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Djilas's Second Conversation with Stalin

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Summary:

Milovan Djilas meets with Stalin and other Soviet officials for dinner to discuss relations with the West, D-day, and communism.

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English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Just before my departure for Yugoslavia I had still another conversation with Stalin. This one was more interesting and more important, though I had no idea that it would take place. On the night of June 5-6, 1944, on the eve of the Allied landing in Normandy, they simply put me in a car and took me to the Kremlin to see Molotov. It was nine o'clock at night. Molotov told me casually that we would have supper with Stalin, and we drove off to Stalin's villa near Moscow.

Along the way Molotov asked about the dangers that might result from the German raid on the Supreme Staff on May 25, 1944. Our mission was in constant contact with the Soviet service that maintained communications with the Soviet mission in Yugoslavia. They sent us daily reports concerning the course of the fighting after the Drvar raid, and consulted us on what assistance might be given. Molotov was able to gain from me a clearer picture than the one described in the dispatched from Yugoslavia.

Stalin's villa near Moscow, a surprisingly small one, was situated in a grove of young fir trees. We entered the little vestibule, and Stalin appeared in a simple tunic buttoned to his chin, looking even smaller and less official. He took us into his study, which had paneled walls. It was cluttered. Immediately he asked about the fighting around the staff headquarters. While one couldn't determine whether for Molotov this was more or less important than other problems, Stalin was wholly engrossed; he asked questions of us and himself, and replied without waiting for answers. He had a passionate nature, with many faces, and could just as easily show reserve as excitement. But he also knew how to restrain himself and keep silent with passion. And his passion quickly and unnoticeably spread to his entourage.

I somehow managed to reassure him that our army would not die of hunger. Molotov chimed in that Soviet pilots were no cowards, but that distance made effective help impossible.

I totally accepted Stalin's opinion that, in view of the growth and increasing complexity of our political tasks, Tito and the leadership should have a permanent and secure base. Indeed, the Soviet mission had already acted accordingly; at its insistence, Tito and a part of the leadership had been transferred on June 3-4 to Italy, and would proceed from there to the Yugoslav island of Vis. But Stalin had not yet received detailed reports when I was with him-only that Tito had temporarily gone to Italy.

Stalin stressed that we shouldn't frighten the English with red stars. But I was adamant that we couldn't give up the stars, since we had fought under them for so long. He stuck to his opinion, but without anger-as one deals with fretful children.

□ Stalin paced back and forth, while Molotov and I stood still. The Stalin half sat on the desk and spoke, sometimes anxiously and sometimes sarcastically: "Perhaps you think that just because we are the allies of the English that we have forgotten who they are and who Churchill is. They find nothing sweeter than to trick their allies. During the First World War they constantly tricked the Russians and the French. And Churchill? Churchill is the kind who, if you don't watch him, will slip a kopeck out of your pocket. Yes, a kopeck out of your pocket! By God, a kopeck out of your pocket! And Roosevelt? Roosevelt is not like that. He dips in his hand only for bigger coins. But Churchill? Churchill-even for a kopeck. It was the English, they were the ones who killed General Sikorski in a plane and then neatly shot down the plane-no proof, no witnesses, and they wouldn't stop at Tito! What is it to them to sacrifice two or three men for Tito? They have no pity for their own! As for Sikorski, I don't say this, Benes told me."

□ In the course of the evening Stalin repeated these warnings several times. Soon thereafter, I transmitted them to Tito and the leadership; later they played a role in

Tito's conspiratorial flight from the island of Vis to Soviet-occupied territory, on the night of September 18, 1944.

□ Stalin then turned to our relations with the new royal emissary Ivan Subasic who, unlike his predecessors, promised an accord with Tito and recognition of the National Liberation Army. Stalin insisted. "Do not refuse to hold conversations with Subasic-on no account must you do this. Do not attack him immediately. Let us see what he wants. Talk with him. You cannot be recognized right away. A transition to this must be found. You ought to talk with Subasic and see if you can't reach a compromise somehow." I also transmitted this stand to Tito. Tito already held a similar position, so Stalin's recommendation simply confirmed him in his agreement with Subasic.

□ I asked Stalin if he had any comments to make concerning our policies and our work, to which he replied, almost taken by surprise, "No, I don't. You yourselves know best what needs to be done there."

□ On the way to the dining room, Stalin stopped before a map of the world on which the Soviet Union was colored in red. Waving his hand over the Soviet Union, he harked back to his previous remarks about the British and the Americans, exclaiming, "They will never accept the idea that so great a space should be red, never, never!"

□ My glance fell on a circle drawn in blue pencil around a space west of Stalingrad. I sense that this glance pleased him, though he didn't say a word. Then, probably associating such a deep penetration by the Germans with the fateful battle of Stalingrad, I said, "Without industrialization, the Soviet Union could not have preserved itself and waged such a war."

□ Stalin added, "It was precisely over this that we quarreled with Trotsky and Bukharin."

□ In the dining room two or three high functionaries stood waiting, but no one from the Politburo except Molotov. Everyone served himself from warmed silver dishes lined up along the upper half of a long table. Each person sat where he wished at the lower half; only Stalin's place was fixed, though he didn't sit at the head. There was plenty of good food, but only with respect to the drinking was there urging and prodding-in the form of frequent toasts, as is customary with the Russians.

No one served us. We ate during a conversation which lasted five or six hours, until daybreak. Stalin's associates were evidently accustomed to such dinners. It was here and in this way that Soviet policy was largely formed, usually in the presence of those who had some connection with the topics under discussion. Stalin ate with gusto, but not greedily; the quantities of food he consumed were huge even for a large man. He drank moderately, slowly and carefully, unlike Molotov and particularly Beria.

He dwelled mostly on the Slavic theme: Did the Albanians have any Slavic roots? Was Serbian similar to Russian? And what sins did czarism commit against the South Slavs? There were anecdotes; I told two or three. Stalin roared, while Molotov laughed with restraint, silently.

Concerning the dissolution of the Comintern, he said, "They, the Westerners, are so sly that they mentioned nothing about it. The situation with the Comintern was becoming more and more abnormal. Most important of all, there was something abnormal, something unnatural about the very existence of a general Communist forum at a time when the Communist parties should have been searching for a national language and fighting under the conditions prevailing in their own countries."

An officer brought in a dispatch. I had the impression that the dispatch had arrived

some time ago, but was brought in for me to read in Stalin's presence. It contained Subasic's conversation with the State Department: Subasic stressed that the Yugoslavs could not turn against the Soviet Union because Slavic and pro-Russian traditions were very strong among them. Stalin remarked, "This is Subasic scaring the Americans. But why is he scaring them? Yes, scaring them! But why, why?"

Then he remarked to me, "They steal our dispatches, we steal theirs."

Just then a second dispatch was delivered. It was from Churchill. He announced that the landing in France would begin the next day. Stalin began to make fun of the dispatch: "Yes, there'll be a landing, if there is no fog. Until now there was always something that interfered. I suspect tomorrow it will be something else. Maybe they'll meet up with some Germans! What if they meet up with some Germans! Maybe there won't be a landing then, but just promises as usual."

Stammering, Molotov began to explain that the landing would indeed take place. Stalin did not doubt it either; he simply wished to ridicule the Allies.

Stalin presented me with a most beautiful sword for Tito: the gift of Supreme Soviet.

From the clump of firs around Stalin's villa there rose the mist and the dawn. Tired and solicitous, Stalin and Molotov escorted me to the entrance. I was filled with admiration for the ruthless, inexhaustible will of the Soviet leaders. And with horror before the endlessness of the cunning and evil that surrounded Russia and my country. And with the thought that it was the mighty and the wise who survived, and we little ones with them-in our own way.