(U) With the comfort and hindsight of a half-century, President Harry Truman's decision to commit American power to save South Korea from Communist aggression in late June 1950 stands as perhaps America's finest moment of the Cold War. By making a difficult commitment, by sacrificing 50,000 American lives in the end, Truman upheld Western values and interests where they were directly threatened. It is easy to overlook the unpopularity and unpleasantness of a war which, though necessary, nevertheless remains unknown to most Americans today. Our sacrifices in Korea beginning in the disastrous summer of 1950 merit recognition and honor in their own right, yet they deserve our attention for another reason almost completely neglected in accounts of the period. By dispatching the 24th Infantry and 1st Cavalry Divisions from comfortable occupation duty in Japan to death and destruction in Korea in mid-summer 1950, the United States actually did nothing less than save the world from a global conflagration.

(U) The issue was found not in Asia but on the other side of the planet: in Stalin's private war with Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia. Determined to destroy Tito and his heretic Communist regime at any cost, Stalin was impatiently planning for an all-out invasion of Yugoslavia by the Soviet military and East European satellite forces. As U.S. and NATO records indicate, the thoroughly planned Soviet attack would have resulted in Western military commitment and almost certainly nuclear response. It would have been the Third World War.

(U) Perhaps ironically, Stalin was initially inflamed by Tito's revolutionary ardor. Beginning in mid-1947, Tito's intelligence apparatus opened the "Greek line," supplying Communist insurgents in neighboring Greece with weapons and supplies, an effort which quickly outpaced Soviet support to the guerrillas; 10,000 Yugoslav "volunteers" fought alongside their Greek allies too. Stalin found Tito's fervor and undue risk-taking troubling; indeed, the Greek issue was the last of a long series of Yugoslav actions Moscow disliked. Stalin sent Tito a letter criticizing the "Greek line," observing that the Communist insurgency stood no chance of success due to support for Athens by the United States, "the strongest state in the world." ¹

(U) When Belgrade astonishingly refused to back down, Moscow exacted retribution. On June 28, 1948, Serbia's national day, Stalin expelled Yugoslavia from the Communist Information Bureau - the Cominform, the Moscow-led successor to the Comintern - setting off an unprecedented conflict in Communist

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ranks which would nearly provoke the Third World War. The Soviets immediately dispensed vitriolic propaganda, denouncing Tito and his government as a "spy group" in the pay of American and British "imperialism." Purges of alleged "Titoists" began with fervor throughout the Soviet bloc, nowhere more thoroughly than in Hungary, the satellite on the frontline of the Yugoslav menace. László Rajk, Budapest's interior minister, was executed in mid-1949 for his supposed ideological deviation, while the Hungarian People's Army simultaneously saw a dozen generals and 1,100 high-ranking officers purged, and some executed, for alleged pro-Yugoslav sentiments.³

(U) Purges and executions were by no means limited to the Soviet side. The split drove a wedge through Yugoslav Communism. To rid his regime of pro-Soviet elements, Tito commenced a cleansing of his party, army, and secret police every bit as thorough and brutal as any Stalinist depredations. Against suspected Soviet loyalists, Tito unleashed his formidable secret police, UDBa, setting off an intelligence war of epic proportions.⁴ The hunt for traitors, known as ibeovci (from IB or Informbiro, Serbo-Croatian for the Cominform), was pursued with vigor, led personally by Tito and his feared secret police chief, Aleksandar Rankovic. It was a fight which Tito, the former star NKVD illegal, with thirty-three covernames to his credit, was well equipped to pursue.⁵

(U) The UDBa crackdown on suspected ibeovci was particularly severe in Montenegro, Yugoslavia's smallest republic, where Communism had the deepest roots and an entire UDBa division was employed to quell local dissent.⁶ Tito's fears of Soviet subversion were not misplaced. Not only did Stalin's intelligence service, the MGB, possess numerous agents throughout Yugoslavia, but Tito's military and secret police were among the most deeply penetrated institutions. Thousands of army and state security officers trained in the Soviet Union were immediately placed under suspicion; in the end, 7,000 army officers and 1,700 UDBa officials, many of them high-ranking, were purged as ibeovci. Probably 100,000 Yugoslav Communists suspected of disloyalty were sent to brutal political prisons, where thousands died.⁷

(U) MGB moles existed throughout the Tito regime. Two cabinet ministers and even the head of Tito's bodyguard were uncovered as ibeovci. Particularly embarrassing for Belgrade were the defections of many officials to the Soviet bloc. The worst incident came in August 1948, when three senior army officers plotting a coup d'état with Soviet backing attempted to defect. UDBa captured Major General Branko Petricevic and Colonel Vlado Dapcevic from the main political
directorate, the latter being head of military agit-prop, while the third plotter, Colonel-General Arso Jovanovic, was killed near the Romanian border. Significantly, all three men were Montenegrins, while Jovanovic had been the wartime chief of staff of the Yugoslav Army. The Soviet conspiracy could go no higher. 8

(U) The ranks of Yugoslavs who sought refuge in the Soviet bloc, what Tito termed the inform-birovska emigracija, swelled to 3,500 in neighboring satellites, where they were put to work in the rising propaganda war. The Soviets soon formed special combat units, including three “international brigades,” in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, an ominous development for Belgrade. Their ranks were filled with Yugoslav émigrés but others too; the 2nd International Brigade, garrisoned in western Bulgaria, included 6,000 “volunteers” from East Germany as well as a battalion of parachutists. Significantly, its commander was Aleksa Micunovic, a former senior staff officer in Tito’s army. 9

(U) Violent border incidents along Yugoslavia’s long Eastern frontiers quickly expanded sevenfold. Soviet-sponsored saboteurs (diverzanty) conducted regular cross-border raids as part of a constant insurgency campaign to destabilize Yugoslavia. UDBa border detachments fought frequent firefights, resulting in hundreds of deaths; according to Belgrade, in the five years after the split, over 700 émigrés attempted to infiltrate Yugoslavia from Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, and 160 of them were captured and forty were killed by Tito’s security forces. Over a hundred Yugoslav soldiers and policemen also died, including some senior UDBa officers. 10

(U) Stalin’s declaration of war on the Titoist heresy was initially greeted with unconcealed glee by the U.S. government. To our ambassador in Moscow, the split was nothing less than “a Godsend to our propagandists,” offering Washington novel options in the budding Cold War. Even the more analytic Policy Planning Staff at the State Department concluded immediately that the break amounted to “an entirely new foreign policy for this Government.” Yet the State Department’s goal of maintaining balance in the Stalin-Tito struggle would prove almost impossible to achieve. 11
The West at once accrued strategic benefits from the Belgrade-Moscow split. Immediately following Yugoslavia’s expulsion from the Cominform, Tito suspended aid to the Greek Communist resistance in Greece, even sealing the frontier, an action which trapped 4,000 Greek guerrillas on the wrong side of the border. 

(U) Stalin was determined to exterminate the Titoist menace. As Robert Conquest, the preeminent scholar of Soviet totalitarianism, explained, the Yugoslav upstart became “a major villain almost at Trotsky’s level in Stalin’s personal psychodrama.” Stalin planned to employ the same methods which had silenced Trotsky – propaganda, intimidation, and assassination. Fittingly, he had admonished Tito with the warning: “We think the political career of Trotsky is quite instructive.” Stalin confidently informed Khrushchev, “I will shake my little finger and there will be no more Tito.” The reality was far different. In addition to the hundreds of raids conducted by Soviet bloc commandos inside Yugoslavia, Moscow attempted to assassinate Tito on several occasions. In one case, the MGB planned to gun down the Yugoslav Politburo while its members relaxed over a pool table at Tito’s villa. All the assassination schemes were cut short by UDBa’s tenacious counterintelligence work. 

(U) In response, Stalin sought a direct military solution to his Yugoslav problem. Subversion and sabotage having failed, crushing the Titoist heresy with the might of the Red Army became the preferred option. The details of Soviet military planning to annihilate Titoism, suspected by NATO intelligence, were confirmed by the defection of General Béla Király after the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Király, appointed commander of Hungary’s planned invasion force, witnessed the Soviet bloc’s decision for invasion and the dramatic increase of his country’s military in preparation for war. As Király recounted, a Soviet colonel who visited his office in July 1951 castigated him for teaching officers the geography of any country but Yugoslavia: “Your students must be taught one battleground only, the territory of the enemy, Yugoslavia.” 

(U) Soviet invasion plans forecast a massive push by an infantry-heavy first echelon, composed of Hungarian and Romanian troops; the brunt would be borne by the 300,000-strong
Hungarian People's Army, which would pierce Yugoslav defenses in the flat northern province of Vojvodina, opening the door to Belgrade, which would be taken by mechanized Soviet forces forming the invasion’s second, decisive echelon. While Tito’s forces were expected to offer stiff resistance, a rapid, if hard-fought victory was anticipated. Crushing Yugoslavia had become the entire raison d’être of the satellite armies. The purpose of Hungary’s unprecedented military buildup was, Colonel-General Mihály Farkas, the army chief, explained, to counter “aggression by Titoist bandits against the sacred territory of our socialist fatherland.”

(U) Washington lacked vital intelligence regarding Soviet intentions; the SIGINT system in particular offered few insights into high-level Soviet military and political planning, thanks to the treachery of AFSA employee William Weisband, which compromised numerous high-level cryptologic successes against Moscow.

Nevertheless, in August 1950 CIA assessments concluded that while Yugoslavia’s quarter-million-strong army might stand a chance against the satellite armies of Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, the presence of six Soviet divisions in those satellites tipped the balance; against a combined Soviet bloc invasion, Tito’s forces would be soon overwhelmed. Hence the CIA concluded that Yugoslav resistance was dependent “on the degree and promptness of Western assistance.”

(U) Washington’s concerns grew grave. George Kennan, the early Cold Warrior, initially greeted the Moscow-Belgrade split as an unparalleled opportunity; Kennan reasoned that the “gain” of Yugoslavia in the Western camp offset the recent “loss” of China. Yet by late May 1950, a month before Korea exploded, Kennan had grown concerned about a proxy war in the Balkans, speculating that a Soviet attack was likely. On June 29, 1950, four days after the invasion of South Korea, Yugoslavia topped the National Security Council’s list of “chief danger spots.” Moscow propaganda denounced Tito as a “Syngman Rhee” in Belgrade, heightening Western worries. Kennan soon concluded that a likely Soviet attack on Yugoslavia would merely be a prelude to the Third World War.

(U) To ready the Yugoslav military for war, the United States embarked on an adventurous
military assistance scheme. In the year following
the Korean invasion, Washington provided
Belgrade with $77.5 million in military aid; by the
mid-1950s, military aid would total a half-billion
dollars. In June 1951, General Koca Popovic, the
Yugoslav chief of staff, even visited Washington
for joint planning discussions. Prodigious
American military assistance to Yugoslavia was as
ironic as it was unanticipated. Before the split
with Moscow, the radical regime in Belgrade had
justly been denounced as “Soviet Satellite
Number One” in Western media, and the U.S.-
Yugoslav relationship had been tense; in the con-
tested Trieste area, occupied by U.S. and British
troops, Tito’s forces in 1946 had forced down one
U.S. C-47 cargo aircraft and shot down a second,
killing the crew.25

(U) Four years before it had all looked very
different. By late September 1951, the U.S. in-
telligence community already regarded Yugoslavia as
a valuable de facto ally and anti-Soviet bulwark. A
CIA special estimate projecting developments
over the next twenty-four months counted
Yugoslavia alongside future NATO members
Greece, Turkey, and Spain in Western military
totals, indeed as “a major increment to NATO
strength” – in the event of war with the Soviet
c bloc. The estimate concluded that Soviet “local
aggression” against Yugoslavia was likely: “the
USSR may be compelled to act soon.” 27

(U) From NATO’s viewpoint, Yugoslavia
served as a “shield” for vulnerable Italy and
Greece; Slovenia’s Ljubljana Gap in particular
was a critical component of Western defenses,
and in mid-1952 Belgrade announced it would
defend the vital gap with four corps, a dozen divi-
sions in all, more than a third of Tito’s army. In
September 1951, the Supreme Allied Commander
Europe (SACEUR) ordered that Italy would be
defended at the Isonzo River line – half of which
was actually inside Yugoslav territory.28

(U) Despite the West’s crash military aid pro-
gram to Yugoslavia, fears of invasion and a wider
conflict continued to mount in NATO capitals. In
early February 1951, the British Chiefs of Staff
announced that a direct Soviet attack on
Yugoslavia “would lead to world war.”
Washington agreed that Stalinist aggression on
Yugoslavia “might well be the prelude to a global
war.” NATO concerns about what was termed a
“second Korea” in Europe were increased by a
broad acceptance that, unlike in Korea, a
Communist offensive against Tito could not be
localized; or, as the British Chiefs of Staff
expressed it, "it is always likely that an attack on Yugoslavia would spread to a global war." 29

(U) Given NATO’s overwhelming weakness in conventional forces, it was inevitable that the nuclear issue came to the fore. Within weeks of the invasion of South Korea, Washington had accepted in principle that due to the dearth of conventional forces, atomic weapons would probably have to be used to defend Yugoslavia against Soviet attack. America’s “freedom of action to employ atomic weapons in such a localized conflict if the situation dictates” was a jealously guarded prerogative, as well as the strategic logic underpinning NATO policy towards Yugoslavia. Given that the conventional balance in the Balkans continued to deteriorate – by early 1951, not counting Soviet garrisons, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria possessed standing forces more than twice the size of Tito’s army – any NATO defense of Yugoslavia would require nuclear backing to be viable.30

(U) Fortunately for all concerned, the long-awaited Soviet attack never came. The war fever increased substantially with the June 25, 1950, invasion of South Korea; in the satellites, propaganda and planning grew more frenzied. To General Király, the activities appeared coordinated with the putative attack on Tito: “That coordination indicated that there was a direct relationship between the timing of the Korean aggression and the completion of preparations for war against Yugoslavia.” 31 Washington’s unexpectedly strong response to North Korean aggression was dismaying to the Soviets: If America would commit two divisions at once, and eventually more than a half-dozen, to save South Korea, what might it do to rescue the strategically vital Tito?

(U) Nevertheless, Soviet military planning continued, undaunted by events in the Far East. Major maneuvers in Hungary in January 1951, involving 80,000 satellite troops, simulated an invasion of Yugoslavia; it was a dry run. Ominously, the war games placed American
troops in the Yugoslav second defensive echelon: war with NATO was now assumed. The Soviet Union, now a nuclear power too, was unintimidated by Western military power. Yet the January 1951 maneuvers would be the high-water mark of the war that almost was. Thereafter, the threat slowly receded; Stalin’s willingness to risk world war – even atomic war – waned, and plans for all-out invasion were quietly shelved. As Király, who witnessed the high-level proceedings, recalled, a strong American defense of South Korea “nipped Stalin’s pet project in the bud.”

(U) Stalin resigned himself to resolving his Tito problem short of all-out war. Assassination efforts continued, spurred on by the USSR’s humiliating upset loss to Yugoslavia at the 1952 soccer Olympics, an event which resulted in the dismissal of senior Soviet officials denounced as having “dishonored themselves and the entire nation and all people working for peace.” The last assassination plan involved the noted Soviet illegal Iosif Grigulevich, known as MAX, who had been involved in the first, unsuccessful attempt to kill Trotsky. Grigulevich volunteered for an outlandish plot to kill Tito with a lethal dose of either plague or poison gas; it was all “childish and naïve,” according to Pavel Sudoplatov, the top MGB expert in “wet affairs.” And it never happened. Late on March 1, 1953, the MGB sent Stalin a report explaining that MAX had not yet been dispatched to Belgrade. It may have been the last report the Soviet dictator ever read, for Stalin suffered a fatal stroke in the predawn hours of March 2. His obsession with Tito lasted to the very end.

(U) With Stalin gone, relations between Belgrade and Moscow began to slowly improve. By May 1955, when Khrushchev visited Belgrade, Soviet-Yugoslav relations had healed, though Tito would remain outside Soviet bloc military, political, and economic structures in perpetuity; the rift, though no longer ominous, was permanent. For Western planning purposes, Yugoslavia would continue to function as a strategic necessity and as an unofficial NATO associate member for decades to come.

(U) Until Tito’s death in 1980, Soviet military threats remained a concern for Yugoslavia, though only the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, with its potential Yugoslav parallels, seriously alarmed Tito. Decades after the intelligence war which Stalin lost, Belgrade feared Soviet subversion and espionage. UDBa sensed Soviet machinations behind manifestations of antiregime sentiments, particularly Croatian nationalism, by no means entirely incorrectly. Certainly KGB interest in Yugoslav emigrés remained high through the 1970s. As a result, the Yugoslav secret police monitored the activities of the informbirovska emigracija, especially what it termed the “enemy emigration.” Against Cominformists in exile, Tito’s spies showed no mercy and never forgot an enemy. As late as 1975, Yugoslav agents in Bucharest kidnapped Vlado Dapcevic, the army colonel arrested in 1948 attempting to defect, and brought him back to Belgrade to stand trial for his continuing pro-Soviet agitation.

(U) In the end, robust American intervention to resist Communist aggression in East Asia during the blood-stained summer of 1950 ultimately preserved much more than the freedom of South Korea. That accomplishment, though considerable and defended to this day in a war that never formally ended, nevertheless pales by comparison with the little-known achievement of preventing a world war, even an atomic holocaust. By their sacrifices, the doomed men of Task Force Smith, the heroes of Inchon, the scarred veterans of Chosin, prevented armageddon. They fully earned their rightful place alongside their older brothers in what we have lately termed “The Greatest Generation.” It is fashionable today to hail the veterans of the Second World War as “the kids who saved the world,” and rightly so. Yet the fine young men of 1950 did no less, though few knew it then – or now.
(U) Notes
4. (U) State Security Directorate (Uprava Dr avne Bezbednosti), said by Yugoslavs to stand for UDBa – tvoja sudba (‘UDBa – your fate’); on its origins (from its foundation in 1944 until 1946, it was known as the Department for the Protection of the People, or OZNa) see Milovan D elebd ic, Obavestajna slu ba u narodnooslobodilackom ratu 1941-1945 (Belgrade, 1987), 13-40, 41-48, 266-269.
5. (U) On the UDBa chief, see Jovan Kesar and Pero Simic, LEKA: Aleksandar Rankovic (Belgrade, 1990); Tito’s own espionage career is elaborated in Pero Simic, Tito agent Kominterne (Belgrade, 1990).
7. (U) Banac, With Stalin, 157-162, 246-249.
8. (U) Ibid., 129-130; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB (New York, 1999), 356-357. (S) Not all defections were one-way; in July 1949 Toma Elekes, an ethnic Hungarian officer in Romanian intelligence, commandeered a light plane and flew to Novi Sad, Yugoslavia; for his trouble, Elekes spent over a half-year in UDBa captivity alongside numerous Cominformists – see 17th Counterintelligence Corps Detachment (Trieste U.S. Troops), Interrogation Report, M-905-15, 29 Jan 1951.
12. (TS//SI)
17. (S)
18. (S)
20. (TS//SI)
25 Apr 1951.
21. (TS//SI)
11 Jul 1950.
23. (U) Lorraine Lees, Keeping Tito Afloat: The United States, Yugoslavia, and the Cold War (University Park, PA, 1997), 86-88.
24. (U) Ibid., 81-82; Heuser, Western 'Containment', 150-153.


26. (TS//SI)


29. (U) Heuser, "Yugoslavia," 142-143.


32. (U) Ibid., 286-287. Király's account and perceptions are widely accepted in Hungary today – Interview, Dr. Géza Jeszensky, 16 Nov 2000; Jeszensky, Hungary's current ambassador in Washington, is an esteemed historian and served as the first post-Communist Hungarian foreign minister (1990-94).


34. (U) For details see Pierre Maurer, La réconciliation soviéto-yougoslave 1954-1958: Illusions et désillusions de Tito (Fribourg, 1991). When Marshal Zhukov traveled to Belgrade in 1957, he confirmed Stalin's war plans by asking Tito, "Did you know, comrade, what we wanted to do to you in 1951?" to which Tito replied, "You know, comrade, so did Hitler." – Heuser, Western 'Containment', 129.


36. (U) Dragan Ganovic, Teroristi iz "šeste kolone": Dokumentarna kronika o teroristickoj aktivnosti protiv Jugoslavije (Belgrade, 1979), 143-154; Slavko Curuvija, Ibeovac: Ja, Vlado Dapcevic (Belgrade, 1990), 246-258; Milenko Doder, Jugoslavenska neprijateljska emigracija (Zagreb, 1979), 133-198.