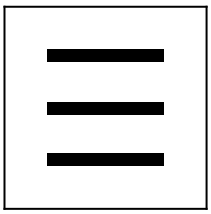
Bogdan Denitch

written by Jason Schulman | July 21, 2016



Perhaps ironically, shortly after writing the following memorial for Arthur Lipow, longtime *New Politics* sponsor Bogdan Denitch died on March 28 at the age of 86. Bogdan's association with *NP* reaches back to the first issue of our current series in 1986, for which he penned a piece making the case for the American left to provide critical support for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, then engaged in a civil war with the U.S.-backed right-wing Contra army. Born a Kosovar Serb, Bogdan became a steelworker and later a professor of sociology at two City University of New York (CUNY) schools, Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center, and wrote a number of books about Yugoslavia under Marshall Tito and its dissolution, most famously *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994). He was also very active in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s.

For most of his adult life Bogdan identified with the third-camp democratic socialist tradition promoted by *NP*, even as he joined the editorial board of Irving Howe's less radical journal *Dissent*. He was a founding member of the Young Socialist League (YSL) in 1954, bringing the not-yet-famous Michael Harrington with him. Both Harrington and Bogdan went along with the merger of the YSL and its "parent organization," the Independent Socialist League, into the more politically moderate Socialist Party (SP) of Norman Thomas and its Young People's Socialist League. But while Harrington became an SP leader and remained so until the early 1970s, Bogdan left the SP milieu in the early 1960s, disgusted by the conversion of many of his erstwhile comrades into Cold War social democrats who supported not only the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba but, soon afterward, the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Moving to Yugoslavia in 1965 and staying there for five years, Bogdan never joined the Independent Socialist Clubs of America or its successor, the International Socialists (IS), which upheld the third-camp tradition, but at Harrington's request he became a founding member of a split from the SP, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), in 1973. Bogdan soon co-founded DSOC's Left Caucus, which argued that DSOC tended to blur the distinction between "mass work" and creating an explicitly socialist presence within the left-liberal milieu. The Left Caucus tried and failed to convince IS to join DSOC to help reorient its relationship with organized labor, but it was instrumental in bringing about DSOC's merger with the post-New Left socialist-feminists of the New American Movement to create the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in 1982, where Bogdan was made an honorary chair and the group's official representative to the Socialist International, a gathering of political parties that he would later denounce for being "not even reformist."

I first met Bogdan in 1999 when I joined the organizing committee of the Socialist Scholars Conference, the predecessor to the Left Forum, an annual convention in New York City. My first impression was that he had a rather stern personality, but if you had the conviction to stand up to him, he respected you. He was aggressive and fearless but by no means humorless (his jokes tended to be vulgar, not always a bad thing). And we often found ourselves virtually finishing each other's sentences during internal DSA discussions. But not always. He initially supported the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 as a necessary response to the national oppression of Kosovar Albanians by Slobodan Milošević. At the time I thought this was a bad idea and I still haven't changed my mind. That said, I was far more appalled by the Milošević apologias promulgated by certain "Marxists" who claimed that all talk of the oppression of Kosovars was so much bourgeois propaganda. Bogdan, who had friends that were killed by Milošević's soldiers, at least had a first-hand grasp of the facts, which—as he wrote in the Summer 1999 *Dissent*—were that the Serbian regime was "primarily responsible for three previous wars of aggression in the region, as well as

massive ethnic cleansing and mass murder of civilians and thousands of prisoners of war in Bosnia. … Even before the NATO attack began, some 25,000 Albanians had been ethnically cleansed—that is, moved with great brutality out of their homes. The massacre of unarmed civilians in the village of Račak took place before the bombing." A great number of articles written by the acolytes of the late Sam Marcy and their fellow travelers frankly denied all of this. Bogdan was at least wrong for the right reasons; his neo-Stalinist critics were not merely wrong but represented something genuinely sick. That they currently act as apologists for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria is no surprise.

Admirably, Bogdan helped to found an organization in Belgrade, Zagreb, Split, and Sarajevo called Transition to Democracy, which provides legal aid for refugees trying to return, and for victims of state violence, by suing police, judges, and local officials who obstruct refugees' return or the return of minorities to jobs they were removed from. After he was in a motor scooter accident I saw him far less often, and after he retired to the island of Brac in Croatia, I saw him not at all—except via email—for several years. His death feels particularly strange to me, as it means the emails have permanently stopped. For years he was, so to speak, there but not there, and now he's simply not there. I miss him all the same.

Footnotes