of the pro-Ustaša Croatian Pure Party of Rights, has denied that it was a death camp and called the partisan antifascist victory in WWII “the biggest loss in Croatia's history.” (137)

Similar developments occurred in Lithuania, which had earlier formed part of the Soviet Union. During World War II, 95 percent of Lithuanian Jewish community was murdered, the highest rate in all of Europe. This was not least of all due to the mass participation of Lithuanian nationalists and fascists who were virulently anti-Semitic. For them, the Nazi occupation was a welcome opportunity to murder both the Jewish population and fight against the threat of social revolution. In a pre-war manifesto, the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) stated that “by restoring the new Lithuania, [the LAF] is determined to carry out an immediate and fundamental purging of the Lithuanian nation and its land of Jews,

parasites and monsters.” (quoted p. 155)

Much like the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) in Ukraine, the LAF began massacres of the Jews before the German Wehrmacht arrived. Later, many of its units were reorganized by the Germans into police battalions which were tasked with the extermination of Lithuanian Jews. SS Einsatzgruppen, which perpetrated mass shootings of Jews and communists, also worked with the Lithuanian Security Police. At the Ponary forest, at least 72,000 Jews were murdered. Already in December 1941, the commander of the Einsatzkommando 3, Karl Jäger, reported that, the objective of “clearing Lithuania of Jews” was “virtually completed” thanks to the “cooperation of the Lithuanian Partisans and Civil Authority.” (158)

Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the new Lithuanian ruling class that had emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy made the rehabilitation and glorification of these forces a priority of state policy. One of the very first actions of the new parliament consisted in rehabilitating Lithuanians convicted of collaborating with the Nazis by the Soviets. Jonas Noreika, who had signed deportation orders for Jews, was declared a national hero. The Lithuanian government championed the “double genocide” narrative, which justifies Lithuanian collaboration in the Holocaust as an understandable response to the alleged “genocide” perpetrated against Lithuanians by “communist Jews” in 1940–41.

This anti-Semitic trope of Judeo-Communism, which was also central to Nazi ideology, is now dominating official commemorations of the war in Lithuania. The Lithuanian government has also initiated several trials against survivors of the Holocaust who joined the Soviet partisan movement. In 2007, the Lithuanian state prosecutor initiated an investigation against the famous historian of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, Yitzhak Arad for “war crimes” that he allegedly perpetrated as a member of the Soviet partisans against Lithuanian nationalist troops. Leading Lithuanian newspapers slandered him as an “NKVD storm trooper.” Similar proceedings were initiated against Rachel Margolis and Fania Brantsovskaya who had likewise fled the Nazi genocide by joining the Soviet partisans.

The material that Subotic provides is a damning indictment of the outcome of the restoration of capitalism after 1989–1991 and the state of European politics more generally. However, she herself clearly does not want this conclusion to be drawn and avoids, throughout the entire book, to even use terms like “capitalism” and imperialism.”

There is no attempt at any coherent reckoning with the social and political character of both the Stalinist regimes and the restoration of capitalism in 1989–1991. Although Subotic correctly emphasizes the right-wing implications of the criminalization of communism, she herself makes no distinction between Stalinism and communism. This renders her vulnerable to the very right-wing narratives that she takes issue with as they, too, rest above all upon the false equation of Stalinism and communism. Indeed, her discussion of Lithuania includes multiple formulations that can hardly be described other than apologetic. Thus, she writes that the “double genocide” narrative was “for Lithuanians ...the only way to make sense of their twentieth-century experience.” This both relativizes and obscures what has taken place.

What happened in the USSR and the deformed workers’ states in Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not, as Subotic suggests, a flawed development toward democracy, but rather the completion of the Stalinist counterrevolution against October 1917. Historical revisionism and the rehabilitation of the fascist traditions of the Eastern European bourgeoisie have been an intrinsic component of this process.

The restoration of capitalism had its origins in the nationalist betrayal of the October revolution on the basis of “socialism in one country”, a direct repudiation of the internationalist and Marxist program of world socialist revolution that had formed the basis of 1917. In the inter-war period, the

Stalinist betrayals of the workers’ movement and promotion of national opportunism had devastating consequences for the socialist revolution in Europe, facilitating the rise of Hitler to power and the outbreak of the Second World War.

In the 1930s, the Great Terror under Stalin saw the most far-reaching mass murder of revolutionaries and socialists that history has ever seen. Among its victims were thousands of Soviet Trotskyists, almost the entire leadership and cadre of the Bolshevik Party of October 1917, as well as much of the leadership and rank-and-file of the Communist parties of Yugoslavia, Poland, Lithuania and other countries in Eastern Europe. Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Marxist opposition to Stalinism and founder of the Fourth International, was assassinated in 1940. These crimes created enormous confusion within the international working class and played a central role in beheading the working class in the revolutionary struggles of the mid-1940s.

The Red Army and the partisans in Yugoslavia were able to drive out the Nazis and local fascists by 1943–44 not because of the Stalinist regime, but in spite of it. Mass struggles of the working class in opposition to fascism and capitalism erupted starting in 1942, with mass factory occupations taking place in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. All of Greece was engulfed in a bitter civil war. However, the lack of a revolutionary leadership allowed the Stalinists to stifle these movements, creating the conditions for the re-stabilization of capitalism on a world scale.

The Stalinist bureaucracy moved to nationalize private property in Eastern Europe only by 1947–1948, facing enormous pressure from imperialism. However, its main priority remained the strangling of an independent revolutionary mass movement of the working class against capitalism that would also threaten a political revolution against the bureaucracy’s rule in the USSR by the Soviet working class. The regimes that were set up on this basis were deformed workers’ states. In Yugoslavia, Tito’s Communist Party, which had come to power as a result of a mass social revolutionary movement, established a deformed workers’ state. Like the bureaucracy in the USSR and Eastern Europe, it remained dedicated to the program of “socialism in one country” while trying to balance between the Soviet bureaucracy and imperialism.

By the late 1980s, these regimes were facing collapse, and the bureaucracies, fearing a political revolution from the working class, moved toward fully integrating themselves into the world capitalist system. As Trotsky had predicted in his *Revolution Betrayed*, this process entailed the transformation of the bureaucracies into a new ruling class and the destruction of all social conquests that had been bound up with the 1917 revolution. Politically and ideologically, the restoration involved a return of the bourgeoisies in South Eastern and Eastern Europe to their historical traditions of extreme nationalism and fascism, and a close collaboration with imperialism.

Yugoslavia was a particularly stark example of this process. In its drive toward restoration, the bureaucracy systematically promoted ethnic nationalism and appealed to imperialism. The result was a decade of ethnic massacres, civil wars, and NATO bombings that cost the lives of tens of thousands of people. It is in on this historical and social basis that the falsification of history and promotion of fascist ideology became central to the politics of these new bourgeois states.

None of this is mentioned in the book. Moreover, Subotic leaves out the massive involvement of the German state and bourgeoisie in this process of the rehabilitation of fascism and historical revisionism. However, German right-wing intellectuals and politicians have anticipated, encouraged and then used the far-right developments in Eastern Europe to further the rehabilitation of Nazism.

It was the German historian Ernst Nolte, who in the 1980s, before 1989–1991, advanced the argument that the crimes of the Nazis were a legitimate response to the “processes of violence” of the Russian

revolution. Nolte's argument that Auschwitz was nothing but a response to the "violence" allegedly unleashed by the Russian Revolution was but a variation of the fascist argument, analyzed at length by Subotic, that Nazism and fascism more broadly were legitimate and necessary responses to communism.

Although Nolte's falsifications were rejected by historians at the time, the destruction of the GDR and "reunification" of Germany in 1990 provided a major impetus for the return of German militarism. The break-up of Yugoslavia provided the pretext for the first German military intervention since the end of World War II, first in Croatia and then in Kosovo. In 1998, the well-known German writer Martin Walser declared in a widely publicized speech that there should be an end to using "Auschwitz" as "a moral cudgel" against Germany and opposed the erection of a Holocaust monument in Berlin. Shortly thereafter, a major exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht during World War in the late 1990s was shut down. In 2000, Nolte was awarded the Adenauer Prize of the Deutschland-Stiftung (Germany Foundation), which had close ties to the ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The Prague Declaration of 2008, which called for "Europe-wide condemnation of, and education about, the crimes of communism" was a major step toward officially legitimizing the views of Nolte. Subotic mentions it as a legitimization of the far-right policies of the governments in Lithuania, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia. However, she does not discuss its contents or the fact that its co-initiator was the former head of the Stasi Records Agency Joachim Gauck who would soon thereafter become the president of Germany and play a major role in the resurgence of German militarism.

The Declaration called for a "recognition that many crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity serving as a warning for future generations, in the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal," and proposed "adjustment and overhaul of European history textbooks so that children could learn and be warned about Communism and its crimes in the same way as they have been taught to assess the Nazi crimes." Statements of support for this declaration were issued by Nicolas Sarkozy, then president of France, the former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher, and the then US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Since 2014, the German bourgeoisie has ever more aggressively pursued a policy of remilitarization. This has gone hand in hand with systematic historical revisionism of the crimes of the Nazi regime. At the Munich Security Conference in January 2014, Joachim Gauck declared that there had to be an end to German military restraint. Just a few weeks later, a pro-Western government was installed in Kiev through a fascist-led coup that was supported by both Germany and the US. At the same time, the right-wing extremist professor Jörg Baberowski from Berlin's Humboldt University declared in *Der Spiegel* that "Nolte had been done an injustice," that he had been "historically right," and that "Hitler was not vicious."

These developments have been accompanied by a combination of complicity, silence and complacency by academics in the US and Germany, moods and tendencies to which Subotic ultimately adapts. There is no other way to explain why Subotic avoids acknowledging the extent to which the same far-right historical revisionism she criticizes in Eastern Europe have been legitimized and accepted in American and German academia. At several points in her book, she favorably quotes the American Professor Timothy Snyder (Yale University), who was one of the most prominent academic supporters of the 2014 coup in Ukraine. His book *Bloodlands* (2010) resurrected and legitimized the very narrative equating communism and fascism that Subotic criticizes in Croatia or Lithuania—a fact that can hardly have been lost on her.

Thus, although *Yellow Star, Red Star* provides valuable material on the resurgence of fascist forces, those interested in truly understanding and

fighting these developments will have to turn to studying the extensive record of the ICFI's struggle against the Stalinist counterrevolution and historical revisionism.

Read Christoph Vandreier, *Why Are They Back, Historical Falsification, Political Conspiracy, and the Return of Fascism in Germany*, available from Mehring Books.

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