

29 Tito's Death

Tito toasted the new year of 1980 with his sons and closest colleagues in Karađorđevo, and the whole of Yugoslavia noticed on television that he received the good wishes sitting down. On 1 January he attended a traditional lunch with the top Yugoslav political figures and expressed his hope that “we shall also see in the next New Year together”. He was in a good mood and seemed healthy. But in fact, even before the holidays he had had an arterial embolism in his left leg, which could not be treated with anticoagulants. Two days later, he was admitted to the University Medical Centre in Ljubljana for “a routine examination”. One of the last political decisions made by Tito before he went to hospital was the prohibition of a devaluation of the *dinar* by 30 percent, as proposed by the President of the Federal Executive Council, the Minister of Finance and the Governor of the National Bank. Tito was aware that this would be an indication to the world of the catastrophic state of Yugoslavia's economy [...]

After the examination, Tito was discharged from the University Medical Centre, even though the doctors knew he needed an operation. When he was hospitalised again, following the advice of the famous American surgeon Michael DeBakey and the Russian specialist Marat Knyazev, they first tried an arterial bypass. As this intervention did not produce the desired results, only seven days later, on 20 January, a statement was issued that his leg had been amputated, as otherwise he would have died of gangrene. When Tito had been told what awaited him, he was so upset that he threatened to take his own life. Since his illegal years prior to the war he had always slept with a gun beneath his pillow. He resisted the operation for as long as possible, saying that he had been born with two legs and did not want to die as a cripple. In the end, however, almost at the last minute, he agreed to surgery.

As it was clear that he was fighting “his last battle”, as early as mid-February the political leadership decided on the “programme” for his funeral. The international situation was all but favourable, as on 27 December 1979 the Soviet Union's armed units had marched into Afghanistan in order to protect its interests there. This was a confirmation to the Yugoslav leadership that they were under serious threat. It seemed that the Soviets were more than ever before willing to use their military force in order to achieve their foreign policy goals, and not only in Central Asia. This was also the prevailing opinion in the White House, from where President Jimmy Carter sent Tito a personal letter, pledging his support. Yugoslavia was gripped by panic. Shops were emptied, savings withdrawn from banks, and some people even fled abroad. At confidential meetings where state security was discussed, the National Defence Secretary of the Republic of Serbia labelled Đilas, the banned professors gathered around the journal *Praxis* and Dobrica Ćosić as enemies against whom “suitable measures” would be taken. The authorities announced that the country was in a state of preparedness for war, and around Belgrade and other important cities tanks and cannons were positioned.

According to data obtained by the CIA, in order to avoid a Soviet siege, some top political figures in Belgrade, just like in the early Fifties, even considered a strike against Albania so as to protect Yugoslavia's back. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a power struggle developed between the group around Vladimir Bakarić, who demanded that he should be elected the President of the Presidium of the Party, and the Serbs with Petar Stambolić and Miloš Minić at the helm, who opposed this idea.

In order for the transition of power to be as safe as possible, Tito's agony had to be prolonged. This resulted in intensive therapy carried out over the following months. The doctors managed "for an almost unbelievable length of time" to ensure that some blood was reaching Tito's vital organs, although they were unable to prevent constant arterial blockages. A series of side effects followed which "compelled" the doctors, among other things, to connect Tito to an artificial kidney. His clinical condition was very complex, "hardly ever seen in medical practice". "Quite some time before his death" breathing difficulties appeared, because of which an artificial lung was used, on which Tito remained dependent for "an unusually long time". In addition, problems with his liver appeared which caused jaundice. In the end, death occurred due to the peripheral vascular system and cardiac arrest. The autopsy showed, among other things, a stomach tumour that was probably benign, but as large as a chicken's egg. In the post-mortem report it said that due to Tito's illness, changes had occurred "that are hardly ever seen in other patients".

Josip Broz Tito died at 15.05 on Sunday 4 May 1980, in his 88th year. The highest Party and state authorities were informed about his death with the coded message *The match is cancelled*. Three hours later, there was an official announcement that Comrade Tito's "great heart" had stopped beating. After his death, "the greatest man in our past, present and future" returned to Belgrade on the Blue Train, which he had "inherited" at the end of the war from King Alexander and had renovated because it was not luxurious enough. Soviet experts took part in this renovation, adding armoured carriages at the front and back of the train, an "advance" and a "rearguard". While still alive, Tito was protected in the same way as Stalin. And like Stalin, he received a funeral worthy of a pharaoh. Moreover, he was buried in a mausoleum, although not quite such a gloomy one as the one Stalin had shared for a while with Lenin. Tito had chosen as his final resting place the House of Flowers in Dedinje, which he had had built after he left his wife Jovanka. In one of his last conversations with General Ljubičić he told him: "When I die, I'd like you to bury me there, [...], there's a good view of Belgrade..." In contrast to Lenin and Stalin, Tito did not want to be embalmed. If Marko Lopusina's account is true, Tito's body would have been preserved in this way in spite of this if, due to the intensive therapies, his body had not begun decomposing so quickly and consequently giving off such an unpleasant smell. For medical and hygiene reasons Dolanc, Mikulić and Doronski decided in utmost secrecy that the coffin at the public funeral should be empty.