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Djilas' First Meeting with Stalin

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Summary:

Milovan Djilas relates his first meeting with Stalin and the discussion about the Yugoslav military and other general conversation.

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Contents:

Transcript - English

It must have been about five o'clock in the afternoon, just as I had completed my lecture at the Pan-Slavic Committee and had begun to answer questions, when someone whispered to me to finish immediately because of an important and pressing matter. Not only we Yugoslavs but also the Soviet officials had lent this lecture a more than usual importance. Molotov's assistant, A. Lozovsky, had introduced me to a select audience. Obviously the Yugoslav problem was becoming more and more acute among the Allies.

□ I excused myself, or they made my excuses for me, and was whisked out into the street in the middle of things. There they crammed me together with General Terzic into a strange and not very imposing car. Only after the car had driven off did an unknown colonel from the State Security inform us that we were to be received by Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. By that time our Military Mission had been moved to a villa in Serebrenyi Bor, a Moscow suburb. Remembering the gifts for Stalin, I worried that we would be late if we went that far to get them. But the infallible State Security had taken care of that too; the gifts lay next to the Colonel in the car. Everything then was in order, even our uniforms; for some ten days or so we had been wearing new ones made in a Soviet factory. There was nothing to do but be calm and listen to the Colonel, and ask him as little as possible.

□ I was already accustomed to the latter. But I could not suppress my excitement. It sprang from the unfathomable depths of my being. I was aware of my own pallor and my joyful, and at the same time almost panic-stricken, agitation.

□ What could be more exciting for a Communist, one who was coming from war and revolution? To be received by Stalin - this was the greatest possible recognition for the heroism and suffering of our partisan warriors and our people. In dungeons and in the holocaust of war, and in the no less violent spiritual crisis and clashes with the internal and external foes of Communism, Stalin was something more than a leader in battle. He was the incarnation of an idea, transfigured in Communist minds into a pure idea, and thereby into something infallible and sinless. Stalin was the victorious battle of today and the brotherhood of man of tomorrow. I realized that it was by chance that I personally was the first Yugoslav Communist to be received by him. Still, I felt a proud joy that I would be able to tell my comrades about this encounter and say something about it to the Yugoslav fighting men as well.

□ Suddenly everything that had seemed unpleasant about the USSR disappeared and all disagreements between ourselves and the Soviet leaders lost their significance and gravity, as if they had never happened. Everything disagreeable vanished before the moving grandeur and beauty of what was happening to me. Of what account was my personal destiny before the greatness of the struggle being waged, and of what importance were our disagreements beside the obvious inevitability of the realization of our idea?

□ The reader should know that at that time I believed that Trotskyites, Bukharinites, and other oppositionists in the Party were indeed spies and wreckers, and that therefore the drastic measures taken against them as well as all other so-called class enemies were justified. If I had observed that those who had been in the USSR in the period of the purge in the mid-thirties tended to leave certain things unsaid, I believed these had to do with non-essentials and exaggeration: it was cutting into good flesh in order to get rid of the bad, as Dimitrov once formulated it in a conversation with Tito. Therefore I regarded all the cruelties that Stalin committed exactly as his propaganda had portrayed them - as inescapable revolutionary measures that only added to his stature and his historic role. I cannot rightly tell even today what I would have done had I known the truth about the trials and the purges. I can say with certainty that my conscience would have undergone a serious crisis, but it is not excluded that I would have continued to be a Communist - convinced of a Communism that was more ideal than the one that existed. For with Communism as an idea the essential thing is not what is being done but why. Besides, it was the

most rational and most intoxicating, all embracing ideology for me and for those in my disunited and desperate land who desired to skip over centuries of slavery and backwardness and to bypass reality itself. I had no time to compose myself, for the car soon arrived at the gates of the Kremlin. Another officer took charge of us at this point, and the car proceeded through cold and clean courtyards in which there was nothing alive except slender budless saplings. The officer called our attention to the Tsar Cannon and Tsar Bell - Those absurd symbols of Russia that were never fired or rung. To the left was the monumental bell tower of Ivan the Great, then a row of ancient cannon, and we soon found ourselves in front of the entrance to a rather low long building such as those built for offices and hospitals in the middle of the nineteenth century. Here again we were met by an officer, who conducted us inside. At the bottom of the stairs we took off our overcoats, combed ourselves in front of a mirror, and were led into an elevator which discharged us at the second floor into a rather long red-carpeted corridor.

□At every turn an officer saluted us with a loud click of the heels. They were all young, handsome, and stiff, in the blue caps of the State Security. Both now and each time later the cleanliness was astonishing, so perfect that it seemed impossible that men worked and lived here. Not a speck on the carpets or a spot on the burnished doorknobs.

□Finally they led us into a somewhat small office in which General Zhukov was already waiting. A small, fat, and pock-marked old official invited us to sit down while he himself slowly rose from behind a table and went into the neighboring room.

□Everything occurred with surprising speed. The official soon returned and informed us that we could go in. I thought that I would pass through two or three offices before reaching Stalin, but as soon as I opened the door and stepped across the threshold, I saw him coming out of a small adjoining room through whose open doors an enormous globe was visible. Molotov was also here. Stocky and pale and in a perfect dark blue European suit, he stood behind a long conference table.

Stalin met us in the middle of the room. I was the first to approach him and to introduce myself. Then Terzic did the same, reciting his whole title in a military tone and clicking his heels, to which our host replied - it was almost comical - by saying: "Stalin."

We also shook hands with Molotov and sat down at the table so that Molotov was to the right of Stalin, who was at the head of the table, while Terzic, General Zhukov, and I were to the left.

The room was not large, rather long, and devoid of any opulence or décor. Above a not too large desk in the corner hung a photograph of Lenin, and on the wall over the conference table, in identical carved wooden frames, were portraits of Suvorov and Kutuzov, looking very much like the chromos one sees in the provinces.

But the host was the plainest of all. Stalin was in a marshal's uniform and soft boots, without any medals except a golden star - the Order of Hero of the Soviet Union, on the left side of his breast. In his stance there was nothing artificial or posturing. This was not that majestic Stalin of the photographs or the newsreels - with the stiff, deliberate gait and posture. He was not quiet for a moment. He toyed with his pipe, which bore the white dot of the English firm Dunhill, or drew circles with a blue pencil around words indicating the main subjects for discussion, which he then crossed out with slanting lines as each part of the discussion was nearing an end, and he kept turning his head this way and that while he fidgeted in his seat.

I was also surprised at something else: he was of very small stature and ungainly

build. His torso was too short and narrow, while his legs and arms were too long. His left arm and shoulder seemed rather stiff. He had a quite large paunch, and his hair was sparse, though his scalp was not completely bald. His face was white, with ruddy cheeks. Later I learned that this coloration, so characteristic of those who sit long in offices, was known as the "Kremlin complexion" in high Soviet circles. His teeth were black and irregular, turned inward. Not even his mustache was thick or firm. Still the head was not a bad one; it had something of the folk, the peasantry, the paterfamilias about it - with those yellow eyes and a mixture of sternness and roguishness.

I was also surprised at this accent. One could tell that he was not a Russian. Nevertheless his Russian vocabulary was rich, and his manner of expression very vivid and plastic, and replete with Russian proverbs and sayings. As I later became convinced, Stalin was well acquainted with Russian literature - though only Russian - but the only real knowledge he had outside of Russian limits was his knowledge of political history.

One thing that did not surprise me: Stalin had a sense of humor - a rough humor, self assured, but not entirely without finesse and depth. His reactions were quick and acute - and conclusive, which did not mean that he did not hear the speaker out, but it was evident that he was no friend of long explanations. Also remarkable was his relation to Molotov. He obviously regarded the latter as a very close associate, as I later confirmed. Molotov was the only member of the Politburo whom Stalin addressed with the familiar pronoun *ty*, which is in itself significant when it is kept in mind that with Russians the polite form *vy* is normal even among very close friends.

The conversation began by Stalin asking us about our impressions of the Soviet Union. I replied: "We are enthusiastic!" - to which he rejoined: "And we are not enthusiastic, though we are doing all we can to make things better in Russia." It is engraved in my memory that Stalin used the term *Russia*, and not *Soviet Union*, which meant that he was not only inspiring Russian nationalism but was himself inspired and identified himself with it.

But I had no time to think about such things then, for Stalin passed on to relations with the Yugoslav Government-in-exile, turning to Molotov: "Couldn't we somehow trick the English into recognizing Toto, who alone is fighting the Germans?"

Molotov smiled - with a smile in which there was irony and self-satisfaction: "No, that is impossible; they are perfectly aware of developments in Yugoslavia."

I was enthusiastic about this direct, straightforward manner, which I had not till then encountered in Soviet official circles, and particularly not in Soviet propaganda. I felt that I was at the right spot, and moreover with a man who treated realities in a familiar open way. It is hardly necessary to explain that Stalin was like this only among his own men, that is, among Communists of his line who were devoted to him.

Though Stalin did not promise to recognize the National Committee as a provisional Yugoslav government, it was evident that he was interested in its confirmation. The discussion and his stand were such that I did not even bring up the question directly; that is, it was obvious that the Soviet Government would do this immediately if it considered the conditions ripe and if developments did not take a different turn - through a temporary compromise between Britain and the USSR, and in turn between the National Committee and the Yugoslav Royal Government.

Thus this question remained unsettled. A solution had to wait and be worked out. However Stalin made up for this by being much more positive regarding the question of extending aid to the Yugoslav forces.

When I mentioned a loan of two hundred thousand dollars, he called this a trifle, saying that we could not do much with this amount, but that the sum would be allocated to us immediately. At my remark that we would repay this as well as all shipments of arms and other equipment after the liberation, he became sincerely angry: "You insult me. You are shedding your blood, and you expect me to charge you for the weapons! I am not a merchant, we are not merchants. You are fighting for the same cause as we. We are duty bound to share with you whatever we have."

But how would the aid come?

It was decided to ask the Western Allies to establish a Soviet air base in Italy which would help the Yugoslav Partisans. "Let us try," said Stalin. "We shall see what attitude the West takes and how far they are prepared to go to help Tito."

I should note that such a base - consisting of ten transport planes, if I remember well - was soon established.

"But we cannot help you much with planes," Stalin explained further. "An army cannot be supplied by plane, and you are already an army. Ships are needed for this. And we have no ships. Our Black Sea fleet is destroyed."

General Zhukov intervened: "We have ships in the Far East. We could transfer them to our Black Sea harbor and load them with arms and whatever else is needed."

Stalin interrupted him rudely and categorically. From a restrained and almost impish person another Stalin suddenly made his appearance. "What in the world are you thinking about? Are you in your right mind? There is a war going on in the Far East. Somebody is certainly not going to miss the opportunity of sinking those ships. Indeed! The ships have to be purchased. But from whom? There is a shortage of ships just now. Turkey? The Turks don't have many ships, and they won't sell any to us anyway. Egypt? Yes, we could buy some from Egypt. Egypt will sell - Egypt would sell anything, so they'll certainly sell us ships."

Yes, that was the real Stalin, who did not mince words. But I was used to this in my own Party, and I was myself partial to this manner when it came time to reach a final decision.

General Zhukov swiftly and silently made note of Stalin's decisions. But the purchase of ships and the supplying of the Yugoslav's by way of Soviet ships never took place. The chief reason for this was, no doubt, the development of operations on the Eastern Front - The Red Army soon reached the Yugoslav border and was thus able to assist Yugoslavia by land. I maintain that at the time Stalin's intentions to help us were determined.

That was the gist of the conversation.

In passing, Stalin expressed interest in my opinion of individual Yugoslav politicians. He asked me what I thought of Milan Gavrilovic, the leader of the Serbian Agrarian Party and the first Yugoslav Ambassador to Moscow. I told him: "A shrewd man."

Stalin commented as though to himself: "Yes, there are politicians who think shrewdness is the main thing in politics - but Gavrilovic impressed me as a stupid man."

I added, "He is not a politician of broad horizons, though I do not think it can be said that he is stupid."

Stalin inquired where in Yugoslav King Peter II had found a wife. When I told him that he had taken a Greek princess, he shot back roguishly, "How would it be, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich, if you or I married some foreign princess? Maybe some good could come of it."

Molotov laughed, but in a restrained manner and noiselessly.

At the end I presented Stalin with our gifts. They looked particularly primitive and wretched now. But he in no way showed any disparagement. When he saw the peasant sandals, he exclaimed: "Lapti" - the Russian word for them. As for the rifle, he opened and shut it, hefted it, and remarked: "Ours is lighter."

The meeting had lasted about an hour.

It was already dusk as we were leaving the Kremlin. The officer who accompanied us obviously caught our enthusiasm. He looked at us joyously and tried to ingratiate himself with every little word. The northern lights extend to Moscow at that time of year, and everything was violet-hued and shimmering - a world of unreality more beautiful than the one in which had had been living.

Somehow that is how it felt in my soul.