

VODNJAN – MEMORIAL WALK¹

1. The Vodnjan landscape of memory of anti-fascism and the Second World War

On its walls, Vodnjan has one of the largest concentrations of graffiti from the Second World War and Porec in Istria. The inscriptions, written in Italian during the war and post-war period, have survived for more than 70 years, and the vast majority of them have retained their almost complete form and content. Graffiti of this type was created in at least three phases: during the Second World War, in the phase of liberation, and especially in the immediate aftermath (1945-1946). Today it is possible to find, see and read them in almost every part of the city: graffiti can be found on very visible, prominent facades of old houses and buildings located in the central and side streets of Vodnjan, on squares, in the streets and on the outskirts of the city. In short, Vodnjan graffiti can be found everywhere, which on the one hand testifies to the persistent and comprehensive writing of graffiti in the 1940s in Vodnjan, and on the other hand represents a rich material and symbolic corpus of traces of anti-fascism and post-war turmoil in the local and regional context.

In addition to these traces, which are still unrecognized as relevant historical and cultural heritage, in Vodnjan there are other elements in the city space that are connected with the memory and narratives of anti-fascism and the Second World War, such as monuments and commemorative plaques. So, for example, there is a very significant memorial plaque in the January 16th/16 Gennaio Street, a plaque that reminds of the martyrdom of three young socialists and anti-fascists on January 16, 1920, who also represent the first victims of fascism in Istria. Other memorial plaques remind of other tragic events and socio-political figures relevant to the local context of that period, while some monuments remind of the collective effort and resistance of Vodnjan anti-fascists in the Second World War, as well as the collective suffering of partisans, anti-fascist activists and civilians.

In the wider area of Vodnjan, there are many significant points of memory, such as Gajana, a village that experienced one of the cruelest Nazi crimes on the night of January 26-27, 1944, when the village was burned and many locals killed, and many taken to concentration camps.

¹ "The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of Apoteka - Space for Contemporary Art, Documenta - Center for Dealing with the Past, Alliance of Anti-Fascists and Anti-Fascist Fighters of Primorsko-Goranska County, and nonessarily reflects the views of the donor countries and the Fund Manager."

Monuments and plaques dedicated to the anti-fascist struggle and the victims of the Second World War can also be found in other places in Vodnjan, such as Galižana, Peroj and Barbariga. As in Vodnjan, it is possible to find a lot of different graffiti from the Second World War and post-war period in these places, which makes Vodnjan a very specific, rich and multi-layered landscape of memories.

2. Memorial walk in Vodnjan

The memorial walk is primarily focused on war and post-war graffiti in Vodnjan. Graffiti is conceived as a kind of outdoor archive, an archive made up of short notes, slogans, symbols and various texts that were written on the walls of Vodnjan in the 1940s. This mosaic of wall inscriptions represents unique historical material and a collection of written documents. Reading this material implies both the careful deciphering and analysis of faint texts on the spot, as well as the opening of a new, broader perspective on the very social and political events that stand in the background of these texts. In other words, reading individual graffiti implies reading its historical, political, social and ideological background. The observation of individual graffiti includes the interpretation of the details of the pre-war, war and post-war context, as well as the meaning and function of the graffiti at the time of their creation. The memorial walk is therefore conceived as a study journey into the past, and the graffiti are landmarks and notes of a historical period, the reading of which reveals lesser-known historical episodes that significantly influenced the historical, social and political transformation of the local and regional context.

During the walk, the participants were informed about the historical background and reasons for the creation of graffiti, about their characteristics and functions, and about their meanings and significance, both in the war and post-war period, as well as in the contemporary context. Namely, the memorial walk is not only a look back at the past, but also a look into the present: a look at graffiti as historical documents, as well as a new, different perspective of reading and understanding the city and public space, which contains often imperceptible, but historically and culturally valuable traces.

In addition to the (post)war graffiti, one of the key points of the memorial walk, which also marks its starting point, is the memorial plaque, located on 16. Jaunara Street, which is dedicated to three murdered young socialists and anti-fascists and which reminds of the first documented case of victims of fascism in Istria. In addition to a review of the memorial plaque dedicated to the events that took place on January 16, 1920, a broader overview of interwar anti-fascism in Istria is also given, with an emphasis on key events and actions that extend to the beginning of World War II and formation of an organized anti-fascist resistance movement.

The memorial walk mostly covers the central part of the town of Vodnjan, i.e. the central streets that are directly connected to the Vodnjan square, such as Trgovačka Street, Castello Street and Garibaldi Street. The walk also includes other Vodnjan streets, such as January 16th Street, San Rocca Street, Pian Street and Freedom “*Sloboda*” Square. The goal of the memorial walk is to provide a complete and scientifically supported view of Vodnjan graffiti and history of anti-fascist struggle, lasting 60 to 90 minutes.

The text that follows presents the thematic framework and content of the memorial walk in a concise way, with an emphasis on broader and narrower contexts that are significant for understanding the memory landscape of the city of Vodnjan.

3. “The Battle of Vodnjan” January 16th, 1920 - the beginning of the antifascist resistance in Istria

The Day of Anti-Fascist Struggle in the Republic of Croatia is celebrated on June 22nd, when in 1941 the First Sisak Partisan Battalion, also the first anti-fascist battalion in Croatia, was founded in the Brezovica forest near Sisak. This was followed by the further development of the anti-fascist uprising in the form of the People’s Liberation Struggle (*Narodnooslobodilačka Borba*, NOB) under the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In May 1945, in the final military operations of the IV. Army, a unit of the Yugoslav Army, being the military force of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia, liberated Istria. On September 15, 1947, along with Rijeka and Dalmatia, Istria was formally annexed to the People's Republic of Croatia, i.e. the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia. 28,754 Istrians participated in the NOB, of which around 5,000 died in the fighting, along with around 5,800 civilian victims, while 21,509 people were taken to German concentration camps. Istrians were also represented in five overseas brigades, which moved from Italy to Yugoslavia and contributed to the battles for the final liberation.

However, the anti-fascist resistance, and then the movement, started in Istria much earlier than in the rest of today's Croatia, already in 1920, and the National Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački Pokret*, NOP) was a sort of a continuation of the movement. Anti-fascism managed to maintain itself during the interwar period despite the repressive measures of the Italian government (abolition of Croatian and Slovenian schools and newspapers, Italianization

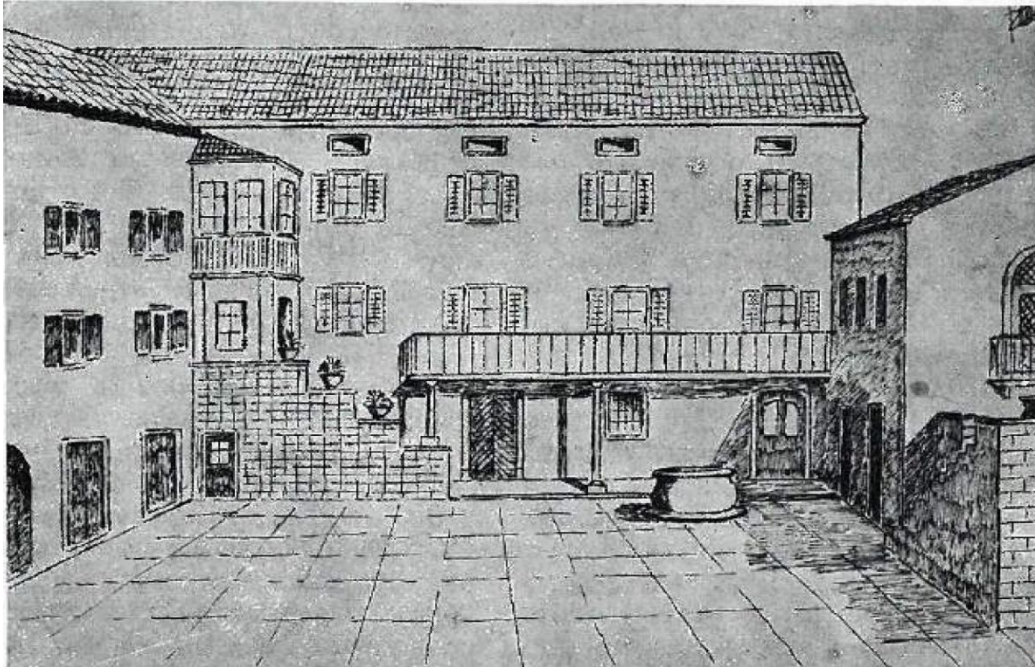
of surnames, etc.) and the fascist beating and expulsion of the unfit. Revolts against the government and fascist violence were organized, such as the Proština Rebellion and the Labin Republic in 1921, as well as the armed actions of Gortano residents (1929). There were also numerous individuals who tried to work against the fascist regime illegally: the office of the General Directorate for Public Security, in its central list of subversive persons, as of 1943, included 940 people born in Pula, 78 from Pazin, 35 from Rovinj, etc. Part of them were tried at the Special Court for the Protection of the State (Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato): 167 proceedings were conducted in the area of Julian Venice (Trieste, Rijeka, Gorica, Istria), and 476 persons were sentenced, including the death penalty to 22 Slovenians and 4 Croats (out of a total of 31 death sentences). Convicted Istrians were partly members and supporters of the Communist Party of Italy. On the other hand, they belonged to the Croatian and Slovenian national revolutionary movement, which confirms the fact that ideological and armed resistance to fascist repression was heterogeneous and plural. It is also worth mentioning the anti-fascist sentiment among part of the Italian citizenry that supports the umbrella Italian anti-fascist organization *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Liberty).

The very beginnings of the anti-fascist, still unorganized resistance, can be found in the Istrian town of Vodnjan, on January 16, 1920, where an armed conflict was recorded between the carabinieri (Italian police), the army and the fascists, with the workers of Vodnjan, mostly socialists. The search by the public security forces in the Social Studies Club in Vodnjan was motivated by the illegal possession of weapons by its members and the alleged conspiracy to overthrow the (local) occupying authorities, while the causes should be sought in the disagreement of the socialist and labor movement with the economic and social policies that the authorities implemented. The outcome of the armed conflict resulted in the immediate death of one young person from Vodnjan, and in the following days two more young people from Vodnjan. The official statements of the carabinieri, local civil and judicial authorities, as well as medical reports on the victims, were shown to be unreliable during the trial at the Military Court in Trieste. At the tendentious trial of 48 residents of Vodnjan and nearby villages, mostly of socialist orientation, the defense lawyers warned of the excessive use of force by the public security authorities, as well as the physical violence of the Vodnjan nationalists that followed the "battle" itself. The Vodnjan nationalists were members of the political Fascio Dignano Democratica (Fascio politico 'Dignano Democratica'), who already at the time of the armed conflict openly supported Mussolini's *Fascio nazionale di combattimento*, and in the Fall of 1920, they founded

the Vodnjan fascist section. 17 of the accused people from Vodnjan were sentenced to several years in prison, but were also amnestied the following year, while the issue of the victims was ignored and covered up.

A memorial plaque to three young men from Vodnjan - the first victims of the Italian occupation authorities allied with local fascists - was erected in Vodnjan in 1950. Pietro Benussi was shot dead on the spot by members of the Italian armed forces - the carabinieri and/or the army. Domenico Damiani, on the other hand, ended his life in a Jesuit prison in Trieste while awaiting trial. Although the archival material does not provide us with irrefutable evidence, the testimonies of his contemporaries and the co-accused, as well as documents about the behavior of prison guards, lead us to the conclusion that his death was marked by a violent act - either by the fascists in Vodnjan during interrogation, or by the prison guards in Trieste. Perhaps the most intriguing case is that of Pasquale Delcaro (incorrectly mentioned on the memorial plaque as Pasquale Giachin), for whom the hospital documentation and the media appearance of the Pula hospital doctor Attilio Giachin, give us more than a solid basis for the hypothesis that the cause of death was of a violent nature (a blow to the head).

A view of the back of the building where the Social Studies Club in Vodnjan was located on the first floor. (Notiziario dignanese, dicembre 1978)



The people of Vodnjan, like the rest of Istria, spent the next two decades under fascism. During that period, anti-fascist activity did not stop in that area either, as evidenced by the fact that as many as 76 citizens of Vodnjan ended up on the list of anti-state "elements", fourteen of whom were denounced to the Special Court for the Protection of the State, which - considering the relatively modest city with a population of around 5,500 inhabitants - placed Vodnjan at the very top of the anti-fascist oriented Istrian cities. Finally, during the Second World War, 90% of the Vodnjan population joined the People's Liberation Movement in some form, over two hundred Vodnjans joined the People's Liberation Struggle, and seventy-five of them died. The final battles for the liberation of the city were fought between April 30 and May 1, 1945, when partisan units defeated the German army and thus ended a quarter of a century of fascist repression.

Dr. sc. Milan Radošević

Memorial plaque to the people of Vodnjan that died in the Battle of Vodnjan, January 16, 1920



4. Istria in the Second World War - Context and Specifics

During the Second World War, the anti-fascist resistance in Istria developed under complex and specific political and military conditions. Namely, in 1941, Istria was an integral part of the Italian state territory, and the foundations of the anti-fascist resistance in Istria were developed and laid out by members of the Communist Party of Croatia and Slovenia (*Komunistička Partija Hrvatske i Komunistička Partija Slovenije*, KPH and KPS), that is, activists operating under the umbrella of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička Partija Jugoslavije*, KPJ). In the process of illegal activity, that is, in the process of creating points of resistance, organizations and during the preparation of the population for armed resistance to fascism, the initiators of

the Istrian People's Liberation Movement gathered many pre-war anti-fascists, grassroots people and anti-fascist-oriented clergy. After the initial tensions and disagreements, a large number of Italian anti-fascists also joined the People's Liberation Movement, among them the members and activists of the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI). Gradually, the Istrian People's Liberation Movement strengthened its position and expanded its organizational framework. Thus, many cells and organizations of the Communist Party, the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez Komunističke Omladine Jugoslavije*, SKOJ), the Women's Anti-Fascist Front of Jugoslavija (*Antifašistička Fronta Žena*, AFŽ) and partisan units were formed. The Italian fascist authorities were trying to suppress the development and activity of the anti-fascist movement by introducing special repressive and military measures, such as the general mobilization of the population and the forced mobilization of the younger generations. However, the anti-fascist movement continued its illegal activities. Thus, in 1943, the Party leadership for Istria was formed, around a hundred national liberation committees were established throughout the territory, followed by the launching of People's Liberation Movement newsletters, *Glas Istre* and *Il Nostro Giornale*.

The general uprising followed the capitulation of Italy in September 1943. Partisan units gain control over the whole of Istria, with the exception of Pula, Vodnjan, Fažana and Brijuni, and the People's Liberation Committees (*Narodnooslobodilački odbor*, NOO) took over the governing power. At the end of September, the Provincial People's Liberation Committee for Istria was founded, whose president was Joakim Rakovac. In September, the Pazin Decisions were announced, which among other things, mentioned the integration of Istria with Croatia and Yugoslavia. In October 1943, by launching a large and broad offensive (the so-called Rommel offensive), the German authorities took control in Istria. During this repressive action, several thousand fighters and civilians were killed, more than a thousand were arrested, and over 400 people were taken to camps. At the same time, houses, buildings and entire villages were burned, many crimes were committed, such as massacres in Mala Gajana, Šajini, Bokordići.

The Istrian People's Liberation Movement continued to operate even under strong German repression and control, expanding its activities and points. In the first months of 1944, new partisan units were founded. Among many partisan units, the most notable were the Italian battalion "Pino Budicin", founded in April, as well as the 43rd Istrian Division, founded in August

1944, in Gorski Kotar. Partisans from Istria participated in units and battles in various parts of then occupied Yugoslavia. Until the liberation, the Istrian People's Liberation Committees operated illegally, taking care, among other things, of aid, food and safety of fighters and the population. Also, various People's Liberation Movement organizations opened schools with programs in Croatian language, various bilingual newsletters and papers were printed, and partisan theater companies were formed. In the end, the People's Liberation Movement organizations carried out a propagandistic, symbolic fight against Nazi-fascism. Among the means used, the writing of anti-fascist wall slogans, i.e. graffiti, stand out in particular.

5. Second World War and the Partisan Graffiti

During the Second World War, the People's Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački pokret*, NOP) used many material and symbolic means of communication and dissemination of information about anti-fascism and anti-fascist resistance. One specific symbolic means of struggle and resistance was graffiti, i.e. wall inscriptions and wall slogans. The graffiti were mostly written by younger members of the resistance movement and SKOJ (Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije, "*League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia*") activists. They wrote messages that called for resistance and struggle, texts that celebrated the anti-fascist movement and its leaders like Tito. The SKOJ also wrote short notes that, on the one hand, disseminated information about the policies, goals and activities of the NOP, while on the other hand, the graffiti also served as a means of signaling the presence and activities of the NOP in a certain area. The explicit anti-fascist character of the graffiti violated fascist control and dominance over public space, disrupting the order and positions of power of the fascist regime and functioning as a subversive act of resistance. In addition to the texts, the activists also drew the symbol of the red star, or hammer and sickle.

Red star (Javna Vaga Street)



"Gloria al primo presidente del CPL regionale Gioacchino Racovaz" / "Glory to the first president of the Regional People's Liberation Committee, Joakim Rakovac" (Trg Slobode/Freedom Square)



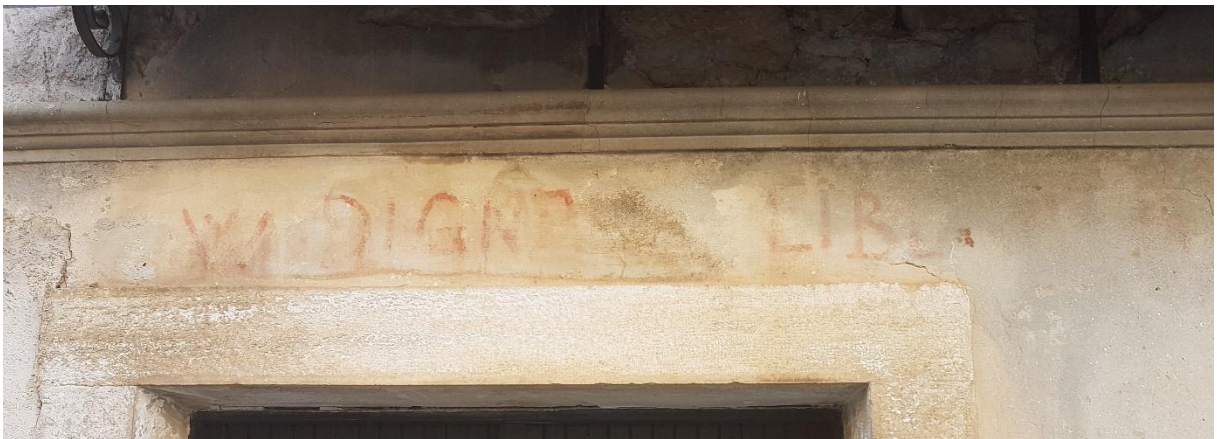
"W Tito" / "Long live Tito" and the red star (San Rocco Street)



6. Historical context 2 – Liberation graffiti

In the last phase of the war, in the process of the liberation of Istria and the defeat of Nazism and fascism, partisan forces were writing graffiti during the liberation of certain places and territories. On the other hand, local anti-fascist activists wrote slogans on the walls as a sign of support for the partisans, and as a sign of celebration of liberation and commemoration of the armed defeat of the Nazi-fascist regime. During May and partly June 1945, immediately after the end of the armed conflict and the liberation, graffiti also functioned as a kind of decorative means: as slogans written on the walls of houses and buildings during certain celebrations, or as elements of the "scenography" of partisan parades.

"W Dignano libera" / "Long Live Free Vodnjan" (Trgovačka Street)



"W il Battaglione italiano 'Budicin'" / "Long Live Italian Battalion 'Budicin'" (Castello street)



7. Historical context – Post-war graffiti

The most complex and intense phase of writing graffiti followed in the immediate aftermath, which was marked by post-war turmoil on the international geopolitical and diplomatic scene. Namely, one of the crucial points of contention between the Allies was the post-war border between Italy and Yugoslavia. As a result, the post-war future of Istria, as well as Trieste and Rijeka, was quite uncertain. In this context, the Inter-Allied Demarcation Commission was formed. The commission was composed of delegations from Great Britain, the USA, France and the Soviet Union. The delegations, by order of the Allied Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, were given the task to visit Trieste, Rijeka and Istria and to examine the situation on the ground and finally propose a way of demarcation that would follow national, ethnic lines. The commission began its work at the beginning of March 1946, leaving Trieste for Istria.

The Commission's travel plan was not known in advance. Therefore, pro-Yugoslav organizations and local-regional communist groups, which emerged from the anti-fascist struggle in the Second World War, during which the attitude and goal of joining Istria to Yugoslavia were consolidated, began the coordinated writing of pro-Yugoslav graffiti throughout Istria. The goal of this campaign of wall slogans was to declare a clear pro-Yugoslav position based on the anti-fascist struggle and resistance, as well as on national, international and socialist points of view. So, for example, in Vodnjan, one can read many graffiti that indicate the number of fighters killed in the anti-fascist struggle, which is equated with the struggle for joining Yugoslavia, or graffiti that very explicitly demand the joining of Vodnjan, Istria and Trieste to Yugoslavia. Also, there are graffiti written in the post-war period which are not directly related to the issue of demarcation, but rather concern the pre-war Istrian anti-fascism. In Vodnjan, for example, you can find graffiti celebrating Vladimir Gortan, one of the most significant figures of Istrian anti-fascism.

Graffiti dedicated to fallen fighters in the fight against Nazi-fascism (Forno Grande street)



*"Vogliamo che sia rispettata la Carta Atlantica" / "We Demand respect for the Atlantic Charter"
(Pian Street)*



"Gloria al martire Vladimiro Gortan" / "Glory to the Martyr Vladimir Gortan" (San Rocco Street)



8. Characteristics of graffiti

The graffiti are mostly written in red and in large, printed letters. They are positioned mostly in visible places and facades in the central streets of the city, and they can also be found in smaller, side streets and squares. The graffiti are quite systematically arranged within the public space, which in turn testifies to the comprehensive and meticulous production of wall slogans in Vodnjan in the 1940s. Graffiti messages are very concise and represent a certain kind of wall synthesis of broader ideas. The content of graffiti is often repetitive and seemingly standardized, thus reproducing and further strengthening a certain political attitude and the clarity of articulated messages. However, a closer reading of the graffiti reveals stylistic and aesthetic variations, as well as different textual and symbolic formations of summarized thoughts, ideas, attitudes and messages. A more detailed examination of the graffiti indicates the multi-layered nature of their forms and meanings, as well as the fact that many different authors with different handwriting and approaches to wall writing participated in their creation.

In Vodnjan, the surviving graffiti are written in Italian and articulate clear messages that rely on anti-fascism, anti-fascist resistance, internationalism, brotherhood (*fratellanza*) between Istrian Italians and Croats, socialist revolution and pro-Yugoslav stance. The Vodnjan graffiti thus outline a historical, socio-political imaginary that is characteristic of the local and regional context of the given period, underlining the cultural and linguistic background of the historical period in which they were being created.

"W la fratellanza italo-croata" / "Long Live the Italian-Croatian Brotherhood" (Castello Street)



Engraved graffiti (Istarska Street)



9. The meaning and significance of graffiti today

The surviving (post)war graffiti in Vodnjan can be understood as valuable historical records and documents, and should be thought of as a kind of outdoor archive. They convey the historical experiences of the Second World War and the immediate aftermath that are woven into the texture of the local environment and the wider region, representing authentic notes, expressions and voices of a historical moment that radically transformed this entire border area, and whose effects are still felt today. The surviving graffiti are expressions and reflections of a significant historical rupture that they constantly remind us of with their presence and their messages. They also remind us of the fragility and changeability of borders and states, of historical unpredictability and historic twists and turns.

By reading these graffiti, we are reading a historical and political (auto)biographical story, both of the city of Vodnjan and of the entire Istrian twentieth century. At the same time, we also read local-regional, Istrian cultural specificities that are manifested primarily in the language of graffiti, in its modulations, occasional mistakes and specific constructions.

10. Graffiti as a Memory Landscape

After more than 70 years, the surviving (post)war graffiti in Vodnjan represent valuable short notes of Istrian contemporary history that are scattered in the everyday space of the city. These graffiti should be understood as a kind of archives "in the open" and as fragments of social memory. Namely, by reading graffiti, the symbolic contours of a historical epoch are revealed, a historical turning point that redefined the wider region is glimpsed, meeting points of ideology and everyday life, big and small histories are observed, writing styles, ways of reinterpreting and applying official policies at the time are observed.

Today, decades after they were written, these graffiti create a special memory landscape that gradually fades and disappears from space, in short - a disappearing memory landscape. Namely, the arrangement of the facades on which they are located, as well as the mere passage of time, signifies both their removal and disappearance, finally – their erasure from the space. At the same time, the disappearance of graffiti does not only represent the disappearance of mere inscriptions and "remnants" of the past, but also the disappearance of a particular historical, political and cultural imaginary that found its visual and textual expression in graffiti.

Therefore, while photo-documentation enables at least partial, visual conservation of these traces of the past, the formalization of the memorial walk program as a cultural-educational route in Vodnjan would also enable their more systematic valorization and eventual conservation in the form of public historical documents of scientific, social and cultural significance for the local and regional context. With that alone, Vodnjan would not only get a specific, defined tour and cultural-educational program, but would preserve on its walls authentic, original expressions and unique traces of the Second World War and the aftermath, which, otherwise, would have been left to disappear and be forgotten.

*Recently deleted graffiti: W il potere popolare/Long live the people's power (Trg
Slobode/Freedom Square)*

