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## BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND REPRESSION: DRAGICA VITOLOVIĆ SRZENTIĆ AND THE YUGOSLAV-SOVIET SPLIT<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This article tells the story of Dragica Vitolović Srzentić (1912-2015), a partisan and revolutionary, who, after the liberation of Yugoslavia from fascism, received the most confidential tasks in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When relations between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia deteriorated in 1948, she was entrusted with delivering Josip Broz Tito's letter to Stalin. As a result of this letter, Yugoslavia exited the Eastern Bloc, and the course of the Cold War in Europe took an unexpected turn. However, upon returning from Moscow, Dragica was accused of siding with the Soviets and sentenced to prison for several years. In 2007, she was rehabilitated by the court, and the renowned director Želimir Žilnik made a film about her. In this article, the authors reconstruct key moments of her life, the historical context, and the content of her most confidential diplomatic mission, as well as subsequent accusations, legal processes and contemporary rehabilitation. This case study surpasses the personal fate of one woman and is of broader significance for the history of Yugoslavia and the Cold War. To that end, this article is of broader significance for three strands of literature: on women in intelligence and diplomatic services, the history of Yugoslavia, and the Cold War. It aims to surpass the sexist portrayal of women in intelligence by celebrating their important contributions to intelligence and diplomatic operations in various official and unofficial roles.

### KEYWORDS

Cold War; Yugoslavia;  
Information Bureau;  
Dragica Vitolović  
Srzentić; Soviet Union

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## Introduction

The American public first learned of extensive Soviet espionage in the United States in 1948 when a ‘red spy queen’ came in from the cold and told her story to the New York World-Telegram (Olmsted 2004: 78). Elizabeth Bentley had managed two large spy rings in New York and Washington, but then she had suffered from ‘gnawing pangs of conscience’ and defected to the FBI.<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, across the Atlantic, on the Iron Curtain borders, one woman was entrusted with the most sensitive secret task—to fly to Moscow and personally deliver the letter from Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito to Joseph Stalin. As a result of this strictly confidential letter, Yugoslavia was condemned by the Soviets, creating a sharp rupture between Moscow and Belgrade in 1948. As argued by historians, ‘there is nothing as important and as defiant in the history of Tito’s (or republican) Yugoslavia than the split between Tito and Stalin in the summer of 1948’ (Jakovina and Previšić 2020: 7). This shattered the Soviet monolith, Yugoslavia exited the Eastern Bloc, made a rapprochement with the West, and the history of the Cold War in Europe took an unexpected turn.

The woman who, through her secret mission in Moscow, symbolically changed history, was later accused of espionage on the Soviet behalf. Her name was Dragica Vitolović Srzentić (1912-2015). This article tells the story of a partisan and revolutionary, anti-fascist fighter and diplomat who, after the liberation of Yugoslavia from fascism, received most confidential tasks in the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, serving in managerial positions, which was rare at that time, in Yugoslavia and beyond. Once accused of siding with the Soviets, she was interrogated by the closest associate of the influential Yugoslav Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Ranković. Eventually, she was convicted for a plan to ‘violently overthrow the existing state and political leadership’, aiming to subjugate Yugoslavia to Soviet control. She received a ten-year sentence, with an additional three-year restriction on civil rights following her release, and confiscation of property. Upon release from the prison, she withdrew into anonymity, emerging from it only in the tenth decade of her life.

In 2007, she was exonerated of all charges, and the renowned director Željimir Žilnik made a film about her with the striking title—*One Woman, One Century*. Apart from this film and her rare media appearances, the existing literature has failed to recognize her role, despite being pivotal to the events of the Cold War. There is no scholarly study addressing the interesting life path and eventful professional career of Dragica Srzentić. To fill this gap, the authors reconstruct critical points in her life, the historical context, and the content of her most confidential diplomatic mission, as well as subsequent accusations, legal processes, and contemporary exoneration. This case study undoubtedly surpasses the personal fate of one woman. It is of broader significance for

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<sup>2</sup> By naming more than 80 people in the United States who had helped her to spy, she effectively shut down Soviet espionage in North America for several years. Olmsted 2004: 78.

three strands of literature: on women in intelligence and diplomatic services, the history of Yugoslavia and the Cold War.

There is a growing literature on the role of women in intelligence during the First and Second World Wars (e.g. Proctor 2006; Toy and Smit 2018; Fry 2023) and individual accounts of female spies, intelligence operatives, and agents during the Cold War (e.g. Wilson 1999; Shahan 2019). Yet, this literature almost exclusively focuses on Western countries, especially the U.S. and the U.K. It is similar with recent literature on the role and status of women in intelligence organizations (Martin 2015; Durbin 2015; Lomas 2021), which is (1) still mainly devoted to intelligence organizations rather than on women as individuals (Shahan 2021: 570), and (2) centres on the West, with some exceptions (see: Hungary, Indonesia and Nigeria, in Pető 2020; Veronika 2024). Scholars have also been interested in the Yugoslav resistance movement during World War Two, the role of Yugoslavia during the Cold War due to its unique geopolitical position, and have studied its security apparatus (Trifković 2022; Jakovina 2011; Marković 2023). Yet, the role of women in this context has been largely neglected. To this end, this article contributes to increasing the diversity in intelligence studies, which has been recognised as a challenge (Scott and Jackson 2004; Van Puyvelde 2020; Stephenson and Rimmer 2023), by focusing on a personal account of a notable woman in intelligence/diplomatic service in socialist Yugoslavia during one of the most turbulent episodes of the Cold War in Europe. To tell Dragica Srzentić's story, the article relies on her own words (oral history), as shared in the documentary *One Woman, One Century*, media interviews and written recollections. Scholarly literature, archives, press clippings and legal documentation have been used to compare, add, clarify and verify her accounts, where needed, to paint a complete picture.

This research, thus, recognises the importance of oral history and memoirs in intelligence research (Haire 2014), by 'providing insights into lived experiences not available elsewhere' (Shahan 2021: 571). It advocates for a balance between official sources and documentation and women's voices and experiences, an emerging source that can speak to and supplement the official history (ibid: 574). The limitations of what personal narratives can do are known, as one has to account for the individual's motivations (Smith and Watson 2010), imperfections of human memory, and intended audiences. Still, such personal storytelling is rich and of great value, calling for critical engagement with the complexities existing within women's recollections of historical events (Bean 2013). As argued by Shahan, women's 'narratives tell us as much about the external world as they do the internal', as we can 'gain insights into the world around them both in terms of wider socio-political context and organizational structures, but it is also possible to gain insights into how they view themselves, their past work, and the stories they want to tell' (Shahan 2021: 575).

Finally, while this article acknowledges the role of women (and men) in various 'sexpionage' operations, including honey trapping and swallow relationships, it is firmly committed to surpassing the portrayal of women in intelligence as sexualised perversions or demonised objects (Proctor 2006: 3).

It aims to celebrate their pivotal contributions to intelligence and diplomatic operations in various official and unofficial roles, including as field agents, intelligence officers, managers, intelligence strategists and diplomats. As will be shown, Dragica Srzentić has contributed to strengthening the position of women in Yugoslav social and political life, as well as promoted left feminism.

From here, the article develops as follows. It starts by mapping Yugoslav-Soviet relations until 1948. It then introduces Dragica Srzentić, her biography, especially during World War Two, including the role of women in the liberation of Yugoslavia. The following section focuses on the early post-war years and the Tito-Stalin split 1948, centred on Dragica Srzentić's role. The article then moves to describe her return to Yugoslavia from Moscow, allegations of and trial for supporting the Soviets, as well as her recollections of her long time in prison. The following section covers the legal and political aspects of her exoneration 2007, as well as the relevance of Danica's story to Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav popular culture, primarily through the reactions to Žilnik's film about her. The conclusion summarises the main findings.

### **Shifting Alliances: The Yugoslav-Soviet Split and Its Origins**

Shortly after the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), its founding figure and leader of the revolution, Vladimir Lenin, passed away in 1924. He was succeeded as General Secretary of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) by Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin until 1953. Stalin instituted a regime marked by total unity, an inviolable cult of personality, and absolute control, underpinned by unprecedented repressive measures and terror. This system, later known as Stalinism, established a model of totalitarian rule (Muhić 1981; Arent 1998; Elleinstein 1980; Edele, 2020). A pervasive control extended even into the most private aspects of life, creating a society wholly subjugated to state power (Medvedev 2012; Gregory 2009; Wood 2004; Kotkin 1997). The extent of this terror is starkly illustrated by the extensive network of labour camps and the millions of citizens who were imprisoned, toiled, and perished within them. The historian and Sovietologist Robert Conquest famously referred to Stalin's regime as a 'camp empire' (Conquest 2007; Peri 2000). Ideologically, Stalinism represented a confluence of Great Russian imperial nationalism in foreign affairs and assimilatory chauvinism in domestic policy, intertwined with traditional anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and a persistent form of state socialism. Domestically, Stalinism was characterized by a paradoxical blend of 'chaos and petrified rigidity,' with the terror of the 'revolutionary dictatorship' being waged predominantly against the 'common people,' who had also suffered under the previous order, overthrown in the socialist revolution (Mur 2000: 444-445). In his foreign policy, Stalin's imperial ambitions—of which Yugoslavia was a casualty—were driven by the conflation of security with territorial expansion. This reflected a belief that a large state was essential for security and defence against external threats. Promoting proletarian revolutions was merely a veneer, concealing the longstanding expansive

aspirations of Russian nationalism to global dominance and the imposition of repressive regimes across Eastern Europe (Luis Gedis 2000: 30–33; Medvedev 2012: 744–749; Mastný 1998).

During the interwar period, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia maintained no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union's communist authorities, establishing a connection only with the onset of the Second World War in 1940. However, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), established in 1919, operated as a revolutionary force under the aegis of the Comintern, headquartered in Moscow. The Yugoslav regime banned the Communist Party in 1921, unleashing two decades of relentless repression and brutal persecution against its members. Despite this, the Party managed to survive, sustained by its underground operations and the backing of the Comintern—effectively, the Soviet Party. However, this external support proved a double-edged sword, as the Party also fell victim to Stalin's purges during the 1930s. Many cadres, who had eluded arrest and torture in Yugoslav prisons, met their end as victims of Stalinist terror within the Soviet Union. By 1937, the CPY lay fractured and decimated, not only by the murders, repression, and persecution it endured but also by the internal factionalism and divisions that plagued it until that year. In this turbulent context, Josip Broz Tito ascended to leadership, emerging as the unchallenged leader of the Yugoslav communists, a position he would hold through war and peace until he died in 1980.

In April 1941, the few Yugoslav communists who had survived both domestic and Soviet repression and awaited Hitler's inevitable assault on Yugoslavia swiftly launched a liberation war and a socialist revolution organized under the banner of the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (Partisans). Throughout the conflict, while Tito's leadership was indisputable, the driving force behind the victorious anti-fascist movement—which ended the war with 800,000 fighters under arms—was also the authority of Stalin. Consequently, after the triumph over fascism and the subsequent seizure of power in 1944–45, the new Yugoslav government, led by the communists, regarded its relationship with the Soviet Union, the hegemon of the Eastern Bloc, as paramount. This relationship was so crucial that it fell under the personal oversight of President Tito, who considered it the most delicate aspect of Yugoslav foreign policy. The Yugoslav president insisted that the ambassador in Moscow keep him informed at every opportunity and provide regular reports to the government and the relevant ministry (Mićunović 1984: 33; Kuljić 2005: 302).

Nevertheless, Soviet-Yugoslav relations deteriorated over time due to a complex interplay of divergence, cooperation and misunderstandings. The most dramatic rupture occurred in 1948, with by the Cominform Resolution. Stalin levelled grave accusations against Tito and the CPY, leading to a complete severance of ties between the two nations (Kačavenda 1999; Dedijer 1969; Radonjić 1979; Petranović and Dautović 1999; Kardelj 1980: 99–137). This split, the first within the socialist bloc, triggered significant geopolitical shifts with dramatic consequences for the CPY and its established political order. The conflict, though sudden, was not entirely unforeseen. Despite appearances—American

observers had deemed Yugoslavia ‘the most loyal Soviet satellite’—tensions had been brewing (Jakovina 2003: 232–242; Lis 2003: 17). Stalin’s need for absolute control over the states within his sphere of influence met with resistance in Yugoslavia, where internal dynamics obstructed complete Soviet dominance. The CPY, having waged a successful liberation war and an authentic socialist revolution independently, could not reconcile itself to a subordinate role.

The Yugoslav experience of emancipation and national liberation was fundamentally incompatible with subordination to any external power, including the headquarters of the international workers’ movement. By cultivating a form of socialist patriotism rooted in the pride of their recognized role in the global victory over fascism, Yugoslavia had already resisted Soviet attempts to impose unequal partnerships, such as the establishment of mixed Soviet-Yugoslav enterprises, by the summer of 1946. Proposals to create a joint bank were also rejected, and Yugoslav criticism of Soviet military and civilian experts working in the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia further strained relations. Such actions did not conform to Stalin’s model of unquestioning obedience and threatened to set a dangerous precedent for other countries of the Eastern Bloc. For these reasons, the Kremlin sought to bring Yugoslavia to heel, making conflict inevitable.

Stalin’s attempt to suppress Yugoslavia’s independence in foreign policy unfolded on the international stage as he sought to impose control over a defiant ally. Viewing Yugoslavia’s resistance to Western powers—such as the downing of American planes and the refusal to back down in the Trieste crisis—as dangerous adventurism, Stalin initially employed subtler methods of control. When these failed, he turned to direct pressure, believing that by crushing the CPY, which he viewed merely as an extension of the Soviet apparatus, Yugoslavia would submit to Soviet hegemony. The Information Bureau became the vehicle for enforcing this imperial policy, with tensions reaching a critical point at the end of 1947 when the USSR’s refusal to sign trade agreements threatened Yugoslavia’s industrialization and survival. The self-confidence of Yugoslavia’s leadership, bolstered by their wartime successes and revolutionary legitimacy, further exacerbated the rift. Tito’s triumphant tours of Eastern Bloc countries, where he was hailed as a hero, and his pursuit of a Balkan federation, posed a direct challenge to Stalin’s authority. This culminated in Stalin’s public rebuke of Bulgarian communist leader Georgi Dimitrov in January 1948 and the removal of Tito’s portraits from Eastern Bloc nations by February, signalling the beginning of a profound rupture in Yugoslav-Soviet relations.

The final visit of the Yugoslav delegation to Stalin in Moscow took place on 8 February 1948, marking a pivotal moment in the unravelling Soviet-Yugoslav relations. During this encounter, Stalin, alongside Molotov, confronted the Yugoslav representatives and the leadership of socialist Bulgaria. The broader idea of a Balkan and Eastern European federation, championed by Georgi Dimitrov, came under fierce scrutiny. Stalin unequivocally demanded the formation of a Bulgarian-Yugoslav federation. This directive was as much a means of political discipline as a strategy for the internal dissolution

of the Yugoslav federation, a prospect that Tito's government could not countenance. Stalin's frustration with the Yugoslav leadership was further fuelled by the deployment of Yugoslav soldiers to Albania, an act perceived as a bold assertion of autonomy. During the February meeting, the Yugoslav delegation reluctantly agreed to sign an accord committing them to consult with the Soviet government on all significant matters. Although tactically accepted, this concession posed a clear threat to Yugoslav sovereignty. Throughout the visit, Stalin treated the Yugoslavs as mere satellites, intent on imposing a policy of 'subordination' that sought to reduce Yugoslavia to the status of an occupied Eastern European state. Milovan Djilas, a member of that last Yugoslav delegation, later reflected on this experience, noting Stalin's determination to 'bring Yugoslavia down to the level of occupied Eastern European countries' (Djilas 1990: 110–119).

Shortly after their return to Belgrade, Tito convened a closed-door meeting of the party's top leadership at his private residence. The discussions were candid: the agreements on economic cooperation with the USSR were deemed unequal, relations with Moscow were deteriorating, and Yugoslavia's independence appeared increasingly under threat. Stalin's proposal for a federation with Bulgaria was dismissed as unfeasible and thus outright rejected (Petranović and Zečević 1988: 909–910). In response, Tito penned his first letter to Vyacheslav Molotov on 20 March 1948. This letter, a crucial step in addressing the deteriorating relations, expressed Tito's bewilderment at the recent Soviet actions, describing them as 'incomprehensible and surprising to us.' In his brief address to the Soviet foreign minister, Tito asserted that none of the Soviet advisers had ever complained about their treatment in Yugoslavia. Given the absence of genuine grievances, Tito demanded that the Soviet government disclose the actual reasons behind the withdrawal of its advisers. Dragica Srzentic, a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of socialist Yugoslavia, was entrusted with delivering Tito's letter to Moscow and bringing back the Soviet leadership's response to Belgrade.

### **From the anti-fascist struggle to the fight for gender equality**

Dragica Srzentić's journey from life in the impoverished village of Sovinjak in Istria (Croatia) to her confidential mission in 1948 exemplifies the hardships endured by many women in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Born into a low-income family of six, Srzentić faced adversity early on with the death of her father. Her mother worked tirelessly to secure her education, culminating in her completion of the Trade School in Zagreb (Stavrić 2012a). In the predominantly patriarchal and conservative environment of the Kingdom, women faced significant obstacles and limited prospects. The prevailing social and political milieu largely ignored their aspirations, with inequality manifesting in myriad ways—from denying suffrage to stringent legal constraints curtailing their autonomy and choices. Despite the daunting challenges, women's social organizations, such as, the liberal feminist Women's Movement from Belgrade,

and its Youth Section consisted of young communist women. These groups were pivotal in raising awareness about women's issues and pushing for greater rights (Pantelić 2011: 18-21). Many activists were part of left-wing political circles, mainly through the efforts of the banned CPY and the involvement of leftist intellectuals who were critical of the Kingdom's social realities. These intellectuals were instrumental in advocating radical changes and influencing the broader movement for equality and social justice.

Dragica Srzentić's move to Belgrade was significantly influenced by the social literature shared by her acquaintances and intellectuals, which steered her toward the left-wing principles of Soviet communism. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia's program articulated the most comprehensive stance against social and gender inequality, fascism, and ethnic nationalism. During the interwar period, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia faced severe crises that challenged its liberal democratic framework. Discussions on the state organization, federalism, and decentralization, mainly through the lens of national issues, often overshadowed the question of women's rights. Unlike most political parties in the Kingdom, the Yugoslav Communists actively recruited young women. Despite the challenging clandestine conditions, the party was committed to promoting economic, social, and political equality between the sexes. Dragica Srzentić officially joined the CPY in 1940 and was deeply involved in Belgrade's left-wing circles before World War II. She and her first husband, writer Jovan Popović, contributed significantly to the weekly *NIN* (Nedeljne informativne novine, that is, weekly information newspaper), which took a strong anti-fascist stance. However, her work with *Žena Danas* (*woman today*), a magazine advocating women's equality and emancipation, was particularly influential (Barać: 2022). Many of her female colleagues from the magazine later became active in the partisan movement and the anti-fascist struggle, a testament to the impact of her work.

"I joined the war primarily because I felt that fascism was a terrible danger, and an evil that surpassed just our country." (Pantelić 2011), Dragica Srzentić later reflected on her motivations. Many women joined the Partisan movement during World War II, giving them new social roles and equality with men. Under the new revolutionary authorities, women were granted the right to elect and be elected to various positions. The substantial involvement of women in the People's Liberation Army is evidenced by the estimated 100,000 participants by the war's end (Pantelić 2011: 35). A pivotal institution during the war that facilitated greater female activism was the Anti-Fascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia (AFŽJ), established in Bosanski Petrovac in 1942. The wartime experience was transformative for women partisans, fostering a new revolutionary identity that reshaped their post-war prospects. Dragica Srzentić spent the initial phase of the war in an Italian internment camp in Albania (1941-1943) following her arrest by Italian military in Montenegro. After the camp's liberation by Albanian Partisans in the summer of 1943 and Italy's surrender, she was assigned to Partisan units in Macedonia. In 1944, Dragica and her second husband, Vojislav Srzentić, were invited to the Supreme Headquarters of the

People's Liberation Army on the island of Vis. There, she swiftly earned the trust of the party leadership. By the decision of Aleksandar Ranković, a Politburo member of the CPY and the primary figure in the security sector, Dragica and her husband, along with mission head Vladimir Velebit, were dispatched to London. In London, her husband was responsible for negotiating UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) aid for Yugoslavia, while she led weekly BBC broadcasts, in which she reported on the war situation in Yugoslavia. Within a short period, she mastered English and gained her initial diplomatic and intelligence experience (Stavrić 2012a).

World War II in Yugoslavia concluded with the triumph of the anti-fascist partisan movement, surpassing all comparable resistance movements in Europe in scale and organization. The subsequent revolutionary change in power marked a complete departure from the political and social values of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The new Yugoslav Federal Republic was founded on principles of anti-fascist struggle, social equality, and a distinct socialist political system. One of the key indicators of this transformation was the advancement of women's rights. The 1946 constitution, a milestone in the history of gender equality, enshrined women's rights in the legislative sphere and granted them full political and social rights for the first time. However, despite these advances, the representation of women in the leading post-war political, military, and security structures was notably limited. Even though influential former partisans could use their sway to advance gender equality, they were still a minority in the highest party and state positions. Although women constituted approximately 12% of the Partisan army, their representation in military structures decreased markedly to only 0.3% in the post-war period (Pantelić 2011: 52). Despite this decline, the changes from the Kingdom period were both visible and significant, laying a foundation for a new perspective on the role of women in early Yugoslav socialism.

In the summer of 1945, Dragica Srzentić stepped into the complex world of Yugoslav diplomacy and intelligence, having been recommended by Aleksandar Ranković, the head of the Yugoslav Intelligence Service (OZNA). The post-war communist regime faced an acute shortage of diplomatic expertise, experience, and effective organization. Consequently, the new leadership retained several diplomats from the erstwhile civil parties in pivotal ambassadorial roles. Upon her appointment, Dragica, alongside Vladimir Velebit, was granted considerable autonomy by the Central Committee of the CPY to rebuild the Yugoslav diplomatic corps from the ground up. She was Deputy Secretary General and Deputy Head of the Department for Africa and Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, being one of the very few women of such high rank at that time.

Until early 1948, Yugoslav diplomacy was deeply entwined with Soviet interests. The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed on April 11, 1945, in Moscow, was the cornerstone of post-war Yugoslav-Soviet relations. This treaty, sealed by Josip Broz Tito and the Soviet delegation, marked the peak of Yugoslavia's alignment with Soviet policies. In a ceremonial toast, Tito hailed the agreement as the realization of Yugoslavia's long-held aspiration to live in a

harmonious alliance with the Soviet Union, which, under Stalin's 'genius leadership,' had triumphed over a common adversary (Dimić et al 2010: 19). For the nascent Yugoslav Federal People's Republic (FNRR), the Soviet Union and its bloc of 'people's democracies' were perceived as the sole bastion of support for Yugoslav interests on the global stage. Tito declared in the National Assembly on 1 February 1946, that the 'unbreakable alliance' with the Soviet Union was a cornerstone of Yugoslav sovereignty and peaceful progress (Dimić and Životić 2012: 354). However, by the first half 1948, the correspondence between Yugoslav and Soviet leaders began to unravel this perceived unbreakable alliance. The fabric of Yugoslav communism's post-war orientation was increasingly questioned, setting the stage for a significant and dramatic realignment in the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe.

### **A Letter as a Point of Historical Separation**

In late March 1948, Dragica Srzentić was tasked with a delicate mission: to deliver a confidential letter from the Yugoslav party leadership to Moscow. The travel arrangements were expedited under the authority of the Marshal Tito cabinet. Her stay in Moscow, which lasted a week, was marked by an increasing sense of unease, which she later reported back to Belgrade. On 27 March 1948, she received Stalin's response, in the form of a letter from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party (Bolsheviks) addressed to Josip Broz Tito and the CPY leadership, and she took it to Belgrade. The choice of date was not accidental: it marked the anniversary of the 1941 coup in Belgrade that had overthrown the pro-Nazi Yugoslav government and triggered the German occupation of Yugoslavia. This deliberate date imbued the Soviet letter with an added layer of defiance and confrontation. The content of Stalin's letter was markedly different from previous communications. It was unusually harsh, laden with severe accusations against the CPY. These accusations, which included charges of 'nationalism' and 'bourgeois' tendencies, reflected the escalating rift between the two communist parties. This letter was not merely a diplomatic rebuke but an explicit effort to compel the CPY to realign itself with Soviet directives, effectively subordinating the party and Yugoslavia to Soviet hegemony. The tone and content of the letter underscored a strategic shift from ideological solidarity to outright political domination, signalling a profound transformation in Soviet-Yugoslav relations. (Banac 1990: 119-141)

The crux of the Soviet complaint was that the Yugoslav party continued to function as a semi-illegal organization shrouded in secrecy. It was alleged that the CPY failed to publish its positions, announcements, or meeting information, stifling internal party democracy and subjecting officials to the surveillance of the secret police. The Soviets specifically targeted Aleksandar Ranković, objecting to his dual role as Minister of State Security and chief personnel officer of the CPY. They suggested that this arrangement allowed the secret police to overshadow the party. Another accusation was that the Yugoslav communists neglected 'class struggle' and failed to curb capitalist elements within society,

particularly in the rural areas. The Soviets contended that the CPY's integration into the Popular Front had diluted its revolutionary commitment. Finally, the letter accused the CPY of failing to address 'suspicious Marxists' and alleged 'spies' within its ranks. Vladimir Velebit, in particular, was highlighted as an 'English spy' (Petranović and Zečević 1988: 908-909). Additionally, Dragica's husband, Vojislav Srzentić, who was employed in the Economic Council, was directly mentioned and accused of undermining relations.

In response, the CPY leadership convened on 12 April 1948, to formulate a reply. Tito proposed a shift in the framework of relations—from party-to-party subordination to state-to-state equality. This marked a strategic redefinition of Yugoslavia's position, asserting national sovereignty and reframing resistance to Stalin as a broader struggle for independence. The CPY's reply emphasized that Soviet accusations stemmed from misinformation and misinterpretation. It rejected claims of anti-Soviet conspiracy and reaffirmed ideological solidarity with socialism, stating: "No matter how deeply one of us may love the land of socialism—the USSR—they must not love their own country any less, especially when it too is building socialism, as is the case with the FPRY, for which hundreds of thousands of its finest people have died" (Petranović and Zečević 1988: 912).

This statement laid the ideological foundation for Yugoslav socialist patriotism and the development of a distinct path to socialism. Loyalty to the USSR was no longer seen as a virtue if it conflicted with national interests; in fact, it was increasingly viewed as betrayal. The CPY firmly denied conducting any covert anti-Soviet campaign and reminded Moscow of its unwavering support during WWII, portraying Yugoslav communists as the USSR's most sincere allies. The Soviet insinuation that the CPY had turned against the USSR while deceiving the Yugoslav people was particularly offensive, as it implied a rupture between the party and the masses. The CPY countered by asserting the inseparability of the party and the people, and that pro-Soviet sentiment among Yugoslavs had been cultivated by the CPY itself. This episode marked a decisive moment in Yugoslavia's assertion of independence, with long-term implications for its domestic and foreign policy. The defence of sovereignty became a central tenet of Yugoslav governance, persisting well beyond Stalin's death and into the era of Gorbachev (Petranović and Zečević 1988: 913).

In response to Soviet accusations, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) firmly rejected claims of lacking internal democracy or failing to pursue class struggle. It denied the alleged rise of capitalist elements, asserting that no country had undergone such rapid and profound social transformation as Yugoslavia following its liberation and socialist revolution. While acknowledging the Soviet model as a source of inspiration, the CPY emphasized its right to build socialism in forms suited to its own national conditions, stating: "We are not inventing a new socialism, but adapting to the realities of our society" (Petranović and Zečević 1988: 915).

This assertion of a distinct Yugoslav path to socialism—in contrast to the imposition of Soviet orthodoxy—became a central ideological controversy that

persisted for decades, raising the broader question: do socialist states have the right to pursue independent models, or must they conform to Soviet authority? For the first time, a socialist country openly criticized Soviet activities. The CPY accused Soviet intelligence services of recruiting Yugoslav citizens, including military officers and high-ranking officials, which it viewed as a direct threat to national sovereignty. The party reiterated previous verbal protests and declared it would not tolerate such practices. It insisted that Yugoslavia's own security services were fully capable of countering foreign capitalist influences and internal class enemies, and offered to share relevant information with Soviet authorities through official channels (Ibid).

The Soviet response in early May 1948 was harsh and dismissive. Moscow interpreted Yugoslavia's stance as a refusal to acknowledge its "errors" and accused the CPY of reacting to criticism in a petty-bourgeois manner rather than through Marxist self-reflection. The letter ridiculed Yugoslav leaders for allegedly denying facts and behaving childishly, and condemned criticism of the Soviet ambassador in Belgrade as offensive and hostile—equating him with Western envoys. Among the many insults, the Soviets twice claimed they had "liberated Yugoslavia and Belgrade from German occupation," and reiterated previous accusations: anti-Sovietism, abandonment of Marxist principles, and lack of party democracy. The final blow came with a comparison between Yugoslav communists and their Eastern bloc counterparts, praising the latter for their modesty while accusing Yugoslav leaders of excessive self-congratulation (Petranović and Zečević 1988: 917-922).

To discipline the Yugoslav communists and bring them under his control, Stalin convened a meeting of the Information Bureau (IB; Cominform), an organization of communist parties. The conference, held in Bucharest on 28 June 1948 culminated in adopting a Resolution on the situation in the CPY. Neither the location, close to Yugoslavia's eastern borders nor the date, laden with war symbolism, were chosen by chance. The resolution delivered a clear and ominous message. After listing the various 'errors' of the Yugoslav communists, it called upon the membership and 'healthy forces' within the CPY to overthrow the current party leadership and install a 'new internationalist leadership of the CPY.' The Resolution received almost universal endorsement from communist parties worldwide, who quickly aligned themselves with Stalin's condemnation of Yugoslavia (Gibianskii 2004: 27–47; Pleterski 1985: 359–361; Petranović 1998: 204–216). They moved to sever all ties with the CPY, effectively isolating it on the global communist stage. Within the CPY, members were forced to take a stand: either support the resolution and Stalin or reject them both. Dragica Srzentić, by her admission, refused to accept the accusations levied by the Soviet leadership in the IB Resolution. However, the written polemic between Belgrade and Moscow, set in motion by her mission to Moscow in March 1948, would have far-reaching consequences. It opened a Pandora's box of issues and dilemmas for every Yugoslav communist, forcing them to confront the existential crisis facing their party and their country.

## Dragica Srzentić as 'Ibeovac'

The Resolution did not immediately bring changes to Yugoslavia's foreign policy or its internal development model. Despite the accusations from the Soviet Union, Yugoslav diplomacy outwardly supported the USSR in international relations. This stance was visibly demonstrated at the Danube Conference in Belgrade at the end of July and at the session of the UN General Assembly in September 1948. These actions were part of a broader, albeit short-lived, strategy by the Yugoslav communists to counter the claims of 'anti-Sovietism' in their country. By maintaining their support for the Soviet Union on the international stage, they aimed to dispel doubts about Yugoslavia's commitment to 'internationalist' principles. However, the situation deteriorated as the Soviet government began increasingly hostile actions in 1949. These actions included cancelling agreements and withdrawing international support in disputes involving Yugoslavia, further exacerbating the conflict and leading to Yugoslavia's growing isolation on the global scene. Stalin used the negative example of Yugoslavia as a pretext to initiate the complete Sovietization of Eastern Europe. The criticism of the Yugoslav communists by the CPSU became a template for constructing an indictment of 'Titoism,' which provided a rationale for purging all questionable elements within the Eastern European communist parties. This marked the beginning of widespread party purges and staged trials across Eastern Europe at the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s.

With the correspondence with the Yugoslav leadership and the IB Resolution failing to induce the CPY into repentance and self-criticism, Stalin escalated his measures, directly threatening the survival of socialist Yugoslavia. From the autumn of 1949, Yugoslavia faced a complete economic blockade imposed by the Eastern Bloc countries. In a context where relations with the West were virtually non-existent, this blockade inflicted severe material damage on a country already devastated by the four-year war. In late November 1949, the Information Bureau held another meeting in Budapest. After the session, the Cominform issued a Second Resolution against Yugoslavia, ominously titled 'The Yugoslav Communist Party in the Hands of Murderers and Spies.' The resolution branded Tito's leadership as a 'group of spies' and 'enemies of the people of Yugoslavia,' claiming they served the interests of Anglo-American imperialists. As a result, the CPY was deemed unworthy of calling itself 'communist.' This resolution declared that the struggle against 'Tito's clique' was an 'international duty' that all communists were obliged to fulfil. The intensifying hostility towards the CPY was intended to persuade European communists that any means used to overthrow 'Tito's clique' were justified, given the characterization of the Yugoslav regime as 'fascist' and subservient to Western imperialism. This rhetoric exacerbated the economic pressure and international isolation of Yugoslavia and was compounded by military threats from the East. In 1949, these threats manifested in frequent troop movements along the Yugoslav border, and daily border incidents resulted in the deaths of numerous Yugoslav soldiers and civilians. The escalating tension forced

Yugoslavia to make large allocations for defence, keeping the army in a high readiness state, further strained the country's already fragile economy. Tito, who had long been a symbol of Yugoslav resistance against fascism and now against Stalinism, became the target of multiple assassination attempts by Soviet agents, as documented by Stalin's biographers. These efforts to eliminate Tito highlighted the extreme measures Stalin was willing to take to subdue Yugoslavia and bring it back under Soviet control (Ministry of foreign affairs of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1951).

Amid an escalating threat of war and the potential for aggression against Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav leadership became acutely sensitive to any signs of internal dissent. From the summer of 1948, Stalin anticipated that the 'internationalism' of a significant portion of the CPY's membership would prevail, undermining Yugoslavia's independent course of resistance. He expected internal opposition to thwart Tito's defiance, believing that Yugoslav loyalty to the Soviet model would reassert itself. Moscow also bolstered its position by supporting the IB emigration, which by August 1948 had swelled to around 5,000 individuals. Should the need arise, these émigrés were ready to serve as a foundation for a potential new party leadership in Yugoslavia. Concurrently, Yugoslav intelligence and security structures, under the supervision of Aleksandar Ranković and the UDBA (Internal Security Administration), began to detect that support for the IB Resolution had sympathizers within the party's ranks. Within a year, it became evident that such internal support posed a significant threat to the country's independence, especially if accompanied by a military intervention from the Soviet Union. This fear was further exacerbated by the onset of the Korean War, which intensified the repression of those who supported Stalin's policies. The repression manifested in both heightened surveillance and the establishment of the first internment camps for those deemed to be pro-Soviet sympathizers (Goli otok, Sveti Grgur). Historian Martin Previšić (2022: 87-102) identifies several motivations among Party members who aligned themselves with Stalin's critical stance. Some IB sympathizers harboured a sincere ideological attachment to Moscow, deeply rooted in their commitment to the Soviet model of socialism. Others combined this ideological loyalty with traditional Russophile sentiments, particularly prevalent in Serbia and Montenegro. Additionally, some party members used the contents of the IB Resolution as a vehicle to voice their criticisms of certain aspects of Yugoslav internal policies. Becoming an '*Ibeovac*' (a supporter of the IB) could signify various things: a staunch Stalinist commitment, involvement in espionage, a critique of the Party's direction, or simply a continued loyalty to information and influence emanating from Moscow.

Dragica Srzentić recalled her position after the 1948 split with Moscow:

I also thought it was wrong to talk about Russians condescendingly. A caricature of a Russian soldier adorned with wristwatches appeared in *Jež*. Furthermore, that soldier left his bones here. Then, a series of articles with the worst insults to Russians appeared in *Borba*. Listen, we were brought up on their socialism.

Nobody ever mentioned Stalin's crimes! On the contrary, the executives glorified him to the point of distaste: 'We should be happy that Stalin and we live under the same sun!' I thought we should agree with the Russians and solve the problems through dialogue (Stavrić 2012b).

Dragica and her husband, Vojislav Srzentić, were part of a small faction within the Party that did not openly endorse the IB Resolution but harboured reservations and doubts about how Yugoslav politics was handling the break with Moscow. The climate of widespread arrests required caution, particularly since Dragica's husband was directly mentioned in Stalin's letter. UDBA's methods relied on a network of informants who provided information on the movements and conversations of those deemed suspicious. In her Belgrade home, UDBA operatives quickly gathered evidence of the couple's disputed activities and statements, linking them to several other individuals in their circle. On 31 May 1951, Dragica and Vojislav Srzentić were arrested. The investigative process began in late June, with Aleksandar Ranković's confidant, Svetislav Stefanović, involved in some of the proceedings.

After half a year of investigation, the public prosecutor filed an indictment at the end of 1951, leading to a trial from 7 to 10 January 1952, in the District Court of Belgrade. The central charge accused Vojislav Srzentić, Dragica Srzentić, Milka Žicina, Ljuba Mihajlović, Mitar Sredanović and Dragomir Lalović under the Law on Criminal Offenses Against the People and the State. According to the indictment, the group had embraced the 'hostile actions' of the Eastern Bloc against Yugoslavia and participated in a plan to 'violently overthrow the existing state and political leadership' and to change the state and social order of the FNRJ, allegedly aiming to subjugate Yugoslavia to Soviet control (Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina vol. 36, fasc. 38). The prosecution's evidence relied heavily on information from the UDBA and confessions extracted during the investigative process. Vojislav Srzentić was primarily accused of accepting the Cominform Resolution of 1948, criticizing Yugoslav government policies, and attempting to expand and organize a network of individuals aligned with that line of thought. Notably, the prosecution highlighted Dragica Srzentić's trip to Italy in November 1949, allegedly under Vojislav's instructions, to establish contacts with members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Italy. Vojislav was also accused of planning to flee Yugoslavia and continuing his fight against the Yugoslav leadership from abroad. Because of that, later party narratives portrayed him as an 'NKVD spy'.<sup>3</sup> Dragica Srzentić was also implicated in the group, which repeatedly criticized Yugoslav policies and supposedly sought a violent change with Moscow's assistance. The investigation focused primarily on instances of verbal dissent. However, it also cited the reading of confidential cables from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which Ljubo Mihajlović allegedly brought to members of the accused group.

3 The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Russian: Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del) abbreviated as NKVD, was the interior ministry of the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1946.

The trial was brief, with defence lawyers appointed *ex officio*. On 11 January 1952, the District Court sentenced Vojislav Srzentić to 15 years of rigorous imprisonment (District Court of the City of Belgrade 1952). Dragica Srzentić received a 10-year sentence, with an additional three-year restriction on civil rights following her release and confiscation of property.

At the height of the conflict with the Soviet Union (1948-1956), a total of 15,737 individuals were arrested and sentenced in Yugoslavia. Among them, it is estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 were women (Previšić 2022: 109; Pantelić 2011: 93; Pantelić 2010: 97-106). All convicted women were sent to special camps in Ramski Rit, Zabela, Stolac, Lonjsko Polje, and on the island of Sveti Grgur. Following the normalization of Yugoslav-Soviet relations after Stalin's death—formalized by Belgrade and Moscow declarations—the threat of Soviet military intervention receded, leading to the cessation of repression and the release of many prisoners. Dragica Srzentić's sentence was initially reduced to eight years in 1954, and she was eventually released on parole in 1955. Her husband, Vojislav, was paroled in 1956. Dragica spent a total of four-and-a-half years in prison, primarily in Stolac (Herzegovina), under harsh conditions. Later, she recalled all the suffering she experienced in prison:

‘At first, we were held in isolation. Then, Milka [mentioned above as part of the group; authors’ note] and I were taken to a wing, where on the wall a banner was displayed, with the words “we are returning to the party.” They put a crown of thorns, leaves, and nettles on me, torn shoes without toes that had a ‘Made in USSR’ label on them, as well as a ribbon that read “Queen of the Infrombiro Ball.” I laugh about it now, but it was terrifying at the time.’ (Stavrić 2012b)

The prison sentences were intended not only to isolate those deemed threats to national independence but also to serve as a means of political ‘re-education.’ Even after their release, the stigma of being an *‘ibeovac’* lingered for all convicts. They remained under the surveillance of police and intelligence authorities, making reintegration into society challenging (Škodrić 2024: 179-204). Until the end of socialist Yugoslavia, Dragica Srzentić led a reclusive life, continually monitored and suspected by local authorities. For a long time, she struggled to find work, as local party officials and members of the UDBA actively prevented her from securing any employment. Eventually, in 1960, she was able to retire. Through her acquaintance with a prominent party official, Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo—whom she had known since her partisan days in Macedonia—she obtained an apartment in Belgrade, where she lived until her death in 2015. She continued to live in Serbia after the break-up of Yugoslavia.

## Legal and Social Rehabilitation

Since the postwar period, Europe has frequently employed mediated trials and a range of specific laws to regulate the commemoration of the Second World War. Additionally, processes like ‘decommunization’ in Central and Eastern Europe and transitional justice measures in recent decades have produced

many instances of legislation explicitly designed to address historical issues, commonly known as memory laws. Some scholars refer to it as ‘the judicialization of the legacy of traumatic pasts’ (Rousso 2007: 31). In comparison with Western European countries, where the purpose of the law is to limit radical revision of the past, ‘becoming an important tool in preventing the offense to the memory of war victims, in the post-Yugoslav space, courts are precisely used to cement the revisionist image of the past’ (Bešlin 2013: 85; see also Škorić and Bešlin 2017). Contrary to other post-communist European states, Serbia was reluctant for a long time to address its communist past, including the crimes committed by the communist regime against its own citizens. Once it finally started to cope with the past, this led to the reinterpretation of the Second World War and state socialism. Law has been an essential instrument of the official politics of memory in Serbia since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 (Djureinovic 2018: 234). In 2006, exactly half a century after the dissolution of the *Cominform* in 1956 and the abolition of the political prisoners’ prison on Goli Otok, Serbia adopted its first *lex specialis* (Rehabilitation Act, ‘Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia’, No. 33/06), regulating the rehabilitation of persons who were deprived of life, liberty or other rights for political or ideological reasons, with or without a court or administrative decision, starting from 6 April 1941 (start of the war in Yugoslavia) to the date of the law’s commencement.

As argued by Vodinelić, ‘legal rehabilitation serves to remove the stigma of conviction from the victim of political repression to repair or mitigate the consequences of conviction or punishment, and to distinguish between the law of a democratic state and the injustice of an authoritarian state’ (Vodinelić 2004: 9). It essentially refers to measures aimed at annulling a conviction or punishment, which were the result of three forms of political injustice characteristic of authoritarian regimes: political legislation, political judiciary, and punishment without any formal procedure (ibid). Exoneration is conducted as a court procedure and (if successful) leads to the annulment of all legal consequences that resulted from a particular decision, as well as the annulment of legal consequences that arose from the persecution of individuals for political and ideological reasons without judicial or administrative decisions (Midorovic 2008: 560). Convictions of exonerated individuals were vacated, decisions made against them annulled, the rights taken away, limited or denied were restored.<sup>4</sup>

The 2006 Rehabilitation Act was heavily criticised by legal experts and judges due to material and procedural deficiencies, and it was replaced in 2011 with a new law.<sup>5</sup> Still, thousands of people used the 2006 Act, aiming to

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4 Complete rehabilitation cannot be achieved without simultaneously addressing the issue of compensation for rehabilitated individuals, the return of confiscated property, and compensation for rights that were taken away, limited, or denied. Yet, this was not really done in Serbia. See: Midorovic 2008.

5 See more on rehabilitation in Serbia in: Djureinovic 2018; Vodinelić 2007; Samardžić 2021.

rehabilitate themselves or their relatives, including Dragica Srzentić. On 23 June 2006, she filed requests for the exoneration of herself (Case No. 132/06) and her husband, Vojislav (Case No. 128/06). According to the information received by the Higher Court in Belgrade, the two cases were joined (Higher Court of Belgrade 2024b). On 27 February 2007, the Court approved their exoneration. The case files were destroyed after the retention period expired (Higher Court of Belgrade 2024a).

The exoneration coincided with a broader social rehabilitation of Dragica Srzentić. The renowned film director Želimir Žilnik played a pivotal role in putting her story in the spotlight. As one of the pioneers of docu-fiction, Žilnik's extensive filmography is marked by a deep engagement with socially relevant themes, often exploring the lives of ordinary, marginalized people and their struggles within various social and political systems. The story of Dragica Srzentić was compelling enough to inspire Žilnik to adapt it into a film. According to him, Dragica's narrative offers a unique lens through which the tumultuous history of the 20th century could be understood—distinct from the conventional portrayals found in the media or scholarly literature. The documentary title, *One Woman, One Century*, implicitly suggests a historical perspective centred on a woman's experience, through which key events in Yugoslav history are reflected. By choosing this approach, Žilnik allows the audience to engage with the remarkable life of a 20th-century woman without the mediating voice of historians and political experts.

The film was well received, garnering sympathetic responses from audiences across the former Yugoslavia. At numerous festivals, viewers connected deeply with Dragica Srzentić's story, often engaging in discussions with her during screenings, where many of the historical topics raised in the film were further explored. Screenings were frequently attended by former Goli Otok inmates and their families, adding a personal dimension to the experience. The film's popularity led to its adaptation into a three-part documentary series, which premiered on Radio-Television Vojvodina in 2012. It was also shown at Stanford University, where Želimir Žilnik spoke to students at the invitation of the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (Žilnik 2013). At the event, Žilnik reiterated his intent to provide a more nuanced historical interpretation through Dragica's testimony, offering a fresh perspective on the turbulent history of the 20th century (Stanford 2014).

## Conclusion

The role of women in Yugoslav society underwent a profound transformation during the War of Liberation and the socialist revolution of 1941-1945. Unlike the earlier era under the Kingdom, women emerged as pivotal agents of political and social change. Their collective experience in the anti-fascist struggle became foundational for subsequent generations, legitimizing post-war expressions of gender equality and emancipation as core values of the communist left, which were subsequently codified and institutionalized. The life of Dragica

Vitolović Srzentić vividly exemplifies the motivations, aspirations, and challenges faced by Yugoslav women in the revolutionary struggle. It highlights the opportunities and limitations for their political and social affirmation in the nascent socialist state. The post-war government, committed to revolutionary societal change, sought to replicate Soviet systems and value norms. The first Yugoslav post-war constitution, modelled after the Soviet Constitution of 1936, enshrined full legal equality and political and social rights for women. Dragica Srzentić's career reflects this social change and continuity with the equality experienced during the partisan war. Her numerous roles in the post-war diplomatic structures, where the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) began building the system from the ground up, signified the leadership's trust in her abilities. However, her example was not widespread within the highest echelons of socialist Yugoslavia's party and state structures. The full affirmation of women and the pursuit of complete equality encountered numerous challenges in the construction of a socialist society, where the close alliance with the Soviet Union played a central role.

The 1948 conflict between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union was a critical event at the dawn of the Cold War in Europe. Its importance and consequences were formative for Yugoslavia's social transformation, its relations with socialist states in Eastern Europe, and the broader left. At the centre of this conflict was Dragica Srzentić, who, in March 1948, was entrusted with supervising and implementing the first confidential correspondence on the Belgrade-Moscow route. The controversy from this exchange catalysed the June breakup when Yugoslavia was excluded from all forms of pro-Soviet integration by the Cominform Resolution. Stalin's harsh strategy toward Belgrade, which included military threats, not only triggered the ideological demarcation of the Yugoslav communists from Moscow but also led to a complete reversal in Yugoslavia's foreign policy orientation and internal security. In a short time, Yugoslavia transformed from the most loyal "Soviet satellite" to the fiercest critic of Soviet foreign and domestic policy. This abrupt shift had to be managed by the Yugoslav communists, with severe repercussions for those whose sympathies leaned more towards Moscow, and Dragica Srzentić was a victim of this policy.

By her admission, Dragica did not accept the content of the Cominform Resolution, but she was critical of Yugoslav policy towards the Soviet Union. The fear that Stalin might launch a military intervention accelerated the regime's repressive measures, making dissent within the Party, especially factionalism, intolerable. The arrest and trial of Dragica Srzentić and her husband, along with others labelled as pro-Soviet (*Ibeovci*), illustrate the extent of the violent transformation within the Yugoslav Party and state. To affirm its independence and ensure exceptional socialist development, the CPY defined the term "*Ibeovac*" as a political disqualification to be ruthlessly suppressed to safeguard the independence of domestic and foreign policy during the Cold War. Thus, Dragica Srzentić's brutal imprisonment, subsequent social ostracism, and surveillance by security services underscore the severity of Yugoslav-Soviet relations during the Cold War and their impact on domestic social trends.

The exoneration of individuals unjustly convicted in socialist Yugoslavia was only addressed after 2000 in Serbia, following political changes after the fall of Slobodan Milošević. Paradoxically, Dragica Srzentić, a staunch communist condemned by her comrades, found social and judicial rehabilitation in post-communism. The legal rehabilitation thus became part of a broader debate on the socialist legacy, often marked by uncritical historical revisionism and selective remembrance within the postsocialist “politics of history.” In this context, Želimir Žilnik’s documentary *One Woman, One Century* offers a more nuanced and profoundly humanized portrayal of the past—one that resists binary divisions of victims and perpetrators, and instead opens a space for understanding a forgotten generation of Yugoslav women whose life stories both shaped and transcended the ideological frameworks of their time.

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## Između revolucije i represije: Dragica Vitolović Srzentić i jugoslovensko-sovjetski raskol

### Apstrakt

Ovaj rad rekonstruše životnu priču Dragice Vitolović Srzentić (1912–2015), partizanke i revolucionarke koja je, nakon oslobođenja Jugoslavije od fašizma, u Ministarstvu inostranih poslova dobijala najpoverljivije zadatke. Kada su se odnosi između Sovjetskog Saveza i Jugoslavije pogoršali 1948. godine, povereno joj je da u Moskvu odnese pismo Josipa Broza Tita Staljinu. Posledice te prepiske bile su dalekosežne: Jugoslavija je napustila istočni blok, a tok Hladnog rata u Evropi dobio je neočekivan pravac. Međutim, po povratku iz Moskve Dragica je optužena da se svrstala uz Sovjete i osuđena na višegodišnju zatvorsku kaznu. Godine 2007. sud je doneo odluku o njenoj rehabilitaciji, a poznati reditelj Želimir Žilnik snimio je film o njenom slučaju. Autori u ovom članku rekonstruišu ključne trenutke njenog života, širi istorijski kontekst, kao i sadržaj najpoverljivije diplomatske misije, te potonje optužbe, pravne postupke i savremeni proces rehabilitacije. Kao studija slučaja, ova priča prevazilazi individualnu sudbinu jedne žene i ima širi značaj za razumevanje istorije Jugoslavije i Hladnog rata. U tom smislu, rad doprinosi trima istraživačkim poljima: studijama o ženama u obaveštajnim i diplomatskim službama, istoriji Jugoslavije i istoriji Hladnog rata. Istovremeno, cilj mu je da prevaziđe seksističke obrasce predstavljanja žena u obaveštajnom radu, ukazujući na njihove važne doprinose obaveštajnim i diplomatskim operacijama u različitim, formalnim i neformalnim ulogama.

Ključne reči: Hladni rat; Jugoslavija; Informbiro; Dragica Vitolović Srzentić; Sovjetski Savez